

the eyes and the bat in the upper range of the strike zone. This should prevent the batter from bunting a ball out of the upper range of the strike zone.

- Don't step on the plate! You will be called out.
- Take the normal batting stance. Even if it is a sacrifice bunt don't show it until the pitcher has entered his wind up and wait for the pitcher to "break his hands." "Break his hands" means when the pitcher's glove hand and throwing hand separate in that phase of the wind up.
- The knees should be bent or flexed. Hold the bat level with the ground—not at an angle.
- If the pitch is in the strike zone, hold the bat loosely with your hands, and let the ball hit the bat. If you push the bat at the ball, or hold the bat too hard, the ball will probably bounce right back to the pitcher, and he will throw you out. If you hold it loosely, the ball will bounce between the catcher and the pitcher, and you will have time to get to first base safely.
- The top hand should slide down the barrel of the bat until it reaches about where the label is. Control of the bat is crucial. Also keeping the fingers behind the bat prevents them from being crushed by the pitched ball.
- When the ball is bunted the bat should not move forward pushing the ball. If the player just "catches" the ball on the bat the bunted ball will drop onto the playing field and stop.

STAR PITCHING FUNDAMENTALS

PITCHING PHILOSOPHY

Hitting wins games. Defense wins championships! **Defense starts with pitching**, and the most important part of pitching is to throw the ball where you want to throw it. A pitcher can only control when he pitches and where he throws the ball.

The number one goal of pitching is to hit your target. So pitching is really nothing more than target practice. Velocity is secondary. Movement is secondary. The sharpness of your pitch is secondary.

Pitching is the ability to throw strikes to both sides of the plate. The ability to change speeds with a breaking ball or a change-up is also important, since it creates a timing problem for hitters. Then comes the importance of creating ball movement, either horizontally or vertically, particularly with a fastball, change-up, or breaking ball. **(Stars will not throw breaking balls until they are thirteen years old.)**

BEGINNING THE WINDUP

Many young pitchers have difficulty with balance. One of the reasons is poor mechanics at the beginning of their windup. Many are taught to take their rocker step (the initial step behind the rubber) straight back. The reasoning for this is that you want the pitcher to take his weight straight back so that all of his weight is coming forward toward the plate when the pitch is delivered.

One problem with this advice is that the pitcher's weight shift is stopped during the knee lift (thus his weight does not continue forward after stepping back). The pitcher's weight should be back when the front knee is lifted and he should be able to balance on one leg. A second problem with this advice is that many young pitchers lose their balance going from a straight back rocker step to their pivot (with their other foot) inside the rubber.

Young pitchers should begin their windup by positioning themselves (if right-handed) so that their body is facing between third base and home plate (or between first base and home plate if left-handed). The rocker step should only be a few inches and angled toward first base (for righties). Importantly, the pitcher should try to keep his head and weight over his front foot. This will allow him to make a smooth and balanced pivot into the knee lift part of the windup.

BREAKING THE HANDS

Many young pitchers break their hands improperly. Although when and where a pitcher breaks his hands may not seem real important at first, the break affects arm mechanics and is a root problem with many pitchers. Pitchers should break their hands directly in front of their bodies, preferably up around the letters. The breaking of the hands should occur at the top of the leg.

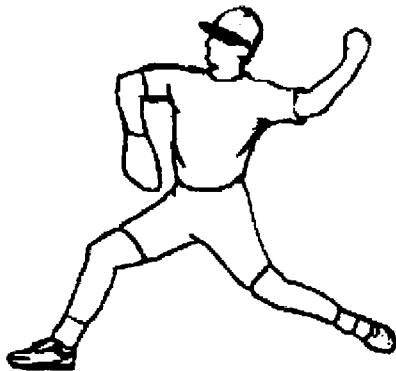
Avoid breaking the hands behind them or breaking by their back hip. If the breaking of the hands occurs after the pitcher's weight begins moving toward home plate, it will cause the throwing arm to stop after the break and not allow the lead arm time to catch up, thus ruining a smooth, continuous circle action with the ball.

PITCHER'S STRIDE - THE LEAD LEG AND BODY POSITION



Many young pitchers fail to keep their weight back when striding toward home plate. They often start with their weight forward before their leg lift is complete and they often loop their front foot toward the plate in a way that shifts their weight forward too quickly.

Young pitchers should consider adopting an “up-down-and then out” movement with their lead leg. The knee comes straight up (to the point where they can balance themselves), and then goes straight down within a few inches of the ground, and then slides above the ground toward home plate until the stride is complete.



