

This is Part 1 of my 6 part article series for the National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA)

There's a saying that goes - "Don't shoot a rabbit with a canon". When I first heard this statement I thought it was kind of cool, but wasn't too sure what it really meant. And the more I thought about it the more I realized it had a lot of application to coaching. To me, this statement really describes how most of us deal with pitchers and how we teach pitching. We take everything we know about pitching, load it into our mouths, aim at our pitcher and let it fly. Needless to say, this sends out a little more information than necessary, overwhelming our pitcher in the process, and in the case of the canon and the rabbit, doesn't leave much of the rabbit when it's all said and done.



The result of this type of canon-firing approach to coaching pitchers is something very similar to what you see on the left. Ours pitcher certainly don't lack for information, in fact it's quite the opposite. They typically have so much information floating around in their heads and various body parts that they couldn't begin to make sense of it all. And that's the real problem! It's not a lack of information that's keeping our pitchers from being better and getting closer to reaching their maximum performance zone, but the inability for them to decipher through it all and determine what information is helpful, what is hurtful and what is irrelevant.

The less clutter in their brain to begin with the greater chance they can process the information quickly, accurately and most of all successfully! So how do we still teach our pitchers what they need to know and yet unclutter their brain at the same time? Great question and one that my series of articles is going to delve into as I truly believe it is the key to unlocking our pitcher's limitations and releasing their maximum success force.

My series of articles will focus on various aspects of pitching from how to help your pitchers become more focused and mentally tough during games, to the common problems, corrections & drills for the Change Up, Rise, Drop, Curve and Screwball. I'm going to share with you a bunch of exciting things I've learned that will really help develop your pitcher's knowledge of themselves in a way that will strengthen their performance. Things like methods for improving your pitcher's mental game to allow them to think clearer and calmer during games. Ways to allow your pitchers make better adjustments during games and some exciting new methods for improving the ways players learn. But most importantly I want to share with you how to create self-correcting, self-determined and self-accountable pitchers.

We've all done a much better job teaching hitting the past few years so the hitters in our game are stronger than ever. The pendulum now seems to have swung back toward the hitters forcing the pitchers to be better than ever before, never mind that the strike zone has started shrinking and the bat technology keeps getting better. If your pitchers expect to stand out there and beat a player holding a \$500 weapon she better know how to make good adjustments – and make them fast. Being stronger mentally than anything the hitter or the game can throw at her is a big first step!

Teach Them to Own Their Skill:

While nobody would argue that pitching is a vitally important part of softball many people have started taking a more hands-off approach to it with the advent of so many pitching coaches. While it's great that more pitchers are getting instruction, not all instruction is great. That's not a statement meant against any particular pitching coach as I am one myself but what I am finding is that more and more pitchers are handing over their skill to an outsider instead of *owning their skill*.

Teaching pitchers to "*own their skill*" is a concept that is foreign to all but the most elite of pitchers. Most pitchers, from a very early age have someone telling them every move to make, every body part to think about, every drill to do, every pitch to throw and when to do it all. Someone has always been there telling the pitcher so many things that the pitcher doesn't have to do much for herself. Oh sure, she's got to throw the actual pitch, but as a result of all the outside information and instruction she continually gets she's become detached from her own motion.

This "telling the pitcher" approach never lets the pitcher get involved with her own improvement, never lets her struggle her way through her own developments, and never lets her experience her own adjustments. While telling the pitcher all the corrections to make might make things seem to go faster in practice, the whole reason for practicing is to learn to dominate in games. Nobody else is out there on the mound when the bases are loaded, their best hitter is up and the umpire's strike zone has suddenly shrunk to the size of a straw.

I'm not suggesting a pitching coach should never be involved with their pitcher - that's crazy. What I am saying is that you can't take the pitcher out of pitching and still expect to have a dominant pitcher when it comes game time. While calling the right pitches is an important piece of the pitching puzzle, throwing those pitches to the right locations with the right movement at the right times are the pieces that matter most.

