

# Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY

## Youth Pitching - An Interview with Rita Lynn Gilman

This month I had an opportunity to interview Rita Lynn Gilman, one of the top youth pitching coaches in the United States. She gives private lessons at her training facility in the Richmond Virginia area. However, she has students from faraway places like Alaska and Canada making the trip for training sessions. She counts some of her recently notable protégés as Lacey Waldrop – Pitcher for Florida State University, Jailyn Ford – Pitcher for the 2013 Junior Olympic team (Team USA), as well as Virginia High School State Pitchers of the Year at all three levels.

**Q: First, please tell us a little about your pitching background.**

A: I've been pitching 31 years and teaching for 26 of those years. I never stop learning and wanting to know more about the art of pitching. My students teach me something new every day.

**Q: What are the major problems you've seen pitchers experience when they go from 35-40 feet?**

A: When pitchers move from 35 feet to 40 feet the major problems they have are: the larger ball size, the ball breaking too early, and the loss of speed.

**Q: How do you resolve these?**

A: When moving from the 11" ball to the 12" ball I have our pitchers use the 14" training ball so they can adjust to a larger ball. Pitchers should warm up with the 14" ball overhand, then underhand. After warming up with the 14" ball, the 12" ball can feel like an 11" ball again!

Moving to 40 feet also causes their ball to break too early. For this issue I have the pitchers use two Chinese jump ropes set up five feet in front of the plate so they can see where the ball should break. The first rope is just above the knees and the second rope is just

below the knees. The top rope is the strike pitch and the bottom rope is the strike-out pitch. I have pitchers practice hitting these ropes so they can make their pitch break at the right time.

The last major problem I see when transitioning to 40 feet and the 12" ball is loss of speed. Pitchers usually lose about 2 mph. To improve their speed at the further distance I have them pitch from 45 feet. This drill can help the pitcher throw "through" the catcher. This drill also helps the pitcher feel like 40 feet isn't so far away.

**Q: What age do you see the biggest jump in speed?**

A: Pitchers generally gain the most speed within the first year of lessons.

**Q: Why the first year?**

A: Learning the correct mechanics is key to gaining speed. Once the mechanics are correct pitchers must do them aggressively and that's when I start seeing the speed increases. Pitchers must be taught to throw hard right from the start.

**Q: What pitches should youth pitchers learn at 10u? 12u? 14u?**

A: There's no set rules for when we learn particular pitches and every pitcher is different.

Learning any pitch starts with learning the fastball mechanics CORRECTLY! Once correct and aggressive mechanics are developed usually around age 10 we then move to an off-speed pitch. An off-speed is very similar to a fastball so it's easily learned. Pitchers must then learn a change-up. Changing speeds is a tool pitchers should learn early on. Around age 12 pitchers should begin learning the peel drop. Learning the drop can help induce ground outs and strike outs. At 14U once they have a fastball, off-speed, change-up, and drop they should now start working on curve and rise spins. These pitches take several years to perfect. If speeds are not in the mid-50's, these pitches won't work.

**Q: What do you recommend youth pitchers do to increase their speed?**

A: Long distance pitching is the

number one speed builder. Long distance increases the pitchers strength. Strength plus speed equals velocity! This should be done three times a week to see results. Lay a 200 foot measuring tape down and have the pitcher stand at the 0 foot mark. The catcher should yell out the yardage where the ball first hits the ground. The pitch should arc high into the air, a 45 degree launch angle gets the maximum distance. By recording the distance the pitcher can track her progress to the chart below to see velocity she created.

100 feet = 50mph  
 125 feet = 55mph  
 150 feet = 60mph  
 200 feet = 65mph

Our next favorite drill is for increasing arm speed. This is a great 10-minute drill that can be done every day with the Xelerator and Light Weight ball. The pitcher should be in stationary position about 25 feet from home plate. Twirl the Xelerator 2x slow, 3x super fast. Do this three times. Then immediately pitch the light weight ball and try to match the same arm speed

created with the Xelerator. Do this ten times. End with the regular ball and try to keep the same arm speed. You can also use the pocket radar to clock the pitchers arm speed in this drill. Be sure the pitcher is pushing the arm speed!! Usually pitchers can increase arm speed numbers the first time doing this drill.

Q: What is the single most essential pitching tool that youth pitchers must have?

A: The Spin Right Spinner is definitely one of our favorite tools. This tool assures that a pitcher's spins are correct from fastball to rise ball. Working with this tool will make a pitcher's spins better therefore making their pitches move better. The SRS gives pitchers instant feedback so she can make corrections.

The two-finger grip is great for learning correct top spin for the fastball. Throwing the spinner using the cross grip can help increase the spin speed! The feedback for this drill is a loud buzzing sound when the spin is fast. Tracking spin speed can be done with the Rev Fire. The cross grip spinner

drill is the number one spin speed increaser.

to now create the firm, resisting front side to whip against.

