

Pre-Season Pitching Program

One of the biggest challenges facing a coach is determining the best way to prepare pitchers for the opening of practice or tryouts.

In professional baseball, managers pretty much know what their starting rotation is going to be heading into spring training. Usually there are several guys competing for just a few spots as relievers. In some instances there might be two or three pitchers competing for the fifth spot in a rotation. Regardless, those managers can take comfort in the fact that they have six full weeks in which to analyze, evaluate and prepare each potential member of the pitching staff.

High school and youth coaches don't have that luxury. In most parts of the country, because of the winter and spring weather, you might only have a couple of weeks from the time you officially begin practice until your first scrimmage. In locations where the weather is really rough you might only get outside a couple of times before the first scrimmage. For coaches who have many question marks surrounding the players who will comprise their pitching staff, this doesn't leave much time for preparation or evaluation.

That's why it has become imperative to develop a structured throwing program for pitchers leading up to the season. If you can get the pitchers to the point where their arms have developed enough that they can literally give you three or four innings in an intra-squad game right from the beginning of practice, it will benefit you in terms of the evaluation process. In addition it will benefit your pitchers by allowing them to throw under game conditions several times before facing opposing teams and your hitters by enabling them to get more at-bats in a realistic game setting.

Over the years I have developed the following eight-week preseason throwing program for the pitching staff of my high school team. The program can be adapted for teams of any age by working backward from the start of your season. Simply figure out when your first practice is nine weeks away and use that as your starting date.

Obviously some coaches will have access to better indoor facilities than others, and some coaches will be working in more favorable climates. Since I am in New York, my preseason throwing program consists of two indoor sessions per week. Usually I am working with 8-10 pitchers at a time. Remember, coaches of younger players (12-and-under) should take care to place a strong emphasis on throwing a lot of fastballs to build arm strength. Younger pitchers should be throwing almost exclusively fastballs and change-ups. Breaking pitches should be limited and monitored very closely.

Week 1

I like to hold my throwing sessions on Sunday and Wednesday or Sunday and Thursday. Whichever days you choose, please try to allow two or three days in between each session to allow for recovery and conditioning.

Prior to all throwing sessions, the pitchers need to get loose and stretch. It always is a good idea to do a little light jogging or perform a dynamic full-body warm-up before

stretching. It can be harmful to stretch cold muscles, so developing a short warm-up to get the blood pumping to the muscles that will be stretched is important.

After the warm-up, in every session, I have each pitcher work on drills. There two drills I prefer to focus on (both are performed at a shortened distance): the [power position drill](#) and the [1-2-3 \(or Toe Tap\) Drill](#). Space permitting, I also like to have the pitchers throw out of the stretch or wind-up from up to 10 feet beyond the mound for a few minutes.

In both the power position and 1-2-3 drills the pitchers are throwing from abbreviated distances. These are not velocity drills. I have the pitchers try to hit both corners of the plate throwing only two-seam and four-seam fastballs. The power position drill allows me to check their hand positioning and arm action, while the 1-2-3 drill allows me to make sure that their mechanics are in order. These drills should last no more than 3-5 minutes each. If a pitcher seems to have mastered one drill quickly, you might allow him to move on to the next. Or, if a pitcher is struggling with one of the drills, you might stick with that one exclusively or spend less time on the other drill.

After the drills I have the catchers squat down while the pitchers throw from an extended distance. When pitchers throw inside and can't long toss, they tend to get into what I call "the 60-foot, 6-inch syndrome." They don't extend themselves, because they are throwing from the exact same distance each time. Moving them back forces the pitchers to work a little harder to get the ball to the plate. I'm not asking them to throw at maximum velocity, but I do want them to have solid mechanics and maintain a controlled landing.

At this point the pitchers are ready to throw from the mound for eight minutes. They should throw all fastballs to both sides of the plate – four minutes from the stretch and four minutes from the wind-up. Usually I have two pitchers throwing from the mound at the same time. They should throw both four-seam and two-seam fastballs. I prefer to have them start from the stretch, because I believe young pitchers don't get enough practice throwing that way.

Week 2

Week two is the same as week one except that the pitchers throw from the mound for 10 minutes after the warm-up, drills and extended-distance throwing.