Let's take a look at some ways we can help our pitchers learn how to *own her skill* and become more successful:

1. The Hand Matters –

- The only body part that ever touches the ball, by definition, must be a pitcher's most important body part. Not that the other parts of a pitchers body aren't helpful and

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important in their own way, but never more so than her hand, and ultimately, her fingers. The other body parts from the feet, to the legs to the arm to the body are the supporting cast members to the hand's role as the main star. And yet most of our pitchers never think even think about their hand. That's because, if you look back at diagram 1, we've managed to cram our pitcher's heads full of so many other body parts and thoughts to consider that they can't prioritize the information. I think this over-information type of coaching is a result of it being much harder to carefully filter out information than it is to over-inform and cram.

- Filtering out requires decision-making and rank-ordering; we've got to first determine what things matter for a pitcher to know and think about and then rank-order those things for the pitcher. Why rank-order? Because we know that players can only retain a few items when put under pressure, pitching is a pressure-packed skill, so we definitely don't want them to go in alphabetical order when deciding what things to remember and what things to leave out. That's our job – not to do it for the pitcher but to teach her how to determine which things are most important, and thus remember them, and what things are more periphery and can therefore be left out. Because remember, under pressure something's gotta go – we just don't want it to be the really important things!
- Since the hand is the only body part touching the ball then how fast it moves, when it moves fast, which direction it swings, and what direction it points at specific times in the arm circle certainly matter when it comes to trying to throw a little yellow ball 43 feet to a little brown glove.
- In the following issues we will delve much deeper into the specific things that a pitcher can and should be doing with her hand and her fingers at various times throughout the pitch as well as their roles on the different pitches. Right now I'm just laying the groundwork for the detailed hand information to come.

2. Understand the *Whys* & Know the *How's* -

- Pitchers really need to know all the *whys* behind their pitching. It sounds simple and obvious but it's amazing how many pitchers do not know the reason **why** things happen with their pitches. Simple things like why balls move up or down or in or out are very important to pitcher's success. They must know **both reasons** why pitches move and not just one. For instance, most pitchers can tell you that balls move in the direction they spin, which is reason #1, but if this was the *only* reason that balls moved then how can you explain that fastballs and drop balls spin in the same direction and yet they don't move in the same direction? The explanation behind this is reason #2 behind why balls move – and that is that balls move as fast as they spin. So, in the case of a fastball the pitcher's objective isn't to make it move up, down, in or out but to move the ball

forward as fast as possible. So in a slice of air the pitcher's goal is to throw the ball as fast as possible through that slice of air and not to spin it as fast as possible. Now take the drop ball with the same spin direction as the fastball, now the pitcher is trying to spin the ball as fast as possible through that same slice of air instead of throwing it through that slice as fast as possible. So in order to help a pitcher keep her drop ball from turning into a flattened out fastball, it's important for the pitcher to understand why a drop flattens out and how to ensure that she gets the right movement on the right pitch at the right time.

- This leads to the **how**. Again, it seems obvious that pitchers would know how to make pitches move and how to make that happen. Pitchers might know that wrist snap is important to make pitches move but that's about as far as they can go. If you ask them why or how the wrist snap matters they'll only come up with spin. Well what about spin? All pitches spin so a pitcher sure better get more specific than just spin. Spin has direction and a pitcher must know what she has to do to create the direction of spin she needs to make the ball break in the direction she wants. She must also know how to create faster, or tighter spin in order to make a ball that moves break even faster.
- So wrist snap matters because it creates spin direction and speed of spin, or not. Lots of pitchers can get spin but they don't know how to control the direction of that spin or how to make the spin faster. Well they sure better know if they're throwing that pitch to a batter standing there with a \$500 weapon in her hands.

3. Feel the Parts in Motion –

- There's a great book out titled, [*The Talent Code, Unlocking the Secret of Skill in Sports, Art, Music, Math and Just About Anything*, by Daniel Coyle](#), and in it he talks about the concept of Deep Practice. Deep Practice is when a person (a pitcher in our case) is forced to slow down, make errors and correct them. It's this act of making errors and correcting them that actually creates a stronger learning process and improves the person, faster! This is not something that can be done for the pitcher, but something the pitcher must go through, struggle through, herself.
- For our pitchers to consistently throw great pitches they must create the right speed and spin on the ball by controlling their various body parts in exactly the way they want to while moving full blast, all while under extreme pressure! That sounds easy but in fact, takes very small and specific body control, something that must be practiced and developed. That development does not happen when the pitcher simply does what someone says instead of feeling and struggling through their own adjustments and growth stages.