**Q: How many pitches and how many times a week should youth pitchers practice?**

Quality instead of quantity. Pick something to perfect each practice. 100-125 pitches 4-5 days a week. Less if she has weekend tournaments. Rest days are also important. Workouts can be divided into mechanical work, speed building, accuracy, and spin work.

**Q: What is the most common problem you see with youth pitching mechanics?**

A: I see it all! Poor posture and poor releases are rampant.

**Q: What do you do to correct these?**

A: I video and compare the pitcher's posture throughout her pitch to the posture of several Olympic pitchers. Most all youth land upright or already forward instead of landing in the reverse posture position. I get them to land with the stride hip leading. This trick gets the head back enough

I work a lot on hand awareness and feeling a ball roll off the fingers with the palm facing forwards. 14" ball and Spin Right Spinner are musts for this! Young pitchers often make up releases and snap other body parts instead of fingers.

**Q: Have you found that youth game umpires have difficulty calling certain types of pitches? If so, which ones?**

A: Yes. Instead of calling the pitch based on where the ball crosses the plate, the umpire is influenced by where the ball is caught. The drop ball and change-up in particular are difficult for umpires to call. The drop is hard for them to call because it drops out of the zone by the time the catcher has caught it. If a young pitcher has a sharp drop, the umpires aren't used to seeing it and the catchers also have a hard time framing these pitches. The change-up is a deceiving pitch not only to the batters but the umpires as well.

**Q: If you could take body type out of the equation, which current pro or WCWS pitcher would you most like your pitching students to emulate? Why?**

A: University of Tennessee's Ellen Renfroe because she mixes speeds, spins and locations. She doesn't overpower you with 70mph+, but she make the ball miss the bat.

**Q: Where do you recommend your pitchers visually focus when they are starting their motion?**

A: Pitchers should focus on the spot they want to hit. Pick a location and make it as small as possible. Aim small, miss small. Instead of the entire glove, pick one string on the glove.

**Q: What pitch do you most often recommend youth pitchers throw as their first pitch if a batter shows no major holes in their stance or swing? Give us an idea of a typical pitch sequence for this type of batter?**

A: I would most often recommend the pitcher to start with their strongest pitch to this type of hitter, and get

them to swing at a ball. The situation depends entirely on what happens. Let's say the worst and she didn't swing. 1-0. Move on to a change up. Most batters don't swing at first strike change-ups. 1-1. Then work up and down pitches to make the swing change planes. 1-2. End on the pitcher's favorite pitch, better known as their "strike-out pitch." Make sure unpredictable pitch sequences are thrown!!!

**Q: Do you prefer that coaches call the pitches, their catchers, or the pitcher themselves?**

A: Coaches should call in the beginning but they must teach the pitcher/catcher the art of calling pitches. Constant communication is key.

**Q: Does this change as the pitchers/catchers get older?**

A: Yes. Pitchers must be allowed to shake off pitch calls. They will learn if their instincts are correct and they will take ownership in the pitch execution and its results.

**Q: What is the most important**

**advice you have for youth pitchers?**

A: Don't be afraid to throw the ball hard and enjoy the game!

**Q: How do you recommend pitchers have their hands as they leap out?**

A: Both hands should be driving out together directly towards the target in what we call the "plug it in" position. Pitching hand does not necessarily have to be in the glove.

**Q: There seem to be a variety of pitching motions. Some have the pitcher leaning back, some have them leaning forward. Which do you recommend and what's the advantage?**

A: Leaning back while standing on the mound is totally unnatural. Any jumping event has a slight lean forward to help propel the body forward. The sprinter position requires the power knee to bend as the body leans out over the toe. Load

and explode into the pitch!

**Q: We've seen a type of motion where the drag leg comes up in a figure four behind the other leg and a motion where the drag leg is brought forward so the pitcher is in a ready position. Should there be two different styles and if so what are the advantages of both?**

A: After release, the knees should pinch together which creates what can be called a figure 4. This position aids in keeping the hips open as the arm whips against the resistance of the stride leg. It also helps keep the glove shoulder pointing at home and the pitching shoulder back.

Getting into a forced ready position causes the hips to square around and balance to be lost to the right. It is difficult to make sure the hand and ball gets thru release before all that happens. Pitching is a reactionary position and fielding position should not be forced.



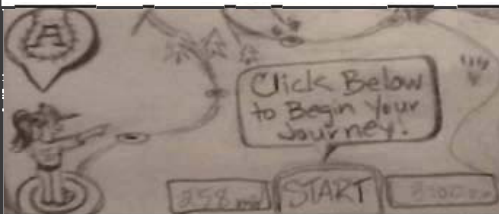


Rita Lynn operates a media-rich website full of information about pitching mechanics, drills, and pitching tools ([www.softballpitchingtools.com](http://www.softballpitchingtools.com)). All of the products mentioned above are available for sale on her website. One of the unique features of her site is that she provides videos showing correct use for almost every product.

*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 [fastpitch2001@optonline.net](mailto:fastpitch2001@optonline.net).*



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