

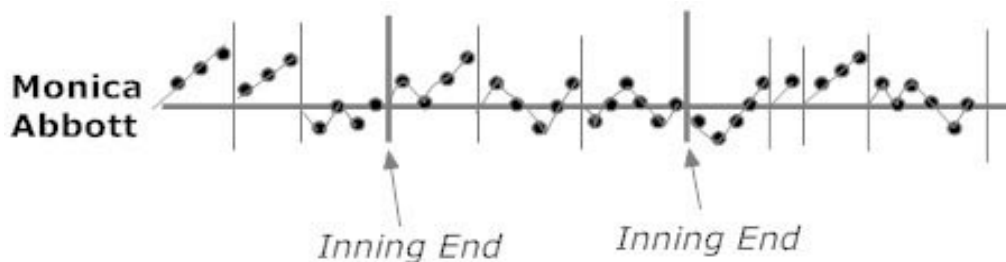
This is Part 6 of my 6 part article series for the National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA)

Since this is my last article I want to share something cool with you I've learned recently, along with my Top 10 Pitching Thoughts – kind of like important pitching things I've learned along the way.

Recently I was meeting with a dear friend of mine – Missy Lombardi, Assistant Coach from University of Oklahoma – who is one of the best pitching minds in the business. Missy is always finding better ways to do things and we enjoy bouncing ideas off each other. In our most recent discussion Missy came up with a very simple, and yet amazingly effective way of charting pitches that I think is fantastic and that I want to share with you.

While it doesn't really have a name, I call it *Above the Line Charting* as that's basically the whole goal – you'll see what I mean. Tracking results & information – or charting – has become a psychotic obsession in our game now and it's not going away anytime soon, nor should it. But I find that too many people spend too much time charting and never really do much with the finished product. Time is an issue for all of us and one of the things I find so incredible about this *Above the Line Charting* is that it's so simple, and all the information you need is immediately apparent without having to translate it, print it out, or otherwise further process the charted info.

Let's take a quick look at a few innings that Monica Abbot recently pitched when the USA beat Australia in the Finals of the 2009 KFC World Cup of Softball (photo 1):



At first glance this *Above the Line Charting* might look confusing but keep these simple principles in mind:

1. Start by drawing a line from left to right across your sheet. This line acts as Ground Zero for all pitches – you'll see why soon.
2. Every pitch is shown by a dot.
3. Every Strike the dot goes UP from the previous dot.
4. Every Ball the dot goes DOWN from the previous dot.
5. After every batter completes their at-bat put a thin line up and down
6. After every inning put a thick line up and down.

It's really that simple. That's one thing I really love about this. It's simple and yet very powerful. So just based on these 6 principles we can tell the following from looking at this Above the Line chart:

- Monica threw to 10 batters (*note that these batters were not consecutive in this particular game, I've pulled out a few to use as an example*)

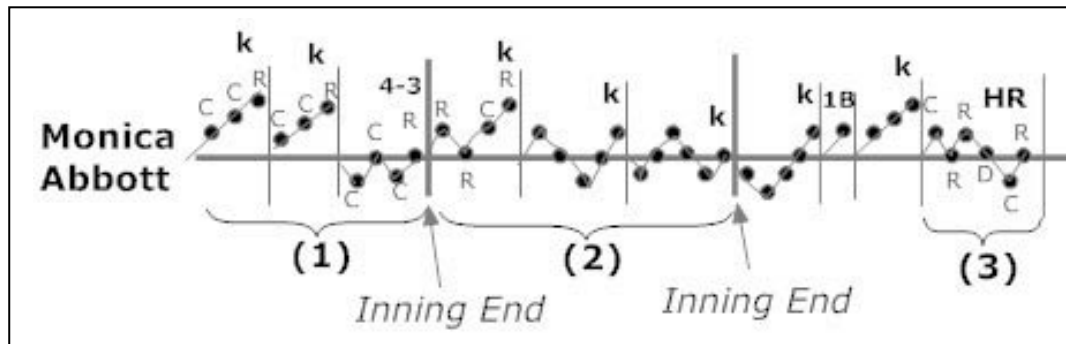
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- She spent most of her time – or pitches – Above the Line – throwing 27 Strikes & 13 balls. That's pretty good!

For many of our pitchers this might be enough information to help them see just how often they are "getting ahead" since it's actually showing pitches in a picture.

But for many of us, this just isn't enough information so of course we've got to make even the simple more complex! And, without doing that to the degree that this type of "simple chart" loses its effectiveness, here's what I've done to provide just a little more necessary detail without getting so much information it's all a big fat useless mess:



I've broken this now-more-cluttered chart into 3 different parts, so let's talk about each one:

(1) In this part I've simply put letters over each dot and these letters represent what that particular pitch was: C for Curve, R for Rise, D for Drop, etc... I've also listed the result for that batter in bolder letters after the last pitch, so K is for Strikeout, 4-3 is a groundout to 2nd base who threw to 1st, 1B is a single and HR – well, we'll get to that in a minute. So by adding the type of pitch above or below the dot you can see which pitch and in which order was a ball or strike and what the result for the batter was. You can mark foul balls by putting a little dot next to the type of pitch. Monica threw to 3 batters in (1) striking out 2 of them and getting the 3rd batter to ground out to 2nd on a Riseball (odd, isn't it?)

