



PERFORMANCE BASEBALL/SOFTBALL CONDITIONING

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The Biggest Mistake I See in Conditioning Softball Pitchers

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With the sheer number of athletic trainers, pitching coaches, team coaches out in the world, it would be impossible to get everyone—or even a majority—to agree on one training program for windmill pitchers (or any athlete, for that matter). Since every athlete has a different makeup and different needs, this isn't even necessarily a bad thing. Approaching the topic of training mistakes, I can't say, "Here is an exercise that no pitcher should ever do" (or, conversely, should always do). However, based on what I see, I do believe that there is a widespread problem with the overall training philosophy that many pitchers adopt from a young age, and that many softball programs implement at all levels.

Start General, Get Specific

The big flaw in the average windmill pitcher's training life cycle is that very young pitchers—beginners starting from elementary school age—train with too much specificity and intensity. Then, those that persevere into college softball are often met with training programs that are much too general to facilitate maximum development.

There is a particular progression that every developing athlete should follow regardless of the sport he or she plays: **fundamental movement skills → fundamental sport skills → elevation of skills/capacities/strength → maximization of those capacities specific to the sport**. Each stage of learning corresponds with a particular stage in the athlete's natural physical development. There is extensive scientific evidence that suggests that the human body is more receptive to learning different things at different stages, and that when a youth athlete acquires skills in a certain order it maximizes his or her potential to excel. One of the most noted publicized examples of this concept is the Long Term Athletic Development model that Titleist implements in their golf schools, designed to develop kids into professional golfers. Aspiring windmill pitchers should follow the same kind of model.

Fundamental Movement Skills First (Elementary School)

Although strength/speed/agility programs are rising in popularity in youth softball, I'd still wager that the majority of beginner windmill pitchers skip the first fundamental movement step. The average young pitcher decides she wants to pitch and simply begins taking pitching lessons. Windmill pitching is a VERY difficult and VERY unbalanced skill. It requires tremendous coordination and body awareness—knowledge of different types of body movement and the ability to translate a coach's instruction into action. The average elementary school girl does not possess the required degree of these qualities "out

of the box." This is *not a bad thing*; it's *normal*! The average beginning-aged pitcher is even *perfectly* ripe to acquire these capacities fairly easily with the right kind of training. The problem arises when she makes no attempt to do so before diving right into pitching; there should be a preliminary step that is about **fun** and **coordination**.

Engaging in a number of building block-type activities first will help the prospective pitcher prepare her body for learning the skill. Take something like skipping as one example: it teaches things like propulsion off the ground and coordination of the arms and legs in a movement that is easy for kids to digest. A kid who can skip easily and dynamically will take much more quickly to the concept of pushing off the pitching rubber with her legs while her arms begin a circle motion, compared to a kid who struggles to sync up her upper and lower halves when she skips. Some kids can skip normally without ever being taught; those who can't should tackle that before attempting more difficult movements. Attaining this type of athletic literacy *prior to the adolescent growth spurt* will result in greater ease of acquiring skills down the road (it becomes more difficult to acquire these foundational skills after the growth spurt).

Working on a light, fun program with a trainer who understands this stage of development will be extremely helpful. Adult strength training programs are NOT the same as fundamental movement skills. Kids at this stage should avoid one-size-fits-all training regimens.

Fundamental Sport Skills Second (Elementary-Middle School)

It is MUCH easier for a strong athlete to learn to pitch than it is for someone who is uncoordinated. It's also easier to turn a strong athlete into a pitcher even a little bit later on in her chronological age than it is to teach an older pitcher basic athletic capacities even if she has a pitching foundation of several years. It's very important that the general athletic skills described in the previous step come first.

Research has shown that to become a true "expert" in something—be it a sport, a musical instrument, a foreign language, etc—it takes about ten thousand hours of practice. It takes about ten years of regular practice to accumulate that many hours. These are undoubtedly big numbers, and the challenge in attaining that goal is keeping a kid into an activity for that length of time. For a windmill pitcher, the two



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big things you need to avoid to reach your ten thousand hours are **injury** and **quitting**. Your pitcher needs to stay healthy and stay involved. The best way to avoid injury is to build a foundation of a high degree of athleticism so that the body is balanced as well as strong and coordinated enough to perform the pitching motion in a *safe manner*. The best way to keep your pitcher interested is to ensure she's *having fun* and *she's good at what she's doing* so that frustration is minimized. The better her athletic foundation, and the less she is rushed into biting off more than she can chew, the more fun and success she'll have as she moves on to acquire pitching-specific skills.

Due to the unbalanced nature of the windmill pitching motion, it's still not a good idea to specialize at this point. Playing multiple sports at this stage will help balance the body and continue the development of general movement skills.

Elevation of Physical Capacities (Middle-High School)


In the middle of the Long Term Athletic Development model as described by Titleist, there are four stages that progress as follows: **learning to play** → **training to play** → **learning to compete** → **training to compete**. Again, the order is very important, as is the distinction between playing and competing. The simple *playing* phase is something that, again, I often unfortunately see skipped. It's a problem that lies in the philosophies of many travel softball programs. Girls are starting to play competitive softball younger and younger, and the expectation for pitchers to *compete* from a very young age is actually hurting their long-term development. When a young pitcher adopts shortcuts in her pitching mechanics that enable her to throw a fair amount of strikes early on at the expense of taking the time to create her foundation of athletic and skill-based building blocks, she ingrains habits that stunt her ultimate potential. There should be a very emotionally *safe learning to play – training to play* period in which the outcome of games takes a back seat to strengthening that foundation and beginning to build upon it.

If that foundation has been set, it is safe for the pitcher to begin increasing her specificity and intensity toward the end of middle school/beginning of high school. Playing a different sport during softball's offseason can still help with balance, but the number of sports can be pared down and the number and intensity of pitching practices can increase. To move from competency to true competition, the pitcher must get stronger. Strength training comes into play here, and should focus on creating a well-rounded athlete with as few physical obstacles as possible. The more of the previous steps a pitcher has skipped, the more likely it will be that she'll encounter physical obstacles at this stage.

Becoming an Elite Windmill Pitcher (Entering College)

For the majority of the world's female softball players, college is the major leagues. A pitcher at a top-tier university will likely be playing or training for softball year round. Physical training at this stage should be targeted to supporting the pitching motion, to elevating the pitcher from great to elite. While premature specificity and intensity is a common mistake at the earlier stages, here too much generality can be a problem. If a school trainer is implementing the same workout program for multiple teams across multiple sports, it's possible that the program isn't targeted enough.

Basically, conditioning the windmill pitcher is a classic case of learning to walk before you learn to run. Then once you've mastered a basic run, it takes a tremendous amount of work to become a world-class hurdler.

For some reason, way too many pitchers try to skip right to running, and are disappointed when they trip and fall. And if they manage to progress to a jog, many stagnate there if they don't elevate their training to the next level at the right time. Start general, get specific. 

More Information Please!

Contact Carly at www.fastpitchpower.com