

## Working Pitchers In

A dilemma that faces baseball coaches at virtually all levels is how to make sure that pitchers who play other positions are able to get their mound throwing, running and flatwork in during practices. In fact, depending on the number of catchers and coaches a team has, it may be a challenge to figure out when to get any of a team's pitchers the work they need between appearances.

It can be extremely difficult to balance the work that pitchers who play other positions need between outings with the amount of throwing they should do if they hope to stay sharp at their other positions. It also can be tough to find the time in practice to allow them to get their throwing in, to hit and to work on their individual defense. Hopefully some of these ideas will help.

### **Step 1: Plan an Effective Practice**

What this dilemma really comes down to is your ability as a coach to design an effective practice. I feel that it is important to cover at least one, if not two, team fundamentals every day in practice. These fundamentals include base running, cutoffs and relays, pickoffs and rundowns, bunt defenses, first and third defenses, etc.

After having the kids warm up (a dynamic warm-up that gets the heart pumping first, followed by stretching, is recommended) and throw for 20 minutes. Next I will usually spend about 20 minutes on infield and outfield fungos, having the players throw from their positions for part of that time without overdoing it.

From there we move into team fundamentals, allotting 20 minutes for one team fundamental and then another 20 minutes for a different one. Some days are better than others when it comes to these fundamentals. If the kids don't understand the concepts after 20 minutes, they probably aren't going to get them at all that day, so it's time to move onto something else.

I know. You're wondering where I'm going with this. When do the pitchers who play other positions – or any of the pitchers, for that matter – get time to do their side throwing? That comes during batting practice.

## **BP is More Than Just Batting Practice**

An effective batting practice is more than just one player hitting and everyone else watching. By utilizing small groups and breaking batting practice down into stations lasting no more than 10 to 15 minutes each, the process becomes much more efficient and prevents boredom from setting in. Doing this will allow your pitchers to get their work in. Here's how.

One station can be dedicated to fundamental hitting drills: tee work, soft toss, short toss or something similar (or a combination of all each). Another station might incorporate live hitting and base running on the field. There might be two "shagging" stations -- one in the infield and one in the outfield -- where players react field balls hit during BP *without* making throws to the appropriate bases. Between pitches, infield and outfield fungos might be hit to keep the players interested and allow them to work on defensive fundamentals.

Pitchers and catchers should be grouped together so that pitchers can get their throwing in during the "shagging" stations. The amount of throwing and the type of throwing that needs to be done depends on the pitcher. At the high school and youth levels, most starting pitchers get one starting assignment per week. If this is the case, they should "throw a bullpen" either two or three days after their start. If they start once a week it is probably okay to wait until the third day for their bullpen session. If they are getting two starts in a week it might be a better idea to schedule the "bullpen" for the second day.

"Throwing a bullpen" simply means that pitchers throw from a mound at the regulation age-appropriate distance and at maximum velocity for a pre-set amount of time (or they throw a pre-set number of pitches). The focus should be on fastballs and location, but the pitchers should throw a set number of the other pitches they would throw in a game. Remember that younger pitchers should ALWAYS be throwing almost all fastballs to help build arm strength. Off-speed and breaking pitches should be introduced only as these players approach physical maturity and their use should be monitored closely and restricted.

How long should a bullpen session last? This is where things get tricky. If the pitcher is only a pitcher and doesn't play another position, the bullpen session should last about 15 minutes. For

players who play other positions you should adjust accordingly. A pitcher who is the starting shortstop, for instance, probably should throw for about 8-10 minutes.

The amount a reliever throws between appearances will depend on how much work he is getting. A pitcher who is being used out of the bullpen frequently may not need a bullpen session at all. If your starters are doing the job you might want to have the reliever who has not worked recently throw a full “bullpen.” Likewise, a pitcher who has been used only occasionally might need to be scaled down to 8-10 minutes (or even less). Common sense should prevail here.

The bullpen session is not designed for the pitcher to work on problem areas. It is part of the rehabilitation process after throwing in a game to help maintain shoulder conditioning. That’s why it is imperative that the pitcher focuses on throwing and locating mostly fastballs. The pitcher must get his work in without worrying about why his curveball is hanging or why his change-up is staying up in the strike zone. Throwing every type of pitch from a mound is important to help the pitcher stay sharp, but fastballs should be the main area of concentration.

### **Drills and Flatwork**

If a pitcher is struggling with mechanics, control or a specific pitch, that also can be corrected during the “shagging” stations on other days. This is called “flatwork,” because it is done from a shortened distance on flat ground – not from a mound. Long toss also can be incorporated into this portion of practice. Many of the drills that have been discussed in Coach’s Clipboard should be performed during flatwork. Most flatwork can be done from about 40 feet or so, and pitchers can work in pairs to make even more efficient use of the time. “Shagging” stations also can afford pitchers an opportunity to do their running and conditioning. Be sure, however, if a pitcher is also an infielder that he gets his throwing or running in during the outfield shagging station. The opposite is true for pitchers who also are outfielders. This will allow them to make the most efficient use of their time.

This article is not designed to go into specifics about throwing programs, running programs or flatwork. Future articles will address those issues. What I hope to accomplish here is demonstrate how to fit your pitchers’ extra work into the framework of an organized practice and the best way to handle pitchers who play other positions.

## **PFP**

There is one last fundamental that always should be addressed, but often is overlooked, when it comes to pitchers. That is pitchers' fielding practice or PFP. At some point during every practice pitchers should work on fielding come backers, fielding bunts and covering first base on balls to the right side. Once again, fitting PFP into the framework of a practice can be difficult. I have found that spending 10 to 15 minutes on PFP after every practice is the best method. PFP sometimes can be addressed when hitting fungos at the beginning of practice, but once again you again run into the problem of how to handle pitchers who play other positions.

## **Common Sense Prevails**

Remember that not all attention spans are created equal. When designing your practice keep in mind that not all age groups have the mental or physical capacity to handle a two hour practice. The youngest teams might only be able to practice for an hour. Older teams might be able to go a little longer than two hours. For some age groups 90 minutes might be appropriate. Whatever the case may be, pro-rate the timing of your stations, eliminate one of the team fundamental stations or adjust your practice in any way you deem appropriate while keeping in mind the guidelines presented here. Good luck. See you next time

**By John Habyan**