

EVERY PLAYER'S WORST ENEMY

“THE LOW ELBOW”

What causes it?

How do you prevent it?

Is there a cure?

Baseball basically involves three main categories of success through skill. We know that these categories include various skills, but I categorize them to our players to focus on the significance of their effect on winning games. Foot speed, physical size and strength, and basic athletic coordination are vital aspects found in all sports. However, an individual can be trained to build speed and strength in a limited capacity according to his natural given body type. This is not to say that increased practice or weight training won't improve a baseball player's performance. On the contrary, developing speed and strength will undoubtedly increase every player's skill level. This article will focus on the area that involves utilizing those levels of skill that have been developed and will be utilized from training and multiple repetitions to increase the level of success.

Three Categories for Successful Baseball

1. HITTING

Every baseball coach realizes that without scoring runs, you don't win many games. We spend a lot of time in practice with multiple drills, which focus on a variety of aspects to improve our hitting. Tee work, soft toss, “Quick Toss”, situational drills, mental processing, live BP, apparatus and machinery, and much more. They all culminate into a minimum of approximately 400-500 swings a day. And with all the practice, hitters still struggle to the tune of a .300 average, if they're lucky. This leads to another topic completely, which is not pertinent to this article. Perhaps we can attack hitting at another time.

2. FIELDING, We're getting close

Here is an area that we spend an abundance of time upon. Our drills, which are unique and unusual to many, focus on quickness, both with the hands, and extensively with the feet. This will lead us into the area that we are focusing on today. Our physical conditioning during practice entices our players to rapidly place their feet for the strongest and most accurate throw possible. This is especially important when throwing across the diamond and turning double plays. We try to denounce side arm throwing from the infield unless it's the only option. Side arm throws increases the lateral angle of the throw, usually tails and sinks, and encourages a LOW ELBOW of approach and release. The ball simply does not carry in straight line. Velocity is decreased and the arm action is usually one of an abrupt stop of deceleration. Therefore, as we move to the next category, we can realize that the hyperextension of the elbow can really take its toll. This is especially true if the player extends his season from spring, to summer, to fall. Excessive trauma leads to serious problems.

3. THROWING AND PITCHING... We're finally there

Here's the meat of this article. The other categories are very important. As a matter of fact, I believe you can win championships if you possess two of the three I've mentioned. You can hold your opponent to minimal runs by

reducing errors and your need to score much. You can overpower your opponent with good hitting. And, you can shut down your opponent with solid pitching.

******But you can't compete or become successful if you can't throw the ball.***

If your players can't throw the ball properly, with any velocity or accuracy, there simply is no place or position for that player on the field. Now consider that you've eliminated two categories from your team's ability. Throwing the baseball can be taught, but the biggest culprit is the *low elbow*. Let's diagnose what it is, how to fix it, but most importantly, how to prevent it.

****A Low Elbow Usually Begins with Young Players***

WHAT IS A LOW ELBOW?

Veteran and high school coaches are well aware of this term. But even some of the high school teams we face will produce players that simply can't throw properly and possess weak throws. These are the areas that we attempt to capitalize upon.

A low elbow is a defect that reduces arm speed due to improper alignment of the feet, shoulders and hips when preparing to throw. It's better known as "Flying Open". It also creates a lack of time and distance required to build hand speed. It is usually detected by a player pointing his glove foot toe or belly button toward his target and dropping his throwing elbow below his shoulder when delivering the ball in a pushing motion. It's a short delivery usually exemplified with a minimal distance of hand travel. The arm lags and there is no power because there is no hip rotation to develop torque on the lower side. The elbow comes to an abrupt stop and with extended time, can hyperextend the elbow joint and even cause permanent damage. You can also observe that low elbow throws usually place the hand under the ball and result in a "*Pie Throwing*" motion. The throws are usually weak, rainbow in nature compensating for reduced hand speed, and fly upward rather than in line drive fashion to the target. The ball usually is low or doesn't reach its destination.

HOW TO FIX A LOW ELBOW?

There are many pointers that can assist in correcting a low elbow.

