

Mitch Alexander's  
**SOFTBALL**  
 ACADEMY

*Youth Windmill  
 Pitching  
 Strategies*

I'm not a pitching expert, but I am a manager, coach, and parent of a youth windmill pitcher. I've met many pitching experts, had talks with them and researched the topic on my own. I call pitches in games and have studied tactics other managers use against my team. I have adapted my strategies over time by watching what others do and also learning what works and what doesn't work in real game situations.

It all starts with your pitchers and what skills they have developed through lessons and practices. The best youth pitchers either practice pitching or pitch in games a minimum of three to five days a week. Youth pitchers get faster and more accurate through repetition, but this needs to be carefully balanced with making sure the young pitcher does not injure their arm. Injuries can occur through repetitive strain, incorrect mechanics, or accidents. It is both the parent's and coach's responsibility to minimize the risk of these injuries.

There are growth plates in the bones of all children and they are especially problematic in youth athletes up until 13 to 16 years old. These plates are open areas of the bone that allow the bones to grow. They can be painful when injured and many youth pitchers experience pain associated with growth plates. There are other common pitching injuries, most involving the shoulders, elbows, and tendons that connect muscle to bone. All youth pitchers should ice their shoulders for 20 minutes following practice or games. Older pitchers may also need to ice their elbows as well.

OK, so we need to protect these young arms and shoulders from injuries, but what does that have to do with pitching strategy? Actually a lot. I had the opportunity to have some in depth conversations with Doug Finch (Jennie's father and pitching coach) and he is adamant about making sure that the pitches youth pitchers are taught must be appropriate for their age and state of

their physical bodies. For example, fastballs and peel changeups are safe pitches for young arms. Flip changeups, screwballs, and curveballs are not. Young pitchers should concentrate on fastballs and peels and pitch location until their growth plates start to close up and their tendons become stronger. The further the elbow is away from the side of the body the worse the pitch is for youth pitchers. For more information, have a look at the biomechanical studies included on the "Pitching Perfect by Jennie Finch" DVD available on her website (<http://store.jenniefinch.com/>)

Doug performed some video analysis on my daughter's pitching motion and recommended many corrections to reduce the risk of injury. My daughter had experienced several periods of tendonitis in her upper arm and shoulder because of her pitching mechanics. Doug educated me in some of the issues and taught me the importance of good mechanics. Through this understanding I located a local pitching instructor who also values safe pitching mechanics and my daughter has not had any injuries related to her pitching mechanics since.

With the understanding that young pitchers should not learn, practice, and throw certain pitches the youth coach is somewhat limited in the strategy they can employ to help give their pitchers the best chance of beating their opponents. At younger ages, it comes down to speed, rhythm, and location. All attributes young pitchers should be able to control. Later on as the batters get better and the pitcher's arms get stronger spin and junk pitches play a bigger part of the game.

As a coach who calls pitches, the very first thing I look at is the batter's check swing. I evaluate if the batter has a short, compact stroke telling me they may have had professional lessons or if they are using a baseball swing. If they have the former, I am more concerned about what to call. If they use a baseball swing, I will usually go for inside pitches as the batter casts their arms out making it more difficult for them to hit inside. If the check swing is high, I will look to call low pitches. If the check swing is low, I will look to call high pitches. If the check swing swoops up, I will call high pitches like a rise or high inside.

The next thing I look for is the batter's position in the box. If they are way up in the box, the other coach may have

figured out my pitcher is throwing breaking balls like rise or drops, or of course they are going to bunt. My pitchers know to typically throw a rise ball in the case of a bunt which helps to cause the ball to be popped up and hopefully caught by the catcher. If they are standing up in the box without bunting, I usually call a high fastball. If the batter is close to the plate, I will call for an inside pitch to jam them up. If they are far away from the plate, I will call for a pitch on the outside corner of the plate. If the batter is back in the box, I call for a drop or rise ball to have the ball break just before it gets to the plate.

At the youth level, almost all inside pitches should be high and all outside pitches low. High inside pitches tend to back the batter off the plate and then can be followed up with an outside pitch. If the batters stand far away from the plate and then moves closer on an outside pitch, the next pitch should be inside. I always try to have my pitchers move the ball around. Vary the location, speed, and rhythm for best results. The best pitchers understand they need to continually vary all three of these for maximum effect. You want to keep the batter off balance so they don't know

what to expect next: high and inside, low and outside, breaking just as they swing, or speed change. A great reference on how to pitch to specific batters can be found at Virginia pitching coach, Rita Lynn Gilman's web site:

([http://www.softballpitchingtools.com/specific\\_batters.htm](http://www.softballpitchingtools.com/specific_batters.htm)).

We just discussed location. Speed comes in three flavors in youth softball: fast, off-speed, and change-up. Off-speed is a slower fastball and can be used to upset a batter's rhythm. The change-up can be either over-used or under-used but is hardly used correctly in youth softball. For change-ups, I hardly ever use them on weaker batters. These batters are best handled with faster pitches. If you slow the ball down, you are just taking away your advantage. The change-up is a great tool against power hitters. It's great to catch a fast hitter way in front of the ball and have them fall all over themselves trying to regain their balance. However, the change-up is much more than a pitch in the toolbox. Throwing the change-up is a tactic that puts power hitters off their game. If you call for the change-up often enough, the power hitters soon realize

that they would rather take some power off their bat than strikeout. This reduces the power hitter to an average hitter that most defenses can deal with. Using a change-up this way, you not only have a great tool to get that third strike on a batter, but you also have a technique to reduce a batter's power! You need to make sure the batter knows you can call for a change-up at any time, including first pitch, two or three in a row, etc.

Rhythm describes the pitcher's routine. Normally, pitchers receive the ball back from the catcher, go to the back of the pitcher's circle, turn around, make sure their hands are separated, step on the rubber, and then wait the same amount of time before beginning the pitching motion once the home plate umpire indicates the pitcher should start. Pitchers need to change this up. Instead of walking to the back of the circle every time, every three or four times, go right to the rubber. Instead of waiting three or four seconds after the

umpire gives the signal, pitch immediately. The pitcher should vary her rhythm to keep the batter off balance. I always try to get a first pitch strike. Change-ups should be called sparingly with runners on base. Statistically, outside pitches result in more strikes than inside pitches. Talk to your pitcher and the person warming the pitcher up. Ask them what pitches were working best. Even if your pitcher normally has a killer rise ball, if it isn't working today, don't call for it! Also, give your pitcher the ability to wave off any pitch she isn't comfortable throwing. I'd rather have my pitcher throw a drop ball that she's comfortable with than throwing a screwball that isn't working.

Making sure that your pitchers throw age appropriate safe pitches, and using the techniques I described to move the ball around, vary the speed and rhythm, and to select pitches that exploit the batter's weaknesses, your pitchers should have successful, healthy seasons of enjoying fastpitch softball.

*Mitch Alexander is the CIO for a major electronics company and coaches both Little League and Travel softball teams and is currently completing his PhD. He is a certified SUNY, ASA, and Double Goal Coach. His wife, Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League Softball World Series. Over the years, both have managed teams together and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. In his spare time, Mitch designs websites for fastpitch teams and businesses and can be reached at [mitchalexander@optonline.net](mailto:mitchalexander@optonline.net).*