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- Moving SLOW is Deep Practice for pitchers and probably the best way for any athlete to learn any skill – really learn it. Going slow requires a very fine knowledge of the proper movements, in the correct order and with the right body parts. Try this with your pitchers – have them get half way to home plate and throw half speed. Not from some sideways starting position but from their normal pitching motion – but half speed. It will be very difficult at first for your pitchers and you’re going to hear “I can’t throw slow” a million times. The truth is, in order to throw fast properly; the pitcher must be able to throw slow. Have them focus more on moving their body in the proper way at the proper speed instead of on telling you how much they can’t do it. Be sure they aren’t going fast and then suddenly slowing down at the release point. The whole purpose of throwing slow is to simulate as close to exactly as possible the regular motion from the regular distance at the regular speed. Ask your pitcher to focus on how her fingers are releasing the ball and if she can feel her fingers pushing the ball forward at release.
- Once the pitcher begins to really feel her various body parts in slow motion she can start to control them and most importantly – talk to them – in slow motion. You will actually see the difference when she finally gets it. In my next article I will dive deeper into this whole concept of pitching slower when I talk about warming up and different workouts for later on in the season when our pitchers get fatigued.
- Moving fast should be last. Too many pitchers just hit the GO! Button and hope their pitch ends up right. There’s far more to it than that and a pitcher needs to actually feel all the parts as they move in order to make sure everything is working the right way at the right speed and at the right time. And if not, then she can feel exactly what part is off and immediately make the adjustment.

4. Balls Don’t Have Brains –

- I know this sounds ridiculous but think about it this way. A ball has no idea what you want it to do, it only knows what you tell it to do. The frustration for pitchers lies in the fact that their brain knows what they want the ball to do but their body isn’t always able to make that happen, so there’s a breakdown between their brain and their body. The better able a pitcher is to see what the ball did, back that up to translate into what it meant they did with their body (usually their hand at release) they can then make the appropriate adjustment to the pitch so the next one is just how they want it. It’s all about immediate and accurate adjustments! Since balls don’t have brains and can’t figure out what you want them to do, they can only do what you tell them to do, so our pitchers must start telling the ball more specific and correct things. The good news is, when this happens the ball **has to** listen, since it doesn’t have any brains and can’t ignore the pitcher’s instructions and do it’s own thing!

5. Aim Small, Miss Small – Focus Small, Miss Small

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- Aim small, miss small is a great line from the movie, Patriot, and while in the movie it dealt with shooting it has a lot of application to pitching with a slight alteration. Basically the concept is if you aim for a small target, let's say a specific lace on the catcher's glove and you miss small, then you would still end up hitting the catcher's glove. But, if you simply aim at a bigger target, like the whole glove, you might miss big thus missing the whole glove.
- I have altered this slightly to deal with a pitcher's focus instead of her aim, as I believe that "aiming" is more specific for the pitcher since it deals with something her eyes can actually do instead of the word "aim" which can also mean guiding to a pitcher – and we definitely don't want that.
- What I notice a lot is that a pitcher's accuracy is usually as good, or as bad as her focus. When pitchers tend to miss big their focus was usually big. But when that pitcher dials in her focus she tends to dial in her pitches so they miss smaller, if at all.

Pitching is simply doing the same motion over and over and over again, under extreme stress, against a batter with a weapon in her hands, to a strike zone that is constantly changing and with little room for error. The more our pitchers know their own motions, know how to control their body parts and are crystal clear on how to accomplish exactly what they are after then the more likely it is our pitchers will be successful.

In my next issue I will talk about Thinking as a fundamental and how we can help our pitchers start to think in a way that's helpful for them to make immediate adjustments and thus learn to dominate their motion instead of their motion dominating them.