

A Road Map for Developing Successful Pitchers

By Michele Smith

How many times have you watched pitchers look great warming up on the sidelines only to fizzle out once they get into the pitching circle? Or, how often have you coached or witnessed pitchers who never truly reach their full potential? Becoming a great pitcher is more than the ability to achieve steadfast mechanics. Many times, as coaches, we focus on the physical game of our pitchers and forget about the mental game—as well as all the other aspects of pitching that are of utmost importance. Let's take a little time to talk about pitching as a whole and how to develop successful pitchers.

The coach's role is to help their individual athletes and team to become the best they can be. While coaching requires knowledge of the skills used in softball, you must develop ways to communicate that knowledge to your athletes. Below, I have developed a 'Road Map' to help you prepare your pitchers to be the best 'game' pitchers they can be.

Construct Goals:

The first thing we need to do is help our athletes develop goals that can be attained and measured. We should also develop a well-defined plan for achieving those goals; this will help to enhance self-motivation and direction for the athletes. When you have a target to shoot for, you are much more motivated to do well and improve.

Off Field Training:

The next step is setting up a good training program. I have written a couple of articles about the importance of training off the field. Please refer to those on my website: www.michelesmith.com for the Articles as well as my new Training DVD and Year Long Training Guide. Weight training is important to keep the total body strong, especially all the muscles used when pitching. Training will give your athletes more power and help keep them injury free.

Video Analysis:

Many coaches and athletes spend a great deal of time working on pitching mechanics. Video technology is an excellent way to help analyze the athletes. Video will help your athletes understand exactly what they are doing right and wrong. There's a big difference between what our minds think we are doing and what our bodies are actually doing. Visually seeing our skills will help us learn at an increased pace. I recommend watching my pitching videos, in other words watching my form (or video of any pitcher who has great form), and then immediately watching video of your athletes and comparing our similarities and differences. Many athletes learn visually, so the use of video will speed the learning process.

Drills:

It is also important to use drills to help develop proper muscle memory of correct mechanics. Drills will also help rid pitchers of bad habits. Remember, most drills will work on just one aspect of the pitching motion, therefore do drills in single sets of 20-25 repetitions—depending on the age of the athlete.

Scouting:

Scouting and analyzing the opponent's weaknesses is imperative in building successful teams and pitchers. It is important to teach your pitchers and catchers to recognize the hitter's strengths and weaknesses so they can be targeted. It is also important for infielders and outfielders to know this information as well so they can be well positioned in their defensive spots. For example, knowing to 'play the line' when a pull hitter is batting is a must for the 'corners.'

Battery Talk and Skills:

It is important for the battery to learn and understand there is more to pitching than just balls and strikes. The following points should be discussed and used in both practice and games.

- Throwing the right pitch in the right situation – Many coaches of young athletes will call the game for the battery therefore it is important to teach the athletes why pitches are being called according to the situation at hand.
- Changing speeds with all pitches—Learn to use ‘junk’ pitches at different speeds, this will make it harder for the batter to time the pitcher.
- Establishing the inside corner and not being afraid to pitch inside—This is a challenge for many young pitchers.
Use ‘cones’ as batters during practice to teach pitchers to throw on the inside part of the plate. Also, let the pitchers know it is the batter’s responsibility to get out of the way of the pitch and to trust their control.
- Learning when to and when not to use the changeup—Since many coaches call the game for the battery, it is important for the battery to understand when the change up is needed and when it is not.
- Upsetting the hitter’s rhythm is a key in becoming a great pitcher—Experienced pitchers do many key things well, and keeping hitters off balance is one such key. Keep the hitter from getting into a groove; both the pitcher and the catcher can help do this.
- Getting ahead of the hitter and working ahead in the count is very important—Control is needed to do this, so work on control during practice to help this part of the pitcher’s game.
- Working fast without rushing is another key component of a great pitcher—A pitcher who works too slowly has too much time to think and that is not a good thing. Get in a quick rhythm and don’t allow the opposing team to break it.
- Don’t get in a pattern...stay unpredictable—Many coaches and catchers calling the game will get predictable and this gives hitters who study the game, and you, an advantage.
- Make adjustments in the later innings of the game—As the game goes on and the pitcher’s pitch count increases, it is important to make adjustments in form and pitch calling. The longer a game goes, the more at-bats a hitter will get off the pitcher and this is an advantage to the hitter. Therefore, making adjustments at the end of the game is very important.
- Getting ahead with strikes early in the count and getting the hitter out with balls—This is one of the most important aspects of pitching. A pitcher who can make hitters swing at balls will be one of the most successful pitchers in the game.
- Frustrate aggressive hitters by working a little slower—This can be done by a longer pause in the pre-motion or by stepping off the rubber. Other ways are to rub up the ball or talk to the catcher by calling her out to the circle.
- Pay attention to information provided by the hitter—Many hitters will show you what type of pitch they like to hit in their warm up swings. Study their warm up swing and you will know where not to pitch them. During the game, learn to process their swing and watch their form to see what they are doing right or wrong so you can make adjustments on where to pitch them.

- Stay away from a good hitter's strength or power zone—Whenever possible, do not pitch to a hitter's strength or power zone. Throw there only when necessary—when it is also the Umpire's zone and you need a strike. Remember there are three strike zones—the Umpire's, the Pitcher's and the Hitter's. Always try to throw to the Umpire's and Pitcher's and avoid the Hitter's.

- Teach defensive responsibilities—It makes a pitcher's job much easier when she is a good fielding pitcher. Work defensive skills regularly in practice. Work ground balls and bunts to all bases as well as plays at the plate.

- Establish a consistent pitching circle routine—This routine should be used in both practice and games. The catcher should be aware of the pitcher's routine and help keep her in it. This should be followed every time a pitcher warms up for a game. In relief situations this might not always be possible, but try to follow the pitcher's routine as much as possible to create a comfortable feel prior to the athlete entering the game.

- Learn relaxation and breathing techniques to keep nerves in control—It is important for all athletes on the team to learn these techniques to control their minds and bodies in stressful environments.

Following this "Road Map" should help your pitchers improve and, therefore, win more games. So much time is spent on the physical mechanics of pitching, the intangibles seem to be forgotten. Learn them, teach them and follow this Road Map—and in no time you will find your pitchers on a journey to a destination called success!

Good Luck!

This Article was published in Softball Magazine, Issue 6, 2007