

Pitching Success Is More Than Velocity

By – Todd Oakes – University Of Minnesota Baseball – Pitching Coach

The emphasis in the past 6-8 years and movement to developing velocity with pitchers has spread like wild fire from youth league baseball to the professional ranks. The number one objective of the majority of pitchers in baseball has become arm strength and velocity. How hard can I throw the ball? The majority of their time is spent with strength training, conditioning, long toss, and pure velocity development. Are we forgetting about the other ingredients of a successful pitcher? Are we still teaching and emphasizing the finer points of pitching? I was taught that the number one objective of a successful pitcher is all about getting outs. In my opinion, velocity is just a small part of getting hitters out on a consistent basis.

What about strike percentage? What about command? What about location? What about changing speeds, including breaking ball and change-up development? What about movement and maybe some deception? What about developing intestinal fortitude and guts as a weapon to get hitters out? There are multiple ways to get hitters out and pitch successfully. To put the majority of our time, effort, and resources into one area is short changing the development of young pitching arms. Pitching coaches and private instructors are seldom asked for assistance and help in the area I mentioned above. “Coach, can you help me develop a change-up?” “Coach, can you help me locate my fastball better down in the zone?” “Coach, can you help me with my pickoff move and ability to hold runners?” “Coach, can you help me develop my mental game?” These requests are seldom asked it appears. Typically it is the request – “Coach, teach me how to throw harder.”

I’ve coached at the professional and college ranks for over 28 years and I’ve seen more than just a few pitchers that have a great arm and throw with high velocity but struggle locating pitches or they struggle with their off speed pitches or they lack some mental toughness to get outs consistently and efficiently. Some of the more successful pitchers that I have had the opportunity to coach have been the finesse and location pitchers who can locate pitches and throw strikes with multiple pitches. I believe it was Warren Spahn who said – “Hitting is timing. Pitching is upsetting timing.” Does a pitcher throwing 90-95 mph with just fastball command keep a hitter off balance and upset a hitter’s timing better than a control pitcher throwing with less velocity but command of two or three pitches? I will take the finesse pitcher that knows how to pitch. There is no doubt a high velocity pitcher can maybe get by with more mistakes with the pure velocity but I’ve seen a lot of fastballs 90+ mph that have been well hit just like the hanging breaking ball. I have also seen many pitchers baffle hitters with just a fastball and change-up combination. Bottom line, I think a highly successful pitcher needs more than one weapon. Velocity is only a piece of the puzzle.

Recruiting

Recruiting is probably the most challenging aspect of college baseball. We are trying to pick out 15-18 year olds and look into the crystal ball and project what they will develop into within the next 1-2 years. Most high school pitchers and parents have been influenced to believe that the most important physical aspect we as college coaches are looking for is velocity. The harder you throw, the more attention you

will get and the bigger the scholarship offer. But we are challenged to find prospective student-athletes with academic skill and emotional intelligence as well. Their fastball velocity and baseball stats are just a small part of the equation. Typically when I review the questionnaire or recruiting bio sheet and the recruit lists his velocity, I subtract 3-4 mph because it is often over-inflated. Or they put down the magic number – 90 mph – and you are left wondering if that is their average fastball or their top velocity ever. I am more interested in the average velocity they pitch with instead of their one time “showcase fastball.” A professional scout once told me, when scouting pitchers, his philosophy was to leave the radar gun in the trunk and just focus on how the other team swings the bats during the course of the game. It’s still probably the best indicator of a “pitcher’s stuff” as well as ability to execute pitches and get outs. I’m as guilty as the next guy because the radar gun is usually in my hand but I have used this approach and it has proven to be accurate and true.

Pitching Injuries

Has the emphasis on velocity development and power arms added to the increase of injuries we have seen in the pitching circle? Young pitchers are bigger and stronger and arm care exercises are a big part of a pitcher’s development. Pitching prospects and parents are spending more time and money than ever before for private lessons, travel teams, camps, and showcases to improve and solidify their mechanics and we have more injuries than ever. Are they spending their money on the right stuff or are we simply focused on velocity development and exposure? It seems as if many parents are convinced that the more money they spend and the more showcases we go to, the bigger the scholarship offer.