Week 3

It is during week three that I have the pitchers incorporate change-ups. I do this first at a shortened distance during drill work, allowing the pitchers to get the feel for the proper grip and arm action.

Week three mound sessions last 12 minutes. I have the pitchers start by throwing fastballs to both sides of the plate. I ask them to throw four fastballs (either grip) to one side of the plate and then four to the other side. It helps the pitchers to place a mannequin in the batter's box if possible to simulate facing an actual hitter. Once they are throwing strikes consistently I have them throw some change-ups until they seem comfortable. At that point they begin alternating fastballs and change-ups so that they can get used to using the same mechanics and trying to create the same arm action for both pitches. I always have them finish up with fastballs.

Week 4

The mound session is increased to 15 minutes for week four using the same basic fastball and change-up format as in week 3 after the drills and extended throwing are completed. This gives you more time to work on more things. Pitchers will be throwing fastballs and change-ups. It is at this point that you can begin actually gauging each pitcher's stamina and which pitchers are working harder on their conditioning in between throwing sessions. If you don't know already, you should be starting to figure out which pitchers are stronger and more likely to be starters.

Be aware that some of your pitchers may have sessions in which they experience a dead arm or are dragging physically. You don't have to force the 15 minutes down their throats. If they are laboring through the session, have them cut back a little bit so that they can finish on a good note. Use the 15 minutes as a guide. Each pitcher may need to be treated differently.

Week 5

This is the week that breaking balls are introduced. The mound session still is 15 minutes. For the first month the pitchers have been focusing on fastballs and change-ups, developing arm strength and proper mechanics. This gives them a full month to work on their breaking balls. Again, for younger pitchers you might wait a couple more weeks to introduce breaking balls or avoid introducing them at all. If you do have them throw breaking balls, please do so on a very limited basis and make sure they are monitored closely.

Pitchers should start out with their usual warm-up and then move to drill work and extended-distance throwing, focusing only on fastballs and change-ups. They then should get on the mound and throw fastballs to both sides of the plate for 5-6 minutes, followed by change-ups. At that point, I ask them to shorten up again and to begin spinning curveballs from the power position off of flat ground. Once they have gotten comfortable with their breaking ball grips and mechanics, they get back up on the mound. Have them throw 8-10 fastballs, followed by 3-4 breaking balls, followed by 3-4 fastballs and 3-4 breaking balls. Then ask them to throw fastball-curveball-change-up sequences before finishing up with fastballs.

Weeks 6-7

This is the time that you will start to tailor the throwing sessions to each individual pitcher. Those who are stronger and more likely to be starters should start to hit their stride and feel really good. These pitchers can be extended to 20 minutes, throwing all pitches, from the mound. Pitchers who are more likely to be relievers might stay at 15 minutes. You also should have figured out each pitcher's problem areas and be willing to spend a little more time addressing those issues during drill work.

The basic routine remains the same as in week five. Following the warm-up and drill work, the pitchers get on the mound and throw fastballs for 5-6 minutes, followed by change-ups. They then shorten up to throw breaking balls from the power position before finishing up by throwing all pitches from the mound. If a pitcher is struggling with one particular pitch you can spend more time on that problem area at this point. This is where coaches have to be coaches and determine what each player's strengths and weakness are.

If a player is primarily a fastball/change-up pitcher, you want to make sure that those pitches are perfected as practice approaches and vice versa for the opposite-style pitchers. It's great to learn something new and work on that area, too, but as a coach it is imperative that you understand what your pitchers do best and have them focus on their strengths heading into the season.

It is during weeks 6 and 7 that I like to have hitters stand in the batter's box wearing helmets while the pitchers throw from the mound. Having hitters stand in gives the pitchers a better frame of reference and gets the adrenaline pumping so that they can extend themselves fully instead of just going through the motions. This should continue during week 8.

Week 8

During the final week of preseason throwing, drill work is cut down a bit. Once the pitchers are comfortable in the drills and executing them successfully, have them move on to developing their pre-game or bullpen routine. Each pitcher should develop a routine that helps them get ready in 10-12 minutes. For starters this would be whatever they need to do prior to a game. Relievers need to be able to get ready to enter a game in a set period of time.

