

Long Toss Insights

Advice on Long Toss from one of its leading proponents.

Getting to know your arm

- By Alan Jaeger

I. STRETCHING OUT PHASE

The first key to conditioning your arm is learning how to build your base at the right pace. Because it will take you four to six weeks to establish a solid base (possibly twice that long if you've never been on a long toss program) you must learn how to "listen" to your arm. One of the most important things you can do as a player is know your arm. Long tossing will give you this opportunity because you have to follow the pace of your arm, rather than throw just for the sake of throwing.

For example, I will often give players three major check points: 1) let the arm stretch itself out with loose arm action, 2) allow your arm to throw as far as it wants to throw provided that it "feels good", like a massage, and 3) be aware of keeping sound mechanics (for consistency and arm support). For someone who is new to long toss it might take a couple of weeks at a relatively short distance (100-150 feet) to stretch and lengthen the arm, to where it feels good, before moving on to the more pivotal extension and strengthening phase.

As you learn how to throw through a stretch without extra effort you will notice that the arm has a chance to "open up" or "air out" without unnecessary strain or pressure. It is at this point that the arm can breathe, the muscles lengthen. The arm will thrive on throwing often at this pace. Because the arm is just stretching out there is little or no swelling from day to day. In effect, recovery period is virtually eliminated and the arm yearns for daily throwing.

This is critical because the arm wants to "stretch out" daily (can you imagine how good your hamstrings would feel if you stretched them out daily?). The problem has been that most players don't know what the sensation of throwing daily (correctly/healthfully) is like because their arms are typically not in good condition, their arms are sore, irritable and tight from years of improper throwing.

Note: though the goal (out of season) is to throw on a daily basis it is typical that the arm will need to be rested periodically until a base is firmly established.

The goal here is to stretch or 'massage' the arm as you move further away from your throwing partner. It is not based on the amount of throws you make or 'timed throwing'. It is simply based on listening to your arm and stretching it out at its own pace like any other muscle.

Be sure to stretch the arm out in a manner that promotes loose arm action and mechanical consistency.

***A Word On Distance** As the arm begins to develop endurance it will not only want to throw more often but it will want to throw more distance. The stretching phase of throwing will commonly go from, per se, 150 feet to 250 feet in a few weeks time. Again, everyone is different and some players may take several weeks to stretch out to 250 feet or more. Either way, the length and distance will come in time as long as smart and consistent throwing is maintained. Also, it should be noted that when a player goes beyond 150 feet, he should use his legs to "crow hop". This will help take pressure off the arm.*

The stretching out phase of the long toss is critical for a number of reasons:

1. Stretching helps to heat and open up the arm properly
2. With distance comes extension and length of the muscles
3. Arm speed can be better generated as a result of a looser arm, and
4. The extra distance that has been created allows the arm to optimize the pull-down and strengthening phase.

II. PULL DOWN PHASE

Where stretching out the arm creates warmth, length and extension, the pull down phase helps to generate arm speed, arm strength, lower release point and acceleration or 'finish' through the release point.

Because the muscles have been lengthened, the arm loosened, there is more space and freedom for the arm to generate a quicker response. As the arm opens up there is more "freedom" in the arm to maximize a natural whip. In effect, pulling down is not a grinding action because the arm has length in it. The pulling down phase becomes an acceleration through a stretch.

Arm strength becomes a by-product of pulling down because the additional distance provides the arm with an opportunity to generate more arm speed on longer, looser and well conditioned muscles.

The amount of throws during the pull down phase will vary but a rule of thumb is to come in 10 feet at a time with each throw. That equates to about 19 throws from 250 feet. Once you get to about 60 or 70 feet, you are free to pull down as long as the arm "welcomes" the sensation. For some players this may last for several minutes after the base has been established. Naturally, you can take a few minutes to warm down once you are satisfied with the amount of pull downs.

After peaking out through your stretch, you will come back toward your throwing partner in a very methodical manner. This is to maximize the length that you have created in your

arm (that will eventually lead to arm speed). As you come in you will notice that it will take a great deal of concentration to pull through your stretch without decelerating your arm. If you decelerate or ease up on your throw you will have missed an opportunity to increase your arm speed and enhance arm strength.

In order to pull down correctly you must learn to accelerate through your release point by taking your maximum effort throw (i.e. 300 feet) into each throw on the way back in toward your throwing partner. For example, each throw on the way in is still a '300 foot throw', the difference is that the length of your throw is happening at a shorter and shorter distance. Though you will be throwing the ball a lot harder, if done correctly, you will be throwing through a stretch without any additional effort. For this to happen correctly you must stay relaxed over your balance point, have great downward extension through your release point and stay mechanically sound or you will launch the ball over your partners head.