(2) In the second part I start off showing each type of pitch for the 1st batter and then for the remaining 2 hitters I just show whether that pitch was a ball or strike (remember, by the dot either going up (strike) or down (ball)) and what happened to the hitter. I just want you to see how the type of pitch often clutters up the look. You'll notice in this second portion that Monica starts hanging out Below the Line more than she did in the first part – which might be something you'd want to look at later on.

(3) In the 3rd part you can see that she starts off behind 2-0 on the first hitter and ends up striking her out, but must literally climb the hill in order to do it. This is a great visual example for pitchers to see how tough it becomes when you fall behind early. In fact, look at all the batters that Monica faces in this example (10 of them) and just pay attention to how often she throws a strike in one of the 1st 2 pitches: 9 out of 10. That's one reason she's so successful! Now – look at the very last hitter in this example. Its Stacey Porter probably Australia's best hitter. Monica gets ahead, and then throws a ball, then a strike followed by 2 balls in a row. And it's the 2 balls in a row that force Monica to have to get back to the line and she throws a strike that's too fat and – Home Run! She really battled her control on this hitter and

the hitter won. It happens sometimes but you can see through the dots how she never spent much time Above the Line with this hitter! That's the power of this type of charting!

Whether you ever end up using this type of simplified pitching chart or not, I don't know, but I do hope that I've stretched your mind a bit to the possibility of finding a different way of doing the same thing. Missy is the one that helped me find this method and like I said, I've shared it with a number of coaches since then and the overwhelming feedback is they love it for its simplicity and for how powerful it is for their pitchers! If you do end up using it let me know how you like it – and if you change it then let me know that too! (cindy@softballexcellence.com)

Now, to wrap up my seemingly endless article series on pitching I want to leave you with a list of My Top 10 Pitching Thoughts. These are things I've come up with from working with pitchers of all skill levels in all countries and over a far too long period. I hit on a few of these in my first article, but this list simply elaborates on a few more. While these might sound simple I have found them to be universal and more importantly, CRUCIAL to a pitcher's success and ultimate domination. While my knowledge and understanding of pitching continues to grow every week (and sometimes daily) I seem to constantly go back to these main points. Keep in mind they aren't in any particular order. Happy Reading –

My Top 10 Pitching Thoughts:

1. **The Simple Truth – You're Throwing a \$5 Ball to a Player with a \$400 Weapon in Her Hands! –**
So you better know what you're doing! YOU better know, not someone else who you see once a week or who sits on a bucket during your games! As a pitcher your weapon is not that \$5 ball but your Million \$\$ brain. Know what you're doing, know what you're trying to do, understand how you're going to do it, evaluate what adjustments you need to make, make those adjustments, then throw again. Period. Get yourself in better mental and physical conditioning that any hitter you're going to face. Know how to dominate your weapon better than any hitter you're going to face (read – dominate your brain, your body AND that ball). Making excuses and whining only makes it more likely the hitter could beat you with last year's \$300 version. Oh, and by the way, there are a bunch of scientists sitting in some lab right now (a whole bunch of them since each bat company has their own) trying to figure out how to make a \$500 bat for next year, and NOBODY is trying to make your \$5 ball any better! Oh, and here are 2 things that really help us beat that \$400 weapon:
 1. A lot of hitters have a \$400 bat and a \$4 swing
 2. YOU know what pitch is coming and the batter doesn't – so keep them guessing and quit being predictable or pickable.
2. **Balls Don't have Brains –** Balls don't know what you want them to do only what your body tells them to do! Learn to control your body and your hand so they dominate the ball instead of letting that stupid little \$5 yellow ball dominate you! I did talk about this in my very first article but its worth mentioning again. A ball can't read your mind so it has no clue you wanted the ball to go flat for 34 feet and then break DOWN sharply just before it reaches the batter. It can't read your grip (those are for your finger pads), it can't read your mind (that's for your body to do) so the ball only knows that your body/hand told it to go straight ahead to the glove. So it does and in the process gets hit about 300 feet! If your hand never did enough to make the ball

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go forward for 34 feet and then break down sharply there's no way the ball can just figure this out on its own. Learn how to make your hand follow your mind, or else buy smarter balls!

