

The Development of a Softball Pitcher - What to Do First...and What Comes Next

by Gerald Warner, Softball Pitching Instructor



We have seen too many promising young pitchers ultimately get frustrated, and in some cases quit pitching softball because they were encouraged to do too much too quickly. Sometimes a pitcher, a parent, or even a coach brags about how many pitches a young pitcher can throw. Trying to learn new pitches before you are doing the fundamentals correctly is a waste of time. Learning to pitch takes a long time...with a lot of hard work and practice.

Below is what we recommend as a step-by-step skills-development plan for each of our pitchers:

Step 1 - Develop good mechanics

- a) Start by fully relaxing your neck, arms, & upper body (a relaxed muscle is a fast muscle)
- b) Let your body lean forward (full body...don't bend at the waist) as you start your arm forward, and push off the rubber to help get a good long "reaching out" stride. Your push-off and stride will eventually be your keys to good speed.
- c) "Open" your body (facing 3rd base for a right-hander) as you go into the rotation.
- d) The arm circle must be fast and consistent (smooth...no jerkiness) with constant arm speed during the entire rotation; keep the arm straight (no bent elbow) the whole way around.
- e) Keep your stride straight...toward home plate. Land with your stride foot turned at a slight (30° to 45°) angle, with the toe touching down near, or on, the invisible line between you and the catcher.
- f) Nearing the release point, quickly "close" your body (toward the catcher)...first the shoulder, then bring your hip through with the ball.
- g) At the release point, have your wrist back, then snap it through as you release the ball.
- h) Let your arm follow-through loose and naturally after the release. You will likely finish with your palm facing you, and perhaps coming all the way up to touch your shoulder.

Step 2 (during the next couple of months) - Increase your speed

Don't worry about control right now...work on making your mechanics smooth and natural... and throw hard. Your control will be fine when your mechanics are correct.

Step 3 (after mechanics and speed are good) - Accuracy & Location

Be able to accurately place your pitch in any of the four corners. For most high school batters, low-outside and low-inside will work best. For power-hitters, you can occasionally use high-inside, too. Eventually, you need to be able to pitch to a specific location so well that you will never throw right down the middle.

(continued)

Step 4 (after Steps 1, 2, & 3) – Have a Change-of-Speed Pitch (develop a change-up)

To the batter, a good change-up should look just like your fast ball...with the same motion, arm speed, facial expression, and no "telegraphing". Ideally, a change-up will be at least 20% to 25% slower than your fastball (If you throw a 50 mph fastball, the change should come in at 37-42 mph).

There are several ways to throw a change-up (stiff wrist, circle change, back of hand, etc.)

- Visualize in your mind how the ball will arc and come down to the plate (low and outside)
- Move the ball back in the palm of your hand (which restricts the wrist snap)
- Keep your wrist "locked" straight (no wrist snap)
- "Pop" or flip the ball out (depending on which style of release you use)
- Follow through low, and toward the catcher

Step 5 - Develop pitches that go down, up, & sideways

IMPORTANT: Again, don't try to do too much too soon! Breaking pitches won't be valuable unless you can throw a decent fastball accurately. So you have to start by really LEARNING the fundamentals of pitching, developing proper and smooth pitching mechanics, then add speed to your fastball, and finally develop consistently good control of your pitches. Then, we recommend that your 2nd pitch is a good, deceptive change-up (above). Now, after you have your fastball and change-up working really well, then consider working on your first additional pitch.

DROP BALL - After you have practiced, worked hard, and have really developed everything in 1 through 4 (above), THEN start working on your drop ball. Your drop will, for most batters, be far more effective than a curve, screwball, or rise...especially through high school. At best, the batter will "top it"...meaning that they will keep it on the ground.

SCREW BALL and/or **CURVE BALL** - Like the rise, the curve and screw are nice to have in your repertoire in preparation for college, but get the "Big-3" (fast, change, drop) working first.

RISE BALL - The rise is very difficult to perfect...it will take time...perhaps years. After you have an awesome change-up, a good drop ball that works all the time, and perhaps one other pitch...THEN work on the rise.



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