After the 10-12 minute pre-game prep (all pitches should be thrown), each pitcher will simulate two innings with hitters standing in the box. Two pitchers should warm-up for 10-12 minutes side-by-side. Then one sits while the other one throws eight warm-up pitches and then a full inning (an inning is comprised of 12-15 pitches). The catcher calls which pitches will be thrown, mixing it up, while the coach calls balls and strikes. There is no coaching, but you may challenge the pitcher to see how many outs he can get in 12-15 pitches. After one inning, the first pitcher sits while the other pitcher throws an inning. They then repeat the process, simulating the routine of getting loose, sitting, getting hot again, sitting and then getting hot. This is the game routine to which pitchers must get accustomed.

Once Practice Begins

Once practice begins your pitchers should be ready to throw in intra-squad games immediately. I've used this program for nine years and never had a pitcher get hurt on me. All pitchers should get innings in intra-squad games leading up to the first game or scrimmage. They should start with three 12-15 pitch innings and progress to four innings in time for the first game against a real opponent. At this point, with them throwing only three or four innings, they only need three days off before throwing again. This type of routine will allow them to build the stamina necessary to go the distance as the season progresses.

This throwing program, combined with a proper strength and conditioning program, should allow your pitchers to hit the ground running when practice begins and give your team a competitive advantage over most of your opponents early in the season. Please see Tim Bishop's article this month detailing how to incorporate strength and conditioning workouts into this throwing program.

Good luck with your pitchers! If you have other ideas please feel free to share them with us at newsletter@ripkenbaseball.com.

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Power Position Drill

In keeping with the theme of this month's **Coach's Clipboard**, the power position drill is an effective way for pitchers to use when troubleshooting or even when warming up before a game. It should be included as a part of any pitcher's flatwork routine between starts or relief outings.

The Setup

All you need to execute the power position drill are two players and a baseball. Two pitchers can work together to make more efficient use of practice time. The pitchers simply stand anywhere from 40 to 60 feet apart (there are different variations of the drill). One will throw from the power position with the other receiving – either squatting down or standing. This drill also can be executed either on flat ground or a mound.

The Why

This drill is designed to assist players with throwing mechanics. It can be used to address several aspects of the pitching delivery. First, to assume the proper power position, the pitcher must get the ball out of the glove and up. The drill stresses the importance of keeping the hand above the baseball in the power position and of keeping the elbow above the shoulder through rotation. The follow through in this drill is only with the arm, which means that both feet stay on the ground. This teaches a pitcher the importance of “staying back” until the ball is released and allows the pitcher to feel what it is like to rotate on the back side, creating a nice hip turn and finish. Pitchers who tend to short-arm the baseball can start from the finish position before taking the weight to the back side and executing the drill. This creates a long, whip-like motion which stretches out the throwing motion. Shortening the distance forces pitchers who drop their elbows to keep the elbow up and to stay on top of the ball in order to throw downhill to the catcher. This also will assist with pitchers who overstride by keeping them back and forcing them to get downhill quickly.

This drill should initially be performed with a four-seam grip, however as pitchers progress in age and as their seasons progress they can throw two-seamers or work on their breaking balls and change-ups.

Points of Emphasis

The points of emphasis for this drill are as follows:

- 1) **Create a wide base with the feet.**
- 2) **Get the ball “out and up.” Take it out of the glove, back and up so that the hand is above the ball and the arm is extended toward center field.**
- 3) **Front shoulder should point directly toward the target.**
- 4) **Not a velocity drill. This drill focuses on mechanics and accuracy.**
- 5) **Create a weight shift to the back side before going forward.**
- 6) **Elbow above the shoulder through rotation.**
- 7) **Follow through only with the arm. Both feet remain on the ground.**
- 8) **Create a nice hip turn and finish.**

9) **No striding promotes a shorter stride.**

10) **Take the weight all the way back from the finish position to stretch out the throwing motion and avoid short-arming.**

Executing the Drill

The pitcher starts by creating a wide base with his feet. First, using a four-seam grip, the hand is placed on the ball at chest level. Most – if not all – of the weight is shifted to the back leg as the ball is taken out of the glove. At this point the throwing arm should be extended toward center field with the hand above the ball. The front shoulder should be pointed directly toward the target, acting almost as a site as the pitcher peers toward home. From this point the weight starts to come forward through rotation, with the elbow staying above the shoulder. The ball is released and the arm completes the follow through. Both feet remain on the ground, and the hips turn. The trail foot should stay near the rubber and the front foot should point forward. This drill is not intended to be performed with the pitcher throwing at maximum velocity. The focus is on sound mechanics and developing muscle memory.

