

## **PITCHER AND CATCHER DEVELOPMENT**

ZFA recognizes that to create a strong program we must place an extra emphasis upon the development of pitchers and catchers. How important is pitching? Simply, to be competitive in fastpitch softball you need three things. Pitching, more pitching and much more pitching! In fastpitch softball, the pitcher controls the game more than any other player in any other team sport. The tempo of a game will ebb and flow on the capabilities of the pitcher. Pitchers need to be developed earlier than the beginning of spring practice. Off-season pitching clinics are the answer. Pitching clinics are held primarily in winter. ZFA hires instructors for pitching clinics and we compliment these with our own ZFA pitching coaches. Refer to [www.zimmgys.org](http://www.zimmgys.org) for the most recent updates.

*How much work is involved in becoming a pitcher?*

**To become a pitcher requires a combination of dedication, mind-set and self-confidence.** As coach, you should advise your players that if they want to be a pitcher they must work harder and longer than any other player on the team. There are simply no shortcuts to becoming a good pitcher. It is estimated that tournament-quality pitchers throw an average of 100 balls a day, 700 a week and 25,000 pitches a year. Coaches are advised to tell pitchers (and catchers) to come early or stay late after practice to work on their skills. There just is not enough time in a regular practice to work on pitching. Some coaches have alternative practice schedules for pitchers. However, you do it, you must communicate to those players who want to be pitchers that it takes work. **Only the player herself can learn to be a pitcher!** A good rule of thumb is that you should have at least two players who can pitch if needed, besides your primary pitcher. The earlier you start developing these pitchers the better off you are going to be. Allocate practice time for the pitchers alone. With the younger teams, try everyone as a pitcher. You'll be surprised at the results!

Developing the Catcher

Whereas pitching is the most emotionally demanding position, the position of catcher is the most physically demanding. A good catcher is strong and able to withstand the stress of a hot day under the pads and mask. The catcher is the final "soldier" guarding home base from the opposition. If your player is afraid to get dirty or suffer a few bruises behind the plate she won't last long at catcher.

Framing, blocking, chasing down pop-ups, holding onto third strikes and foul tips, fielding bunts, and plate blocking are critical skills that must be mastered. There are a number of books, videos and websites that provide specific practice and conditioning drills for catcher development. Catching, however is more than blocking balls and throwing out base runners. Catchers need to have a tough personality and a calming presence on the field. A good catcher knows how to keep pitchers motivated and emotionally steady while on the mound, and know not to panic when things aren't going well for their team. Remember, it's the catcher who can call time out, go to the mound, and talk to a wild pitcher without the threat of removal. **No player has a greater influence on a pitcher's performance than the catcher.**

The catcher should be the one who calls the signals during the game. You are probably thinking **“but my catcher doesn’t know how to call a game.”** This may be so, but the truth is, **SHE NEVER WILL UNLESS YOU TEACH HER HOW!** Even if you only have your beginning catcher call for the occasional change-up, you’ve accomplished much when both she and the pitcher learn that they can be more effective when they are working together as a team. How many times have you seen a pitcher throw a beautiful third strike change-up, only to have the batter advance to first base because the catcher wasn’t expecting the pitch!

A great catcher possesses not only defensive skills but also strong leadership skills. The catcher, without a doubt, is the leader of the team. Her role is much like a general's. The pitcher and the fielders are her troops. Pitchers and position players look to their catcher for guidance and confidence. In addition to calling the pitches, it is the catcher who should call plays once the ball is hit. As such, catchers should have more softball smarts than anyone else on the field. Most importantly they must be able to take on leadership responsibility.

The catcher is the only player facing the entire field. On certain plays in the infield, especially bunts, it's the catcher's responsibility to yell out where the ball should be thrown. Teammates need to learn to trust the catcher's eyes and judgment. Teach your catcher to shout "One! One! One!" for first base and "Three! Three! Three!" for third base in a firm voice and without hesitation. **Extra time spent with your catcher on game strategy and tactics will always pay off.**