First, be sure the player is in his most powerful position. A player's feet will always dictate and facilitate his strongest position. His feet should be placed as if he were preparing to hit, and his target of throw is to the pitcher, (illustrated by a 90 degree angle of his foot position to the line of the target) Simply put, he's viewing his target over his glove-side shoulder. (We have our pitchers increase the lower part or hip rotation to show the numbers on his back and his glove side back pocket for greater torque.) We advocate keeping the elbows pointing downward as though squeezing something under the arm pits. This creates a glove and hand position with the fingers pointing upward and close to the body at about chin height. It encourages a smaller more compact position for a quicker response. Now when we separate, or proceed to transition and separation, we tend to go downward, back, around and upward, rather than laterally sideways, in a bow and arrow, shortened fashion. The front toe, or lead toe, should be touching the ground with heel off the ground and facing the target. This provides for a softer more direct step toward the target. With the lower body in its proper position, have the player step or stride forward without turning his hips. Keep the player in the closed position as if he were striding to hit a pitch; hips and shoulders back and loaded. He soon realizes not to prematurely open his front side and drop the elbow. Upon his stride, have the player drop his hands downward, stride forward toward his target gaining ground, reach back to the launch position, and freeze.

*While in the launch position, be sure his throwing thumb is pointing downward toward the ground under the ball, and his index and middle fingers are on top! By turning the thumb downward, the elbow automatically elevates. The throwing hand should be bent at about 90 degrees, in position as if waving goodbye to the person behind you., and elevated at least to shoulder height.

*Next, while still in the launch position, Hip, back pocket and numbers of the glove hand are still facing the target, have the player take his throwing hand with the ball; tap the top of his hat with the **back side of his wrist**. Amazing, that's where we want his hand and elbow height to deliver, at least at shoulder height. With multiple reps, he'll realize that the distance of the arm travel, combined with lower side torque and raised elbow, will enable him to throw harder with less effort and more accuracy.

*The travel of the hand during transition and separation should always be downward and circular, never sideways or laterally when possible. Experienced players may have to compensate according to the situation. It should be long and downward out of the glove for pitchers and outfielders for maximum distance and time to create hand speed, and shorter for infielders to compensate for quicker releases.

*Remember this sequence... Long lever out of the glove downward and back, short lever at the top, (wrist to hat) and long lever throw to the target for reach and extension.

PREVENTION AND CORRECTING TIPS AND DRILLS

The best way to prevent any bad habit is to never allow it in the first place. Our camps begin at age 6 and have provided us with a good opportunity to develop good habits early on in a youngster's career. We are very active in our youth leagues with free coaches' and kids' clinics during the winter and early spring. This has proven to be very effective with increasing interest in our programs. Teach and reinforce good habits by reading and studying information that has proven to be successful. My grandson recently turned 8 and is playing in the little league system. While his throws are a bit erratic at times, his velocity and arm action are very good. He sets his feet and throws with an elevated arm. He rotates his hips for power, and that's what is important at this time. When players feel successful, they'll train harder and become more confident and coachable. Fundamentals win games and starting early is the key.

FINAL TIPS AND DRILLS TO CORRECT LOW ELBOW THROWING

- 1 Stand in front of your player as he is in the launch position. Take a broomstick or small rod and hold it horizontally to his chest at his shoulder's height. Have him step and throw to his target without making contact with the rod. His elbow should rise above and increase his awareness of problem. Raise the rod even higher to over train.
- 2 If no rod is available, kneel with a ball glove at his chest and repeat the drill without contacting the object.
- 3 Repeat the separation downward to the launch, checking for the thumb under and waving goodbye for an elevated elbow
- 4 From the launch position and elevated elbow to at least the shoulder height, have the player tap his hat three times with the back of his wrist. On the 4th deliver and throw.

Teach the game and you will see the results. The player who prepares early and builds a solid foundation with fundamentals usually finds success. Enjoy these times with your teams and children for they are precious and end all too soon. Take the time to teach the basics. And remember..."Fundamentals win games."

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