

The Truth about Breaking Pitches

There are many young pitchers who enjoy tremendous success as 10- , 11- and 12-year-olds. They have a pretty good fastball and develop a breaking pitch that seems to baffle most of their opponents. Unfortunately, many of these successful young pitchers are never heard from again once they move to regulation-sized diamonds. What happens to them?

Pitchers who fall in love with their breaking balls at young ages often risk or even ruin their futures on the mound for the sake of winning a few games that really won't have a whole lot of meaning in 10 or 15 years. The more breaking balls a young pitcher throws, the fewer fastballs he or she is throwing. Kids develop their arm strength by throwing fastballs. Developing arm strength by throwing fastballs with proper mechanics helps build the foundation for a successful pitching future.

The proper approach allows a pitcher to build the muscles necessary to develop a good fastball and to throw breaking balls properly. It helps with the development of velocity and injury prevention. Pitchers who throw mostly fastballs when they are younger may not experience as much success as some pitchers at that particular time, but they often surpass the other temporarily more successful pitchers as they get older.

Does this mean that a 10- , 11- or 12-year-old never should throw a curveball or should not be taught the proper way to throw a breaking pitch? Absolutely not. Kids are going to be kids. They take their cues from the big leaguers they see on television and are going to experiment with all types of grips, deliveries and pitches when they play catch in the backyard. Because of that alone it can't hurt to show young pitchers the right way to throw breaking pitches. But the real decision about whether to teach a kid how to throw a curveball really comes down to his or her physical and emotional maturity.

We know that kids develop at different rates physically and emotionally. My 10-year-old may not have developed the same as yours, so really this decision should be made on a case-by-case basis. You might find a young pitcher who is big for his age and already has developed a good fastball, but who wouldn't be able to emotionally handle the responsibility of throwing just a few breaking pitches in a game. Likewise, a smaller and weaker kid might understand the game and be able to successfully use a breaking pitch a few times in a contest to his or her advantage. But this pitcher may not have the physical tools to throw a curveball properly. Neither of these pitchers should be introduced to the breaking pitch.

If you do run into the rare combination of a young player who is physically strong, has a good, hard fastball and can handle the responsibility that goes along with being able to throw breaking balls, then it's okay to introduce the concept to the pitcher. It is extremely important, however, to make sure that you teach the player how to throw the curveball properly.

The main problem with breaking pitches in youth baseball is that pitchers do not learn to throw them correctly and then they fall in love with them. They experiment with all sorts of deliveries until they find one that actually makes the ball move a little bit and allows them to be successful. After that they throw more and more breaking pitches, sometimes as often as 50 percent of the time. This is damaging to their futures for a couple of reasons. First, by throwing so many breaking pitches they are limiting the number of fastballs that they are throwing, which hinders the development of the arm strength they need to be successful and pitch without injury when they get older. Second, by throwing so many curveballs the wrong way they are risking severe damage to their elbows.

For most young pitchers it is best to throw a lot of fastballs and to develop a consistent change-up. You can win a lot of games through the high school level with a good fastball and change. Again, it's not good if the pitcher falls in love with the off-speed pitch. He or she should throw at least 90% fastballs, but it's nice to have something different to fall back on that won't damage a player's arm.

Those pitchers who are physically and emotionally ready to start throwing breaking pitches should be introduced to the correct way to grip and throw those pitches. After they have been shown the proper mechanics, they should practice throwing breaking pitches occasionally from a shortened distance until they prove that they understand the right approach. Then, and only then, should they be permitted to throw breaking balls from the regulation pitching distance in a practice setting. Finally, when the pitcher has shown the ability to throw the pitch properly for a strike, he or she can be allowed to throw breaking balls in a game setting.

The youth coach's job when it comes to curveballs does not end there, though. It is imperative that coaches of young players monitor the number of curveballs that their pitchers throw strictly, setting a limit of one or two per inning or one per every 10 pitches. Again, even if a young pitcher throws a breaking pitch correctly, if he or she relies on it too much, the player's arm strength will suffer, which in turn could hinder his or her ability to pitch successfully in the

future.

Since many youth coaches have not been exposed to the proper mechanics involved in throwing breaking pitches, a list of key points courtesy of Ripken Baseball pitching instructor and former big leaguer John Habyan follows:

- Find a long seam on the ball and place the middle finger on the inside part of the seam so that there is something to pull down on; the ball should be visible on both sides of the fingers.
- Tell the pitcher to move the grip around until it feels comfortable.
- The hand stays on top of the ball as the arm comes forward before getting over the ball out in front of the body. The hand comes over on top of the ball and then through it as the arm gets out in front.
- Young pitchers often let their hands drop beneath the ball, which puts strain on the elbow. Please monitor this and do not allow it.
- The pitcher should pull back in after releasing the ball so that the follow through is short of what is normal.
- Have the pitcher start by making the ball break small; create some rotation and throw strikes.
- Don't let pitchers throw the ball up to make it break down; make sure that they get the hand over the ball and make the ball break a little bit within the strike zone.
- Monitor the use of the breaking ball in games; don't let the pitcher throw it strictly for the sake of winning.

By Cal and Bill Ripken