Short-armers should start with the weight forward in the follow-through position before taking the weight all the way back and then completing the drill. This will give them the feeling of stretching out the throwing motion.

Pitchers who throw the ball high a lot and tend to drop their elbows can have the catcher shorten up. To throw strikes from a shorter distance, pitchers will have to get their elbows up and stay on top of the ball. A shortened throwing distance also is good for showing long-striders that a shorter stride will help them get on top of the ball and throw it downhill.

Teaching Point

This drill is all about balance and timing. Have the pitcher stop and “pose for a picture” after the arm finishes to ensure that both feet remain on the ground and that the drill is completed properly.

1-2-3 Toe Tap Drill

For young baseball players – and sometimes even the pros – perfecting pitching mechanics is an ongoing process. Pitchers should use their off days to throw from flat ground and iron out any mechanical problems they have been experiencing. It is important for coaches to introduce a variety of throwing drills that help improve mechanics and to be able to explain what area each drill is designed to address. Pitchers often do their throwing on the side at practice when the rest of the team is involved in batting practice or some type of team fundamental. If the coach has explained all of the flatwork drills and what they are designed to address all he needs to do that day is tell his pitcher that he needs to work on his power position, balance position, staying back, etc. No matter what that pitcher needs to work on he will know the exact drill that can correct a particular problem. This is much more effective than just telling a young pitcher to go off on his own to throw.

One area of mechanics that can break down easily is the balance position. It is important for pitchers to understand that they need to stop their momentum and hold the balance position for at least a split second. This allows them to gather their energy before pushing off the rubber toward home. Pitchers who don't pause tend to "walk through" their balance position and are not able to generate as much power toward the plate. We have a drill called the 1-2-3 Drill that addresses this issue.

The Setup

All you need for this drill is a pitcher and a partner, preferably one of the team's catchers. A throw-down home plate should be set up at a shortened distance. For players under the age of 13 the plate should be set up at about 40 feet. It probably should be set up at about 50 feet for older pitchers. The partner or catcher should squad to receive the pitches. Two pitchers can work together on this drill to maximize its efficiency. This is especially important if a team needs its catchers to focus on something else at the time this drill is being executed.

The Why

This drill can be used for pitchers of all ages. It is designed to help the pitcher control his body and be able to keep his weight back while gathering energy in the balance position. By design the drill prohibits the pitcher from "walking through" the balance position. Pitchers will be able to generate more power toward home plate by gathering their energy at the balance position before pushing off the rubber and taking the body toward home plate. This should help improve control and velocity while eliminating wear and tear on the arm.

Points of Emphasis

The main point of emphasis for this drill is body control. It should be executed from the stretch position. From the stretch the pitcher should focus on controlling the front leg so that it can be picked up and placed down softly two times before the pitch is delivered. Only fastballs should be thrown (two-seam or four-seam are okay).

Executing the Drill

The pitcher assumes the stretch position and one of the fastball grips. After coming set he lifts his leg to balance position, shifting his weight to the back leg, and then puts it down lightly. Once the foot hits the ground the leg should be lifted in the same manner. After the foot touches the ground for the second time the leg is lifted again. This time the pitcher holds his balance position for a split second before pushing off the rubber and throwing home. This is not a velocity drill. It can be helpful to count, "One, two, three," for each part of the drill. The ball should be thrown on "three." After doing this for several minutes, depending on the day, the pitcher might want to throw a few pitches from the regulation distance at full speed to feel the drill's impact on his mechanics.

Make it Fun

Just like with anything, kids will tire of this drill after a while. However, you can hold their attention for much longer periods of time by turning the drill into a contest. Set up a screen or some other type of target and have the kids execute the drill and try to hit the target. Give them a point each time they hit the target. This type of contest can be done in small groups as a station, in pairs or together as a team.