We all know that throwing the baseball in an overhand motion is not a natural action of the body or arm. It is my opinion that each individual pitching arm is anatomically built to move only so fast and consequently, throw the baseball only so hard. But yet we push the envelope and we push the body and we try to improve arm speed in order to squeeze out every possible mph the arm has in it. The smaller muscles, tendons, and ligaments that form the shoulder capsule and elbow joint are structured to carry a certain load but we want to force more strength, flexibility, and acceleration on these areas. And we are doing it with the 12-15 year olds as well and we are brain washing them into believing velocity is the most important quality. This is simply the wrong message. Shouldn’t we be focused on developing an efficient delivery; focusing on filling up the strike zone with pitches; focusing on developing a change-up; focusing on the mental and emotional aspect of the game? These are essential ingredients in executing pitches and getting hitters out for pitchers of every age group.

Rest Period Must Be Built In

Baseball has slowly become a year round sport all over the country, including the Midwest states. The market is saturated with indoor baseball training facilities which allow year round training. Travel and club teams will attend multiple tournaments and showcases during the fall and winter months. High school pitchers are attending showcases in January and February and throwing for the radar gun. Most of these year round opportunities have two main objectives – velocity development and exposure. Young pitchers and their parents are convinced that this is the path they must take to earn a college scholarship or for their son to earn more playing time and a bigger opportunity. So the question

becomes – when is the pitching arm getting a break – when is the young, not physically mature yet body getting rest? We are forgetting about this vital ingredient in maintaining a healthy pitching arm – REST.

In my opinion, the throwing arm of any baseball player, and especially a pitcher, must build in a 8-12 week rest period during the 12-month calendar where they do not pick up a ball. They can weight train, do arm care, condition, take a yoga class, swim or how about play another sport. We love to recruit multi-sport athletes that are developing other athletic skills and training other parts of their body throughout the year. It leads to a more balanced and more competitive athlete. We require this rest period even for our college age pitchers. We had four of our freshman pitchers take this past summer totally off and instead focused on the other areas. Do you think they came back in the fall well rested, healthy, and much stronger? Some of our top pitchers in the past 10 years have taken the summer off rather than rent themselves out to a collegiate league and show up in the fall tired. If our pitchers pitch during the summer, then they do not pitch in the fall and take their break then. The younger the pitcher the longer the rest period should be. A prolonged rest period for a pitching arm is extremely important for a healthy career.

Mother Nature

Whether we realize it or not, we all have an extra coach on our coaching staffs – and her name is Mother Nature. Mother Nature is in control of the slow maturation process and physical development of our players. The problem appears when we do not listen to her and we want to be bigger, stronger, and throw harder right now – not have to wait until next year. Patience and grinding it out on a daily basis becomes a virtue. Logically speaking, a young pitcher will gradually throw harder each year he ages, grows, and develops. But yet we have some pitching coaches that are quick to take credit for velocity increases and market themselves as such. What we don't know is how much of that development should be credited to Coach Mother Nature? Developing pitching skills, including fastball velocity, is a process and it takes time as well as physical and emotional maturation. We need to trust that other coach in this area.

Conclusion

Power arms and the development of high velocity fastballs have become a huge focal point in the pitching circles. High velocity and 90+ mph fastballs are sexy, they have swagger, they impress the fans, coaches, and scouts. But do they get hitters out any more consistently than the finesse pitchers with multiple pitches that locate well and compete to get hitters out? Don't get me wrong, I love velocity as much as the next guy, but I refuse to make it the number one objective in our pitching philosophy. There are a number of different ways to ease a hitter into poor contact and hopefully get him out. Let's get back to developing all of those traits and skills and not put all our eggs in one basket.