3. **Feel beats Thought** – I got this saying from John Cohen, Mississippi State's new baseball coach and quite simply it means that anytime a player can "feel" something for themselves it beats the heck out of thinking it. But, keep in mind that thinking beats nothing – which too many of our pitchers have as their pre-pitch thought; nothing. The process for a player (a pitcher in our case) that's learning how to feel things when they pitch goes like this:
 - a. First they have to have a thought for the pitch, something they're trying to accomplish. The smaller or more specific this thought can be the greater chance their body can turn that thought into action. So for instance, instead of saying "get faster" as their thought they should get smaller (more specific) by saying "make my hand faster past my follow through". This thought is more specific because it not only says *what* should get faster but also says *when*.
 - b. Then, this type of specific thought plays out through the pitchers body parts. The more she can *feel* those parts the more she can control them and therefore make that thought actually happen. Feeling something is more evolved than simply thinking it since feeling happens in your body parts and thinking happens in your brain, and it's your body parts that are actually working together to pitch the ball, not your brain.
4. **Fingers only Body Part Touching the Ball** – Pitchers think they pitch with their arm, just ask yours. Have them actually touch their arm and they'll come nowhere near their hand. Then they might say they pitch with their wrist – or even snap. The wrist does not every touch the ball and "snap" isn't even a body part. The hand, and more specifically the fingers, is the only body part that a pitcher will ever touch the ball with no matter her age, skill level or team. A pitcher must know how to talk to her fingers and have them listen in order for her to dominate the ball.
5. **Pads are a Pitchers Key to Dominating the Ball** – If the pitcher's hand is the only body part that ever touches the ball then it's the pitcher's finger PADS that actually transfer the power and direction to the ball. Learn to talk to and dominate the pads of your fingers and specifically, the pads of your pointer and middle finger as they are the strongest fingers on your hand. Not sure what the pads are? Simply snap your fingers and it's the pads of your thumb and middle finger you'll use to snap. Lots of pitchers think they use the "tips" of their fingers to pitch – try snapping with the tips of your fingers and you'll be there for awhile. Pitch with the parts you snap with. Some pitches require more pressure with the middle of the pads, others with the little finger side and others with the thumb side. The more you can dominate these small body parts the better your pitches will move and the better you will be!
6. **Make the Pitch Match your Picture** – When any pitcher stands on the pitching rubber, no matter how good or how bad she is, she has a picture for what she wants the ball to do. When she's young that picture is to go straight to the glove. As she gets better that picture might be to go straight toward the plate and then curve left sharply at the last minute landing on the outside corner. The problem with pitchers that struggle with their control isn't the picture they have for the pitch, it's in making the actual pitch they throw match the picture they had for the pitch. What a pitcher uses to connect their picture with their pitch are the directions for the pitch,

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those things they actually say in their head just prior to the pitch. An elite pitcher will say those things with their eyes as soon as they get the pitch signal – it's become that automatic. But, an evolving pitcher must practice those directions as they are as much a part of that pitch as the pitch itself. Get specific and get simple and then practice to have your hand follow your directions and you'd be amazed at how often the pitch will match your picture!

7. **Own It** – This is simple – quite whining and making excuses for bad pitches, lost games, whatever. Own it! If you don't like it then fix it but Own It! My sister Sue used to catch me when I was pitching and while she seemed a little harsh at the time, she was dead-on right. She used to tell me whenever she'd make a trip out to the mound, usually with multiple runners on various bases, "you got into this now get out of it" and then meander back behind home plate. I'd most often get out of it only because she made me so mad! But in fact, she was right. I did get into it and I was just as capable of getting out of it!
8. **Improve the Next Pitch, Forget the Last Pitch** – This goes along with Owning It and is simply how pitchers need to learn to think in order to quit carrying around all their previous bad pitches so they can fix any issue they might be having at the moment. Every single pitch in every single practice and game have your pitchers work on Improving the NEXT pitch and forgetting the last one! Remember, it's a \$5 ball vs. a \$400 bat so stay in the present!
9. **Don't Let it Leak** – The majority of pitchers I work with work really hard, put a great deal of effort into every pitch and yet don't get that same amount of result on the pitch itself. This simply means there's some kind of leak. Think of it this way - if you're putting in a 10 effort level out of a possible 10 (highest) into your pitch but you feel like your pitch is only coming out at a level 8, and then instead of trying to give an 11 effort level out of 10, find the leak! Make yourself more efficient instead of always just trying harder. Most pitchers leak or lose their power at the release point or in their follow through. They start too fast and then quickly fall apart the closer they get to the release – which is when it all really matters and when they should be at their best.
10. **The End Matter Most!** This is a continuation of the previous point. The end of the pitch is when you release the ball so of course it matters more than the beginning. I'm not saying the beginning doesn't matter but I am saying that the end matters more. The end of a pitcher's motion (which starts as they enter the release zone) must be fastest and the end of a pitcher's snap must have the most snap. For a pitcher to really dominate they must dominate the end of everything – it matters the most! Dominate the end of the game, the end of the weekend, the end of the season, the end of the tournament and THE END OF THE COUNT!!! Starters don't matter – it's finishers that we remember!

As most of you get ready to start a brand new season I wish you all the best of luck! Thanks for reading and for all your time, passion and energy to coach softball and if you ever have anything cool to share with me you can do so at: cindy@softballexcellence.com!