Developing Young Pitchers:
Pitching vs Throwing: The Importance of the Count

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"That guy is really pitching out there." "The kid has good stuff but he is a thrower, not a pitcher." What are people talking about when they make statements like this? That question is important when coaches are trying to develop pitchers. And make no mistake about it, the most important player in all of sports who can single handedly increase the odds of winning a game is a good pitcher. Only in baseball does the defense control the ball. And every play begins with the ball in the hand of a pitcher. I learned this early. My junior and senior year in high school our ace threw a shut out in the Oregon state championship game. Needless to say, we won both titles needing to score only one run offensively and needing to make only six or seven plays during the game while they struck out two an inning. What made them pitchers, not throwers?

The answer can be found by looking at some very interesting stats. How is a players batting average impacted by the count? The interesting thing to note is that the numbers I am going to offer you are quite consistent from youth leagues through professional baseball. If you track a game on ESPN, they will show you the batting average of players at the major league level depending on the count. The best players at the professional levels fluctuate consistently just like the high school players I've spent coaching. Here are the most important lessons of studying counts to help pitchers understand what separates good pitchers from throwers.

Throw Strike One

When a hitter has a 0-1 count their average is around 170. When a hitter has a 1-0 count they hit over 275 and will walk twice as many times as the hitter that starts 0-1. So strike one on the first pitch shrinks the batting average and minimizes the hitters on base percentage by over 50%. As important as this is, one thing that must be noted is that the 0-0 count creates a hitter with an average just over 250. A bp fastball right down the middle is not the strike good pitchers throw to any dangerous hitter.

Get Ahead of the Count: Advantage Counts

This naturally follows the value of throwing strike one on the first pitch to a batter. When you have a hitter 0-1 or 1-2, both these counts produce batting averages of under 180. The pitcher has all the pitches in his arsenal at his disposal and can freely cut loose with something nasty, misses do not create any threat of a walk. And when the hitter has a 1-2 count, they must swing at any pitch close to avoid strike three no matter how challenging it is. These are pitchers counts, and good pitchers regularly have hitters backed into the corner that these counts create for offensive players.

Avoid Hitters Counts

The ultimate hitters counts are 2-0 and 3-1. Both of these counts produce batting averages in the mid 300's. The hitter can sit on a fastball and look for a mistake. They are not penalized for taking something nasty; a strike called still leaves them with a good count to hit the next pitch. Any time a hitter can guess pitch and location they are in control, not the pitcher. 1-0 and 2-1 counts create averages over 280 as well. These are also counts that the hitter can guess and still have an OK count if a strike is called. The last advantage count

is 3-2. The batting average for this count is 300, and three of ten times ball four is thrown. This creates an on base percentage of 600. The pitcher must throw a strike and the hitter is rewarded with a walk taking the pitch. Advantage offense. Beyond the batting average, all these counts create over twice the walks that advantage counts create, so on base percentages skyrocket. When a "pitcher" is constantly behind in the count, they are "throwers" to dangerous hitters who are safely sitting on pitches. The odds and statistics are against them.

Using Even Counts

Stats help us with the importance of throwing strikes, and even counts show the importance of getting ahead of falling behind. The even counts are 1-1 and 2-2. Both these counts create batting averages in the mid 200's. When the pitcher gets strike 2 on a 1-1 count, they drop the average of the hitter to 170. When they miss, they are facing a hitter with a batting average in the high 200's and doubling the chance of walking the batter. Even more crucial is throwing a strike on the 2-2 count. A miss sends the count to 3-2 which creates a situation where the batter has a 600 on base percentage. A strike gets the ball in play or a strike out, which is a 200 on base percentage.

Pitching, then, is the art of getting ahead of hitters on a regular basis. Goal number one of pitching at any level is consistently throwing strikes. As soon as this happens, young players can start refining themselves. Until that happens, games will take forever and the defense will find themselves trying to stay focused as hitters are walked and hit and then hit the ball hard while looking for the pitch they want and getting it delivered to them.