

## **When is the right time for youth pitchers to explore throwing new pitches?**

Nowadays, it is not uncommon for me to have a young player around the age of 11 walk in to a pitching lesson with me and I ask the question, "What pitches do you throw?". I am hoping for the response of just a fastball and maybe starting to learn the changeup. But sadly I am normally wrong. I get the answer of "Fastball, Changeup, Curveball, Cutter, and I am working on a knuckleball". That is when I shake my head and say "let's go work on that fastball".

Young pitchers are throwing more and more pitches at a young age and they don't understand why that could be an issue. You can walk up to most 12U baseball games and see a lot of pitchers throwing curveballs. When R A Dickey was on the verge of winning the Cy Young a few years ago, every other kid I coached threw a knuckleball (or what they thought was one). They are trying to learn sliders, cutters, and crazy enough people are even telling them they can throw split fingers. Coaches and players of those younger age groups don't seem to understand the process to not only learning pitches but also making sure the athlete is old enough to throw certain pitches.

As I start to explain my theory on when players should start throwing other pitches, I tend to lean more on the actual process of being a pitcher rather than the health of the pitcher. The process starts at 9 years old in most states which is when pitchers start pitching. At this point, pitchers are trying just to get comfortable with the mechanics, the mound, and the position in general. At this point a simple fastball should be the only thing they are thinking about. Because trust me, they are already nervous enough getting on the mound and trying to throw a simple strike. For most players, this takes a few years to get used to. I certainly haven't coached too many polished 9 & 10 year olds who can repeat mechanics and throw strikes with their fastball at least 70% of the time. So for this time period and possibly even 11U, focus to teaching the pitcher their mechanics, how to repeat strikes with a fastball, and how to pitch with a fastball. It might cost you a few W's and a few championship titles, but the player will be much better for this down the road.

As the player starts to get into his 11/12U time frame, assuming that his mechanics are coming along and he can throw somewhat consistent strikes with his fastball, it is now a good time for the pitcher to start to learn the change up. Not the curveball, not the slider, the change up. This might be the most common secondary pitch for most pitchers but I promise you it is normally one of the worst thrown and the most "boring" pitch for a pitcher to throw. I teach this to players at this age for a couple of reasons. One, it is an easy transition from a fastball. A simple circle change up grip is just shifting over a few fingers and throw the pitch like a fastball. We can

eventually get into more creative work with the change up in terms of pronating the baseball or splitting the fingers a tick a part or even playing with grip pressure, but for now just teach them the grip and the general fastball arm action of throwing this pitch. Then start to teach the player why this is the hardest pitch for a hitter to see in the game of baseball. Teach them how to use this pitch off of their fastball and what types of counts to throw it in. Most times players will start throwing this pitch only in comfortable counts like 0-2 & 1-2. Once they get more comfortable teach them to throw the pitch in heavier fastball counts like 1-0, 2-0, 2-1, 1-1, etc. This type of progression can take years. Easily a few years if the player is constantly working on this. But in the long run, the ability to throw a good change-up off of your fastball will pay massive dividends.

Now we get to the famous breaking balls and when they should start to be implemented. I have seen the curveball and slider abused more in youth baseball for the wrong reasons than any other pitches. I have seen 12U pitchers throwing curveballs so that the teams can win more games. I have seen them throwing these pitches after watching one of their favorite players on TV throw a nasty breaking ball. There are many reasons why players throw them at early ages and to me, there is no good reason for a player to do that. Not only is it breaking up the path a young pitcher should be taking in regards to learning how to pitch and be effective, but it is also putting players at risk for injury. Keep in mind, players are growing at rapid rates from 12U-14U. Their growth plates are opening and closing and their arms and muscles are generally not ready for the type of torque that either high end velocity creates or the type of arm movements a breaking ball creates. If I take a step back, I am not sure there is a lot of proof out there that if you throw a breaking ball at a young age you are going to get injured. But I have seen a lot of kids who throw breaking balls at a high rate in games and have paid the price down the road with their arms. I am a firm believer that a player should not even think about throwing a breaking ball until a few things occur. First, the player must be able to throw a fastball and a change up in the strike zone effectively at a high rate. Secondly, the player must have a firm grip on his mechanics and have some sort of repeatability to them. Lastly, the players should probably be in his eighth grade year and be somewhat physically mature. This is not to say I have not had very polished 13 year olds who grew faster than everyone else and I introduced a curveball grip to them to play around with in the back yard. But for the most part, those players are few and far between. I implement this pitch when they are ready, and that is what is important. It is not just to win a few games or a few tournaments at a young age that the player won't remember in 3 years. We implement these pitches in this pattern so the player develops correctly and in a healthy manner.

Make no mistake about it, as the player enters high school he will need to have a feel for three pitches to compete. So starting to teach the player a third pitch a year before he gets there will give him time to prepare. But keep in mind, if he has followed this path and the player has a good fastball and good change up, he will be just fine if that curveball is still in the development phase.

The last part of this topic I will touch base on is the pitcher who throws 5 pitches and who is constantly inventing new pitches to throw. I strongly urge you not to do this. Even if you are in high school and can handle doing this from a health standpoint. For most players they don't have enough time to make 3 pitches be really good. How in the world are they going to make 5 pitches good? The truth is, and I see these players every year in our tryouts, not even one of their pitches is ever above average. They are all below average and generally he is not a good strike thrower.

So my point to all of this before I ramble on anymore is to stick to the process. Don't feel like your son or players are getting passed up because he isn't throwing a breaking ball to win the game and his teammate Joey is. Everyone's path is different and stick to the one that develops your players the best and keeps them the healthiest.

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