PITCHING BASICS: STRETCH vs. WINDUP

This article is focused toward the instruction of youth baseball players but will also contain some concepts and suggestions for players at higher levels (high school, college, pro). One of the most common skill deficiencies that I’ve seen at EVERY level of baseball is a pitcher’s (in)ability to control the running game. If you want to know my real opinion on the matter, I believe this issue is deeply tied to the fact that we allow advanced base running at too early of an age. This definitely will be the topic of a future article, so I won’t dive into it here. But, we’ve all been to these games in which every runner who makes it to 1st base will soon be standing on 2nd (and probably 3rd) …and there’s nothing the defense can do about it.

Coaches, ask your pitchers if they enjoy the process of dealing with the runner at first base. I can almost guarantee what answer you’ll get (Exception: Lefties that have learned a decent move). Why? More than likely because they’ve only experienced failure and frustration through the process. Indeed, baseball seems to be all about failure. Those failures are what make the successes feel so amazing! But what if there are zero (or very close to zero) successes? Does anybody truly enjoy doing something they are always unsuccessful at? In a lot of cases, youth pitchers would rather just let the guy steal his base and keep his mind focused on taking care of the hitter. So, how do we fix it?

The first step is to **teach the rules early**. Balks eventually all but disappear in baseball. For young kids, however, you could almost call a balk on every pitch. They need to get comfortable with how to pitch out of the stretch. In fact, it should probably be one of the very first pitching concepts that is taught. And repetition is the key. In baseball, we want everything to become instinct or muscle memory. I should not have to think about when to put my foot on the rubber or how to come set legally. “Now make sure you don’t move anything from the neck down until you’re ready to pitch. And you have to be still for a short pause before you’re allowed start the pitch.” You see? There are a ton of tiny little details that these kids are trying to remember and implement simply to pitch out of the stretch correctly. If we add the gameplay of also making sure the runner doesn’t steal 2nd, it becomes information overload. The game should be challenging, not frustrating. Additionally (and this concept is for ALL levels), we make our most important pitches of a game out of the stretch. We need to be at our best when there are runners on base…another reason we must be comfortable in the stretch. Further, there is a stat called WHIP. It stands for “walks plus hits per inning pitched.” It essentially measures the number of baserunners a pitcher gives up each inning. A very good number would be around 1.2 baserunners per inning and that doesn’t even include errors or hit batsmen. This means that on average there is going to be a baserunner EVERY inning! This next sentence doesn’t need to be stated, but I’m going to do it anyway. That means that your kids will be pitching out of the stretch constantly. TEACH IT EARLY!!!

By the way, there is no rule that says a pitcher must pitch from the windup if there is nobody on base. Look around the MLB. There are a number of guys that never use a windup. It’s certainly more prominent with relievers who tend to come into a lot of games with runners already on base, but plenty of starters do the same thing. I made the switch about 2 years into my pro career and never looked back. It just simplified everything. I never had to decide how many practice bullpen pitches I would throw out of the stretch vs the windup. Or why I felt better with one or the other and how to make them both feel the same. In the case of these youth pitchers, why would we want to ADD movement to an already impossible to repeat action?!?! Some of the kids I work with are trying so hard to keep control of their bodies during their windup that they can barely remember what pitch they’re throwing. Simplify whenever possible. Teach the stretch and teach it early!

Here are some ideas on how to teach the stretch to these youngsters…

1. Don’t make them robots! Mechanics are great, but they’re already thinking about plenty of other new things their body has to remember. A great way to get them to think less about the actual throwing part is to have them long toss from the mound out of the stretch. Portable mounds make this possible and some fields may have foul line bullpens that face home plate. This will force them to use movements that create a high energy throw without having to think their way through it. Note: they can also implement stretch throws into their flat ground long toss or pull downs.
2. They won’t all do it the same. This is more like 1a, but should still be mentioned. Some will like to come set with their hands high…some low…etc. Let them try it and figure it out.
3. At this point we’re not worried about how quick they are to the plate. Get them comfortable with the basics first. Teach strategies and skills later.
4. Make sure you, as the coach, are familiar with basic balk rules.
5. Show them a simple video of their favorite big leaguer doing it. Point out the small steps that are so easily overlooked by a kid watching a game.

The concept is pretty simple. Pitching out of the stretch is something that every kid is perfectly capable of learning and it will become an essential skill early in and throughout their career. Therefore, it only makes sense to get them comfortable with it as early as possible. Ideally, this process will make it much easier for them to understand and implement strategies used for controlling the running game when that time comes. Let’s make pitching out of the stretch the basics, and the windup can be something they teach themselves as they get older and start experimenting with their motion.