Notice the position of the pitcher's body in this illustration. His head is clearly in the center of the triangle between his two feet. This is your power position and the position every pitcher must get into to throw with maximum velocity. You have much more power by keeping your weight back toward the center.

LANDING OF LEAD LEG

A common problem with young pitchers is the mechanics of their lead leg. When striding toward home plate, some pitchers come down on a completely stiff leg, with their knee locked. This creates a whipping motion in their delivery and will generally create arm problems at some point. The lead leg foot should land soft and either on the ball of the foot or flat—not on the heel of the foot. The foot lands softly to avoid jarring the body, which can cause head movement. The front foot should land closed, but slightly to the first base side of an imaginary line that runs from the instep of the post foot to the center of the throwing target.

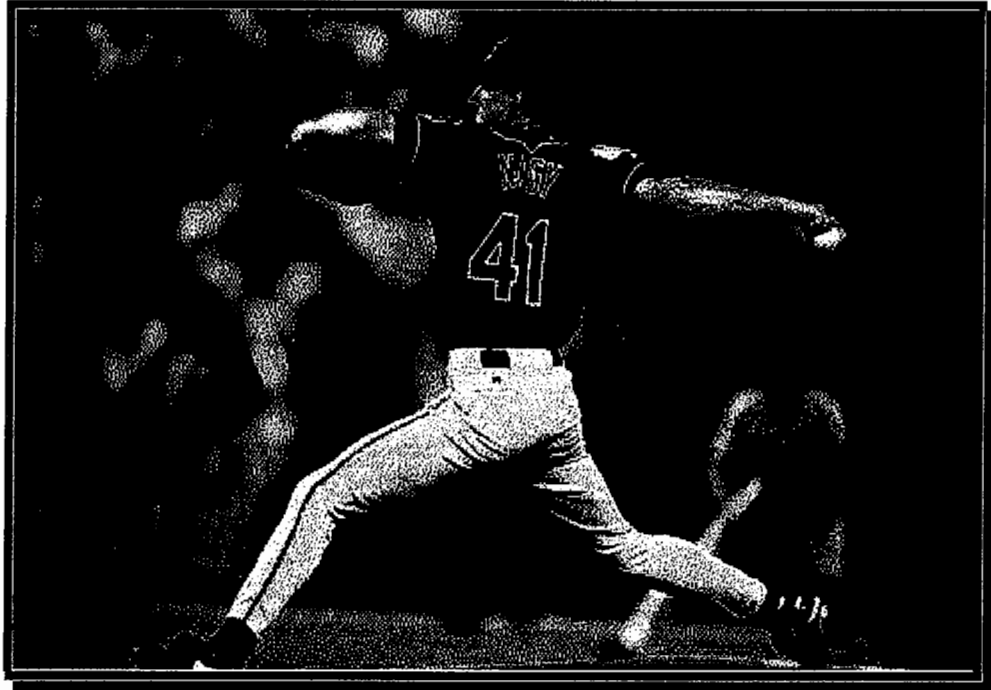


When the stride foot lands, the knee should be bent.

THROWING ARM - FROM THE BREAK TO THE COCKED POSITION

After the hands break, the throwing arm should take a down, back and up path until arriving at the cocked position. Young pitchers should focus on the throwing hand. The ball should be pulled out of the bottom of the glove when the hands are breaking. The hand should stay on top of the ball (palm down) when taking the ball down and back. The action here is circular. As the arm comes up,

the ball and palm of the hand turn outward (toward the short stop for a right-hander). When the elbow of the throwing arm reaches the height of the shoulder and the hand is over the biceps, the pitcher is in the “cocked” position. The palm should still be facing outward.



At this point, the front leg should be planted and the non-throwing shoulder should still be pointed toward the target. Notice the above pitcher's arm is straight back in the desired position. Avoid wrapping the arm past this position or to the second baseman side of the body.

When taking the ball back, some pitchers extend too far and are not able to get the ball in the cocked position soon enough. Their front leg is planted, their body is ready to turn for the throw, but the ball is too far behind them. Throwing the ball from this position greatly reduces velocity and, more importantly, puts a great deal of stress on the shoulder. Another problem occurs when the palm turns toward the target while bringing the ball up to the cocked position. This also puts too much stress on the arm during the early acceleration of the hand.

THROWING ARM ROTATION

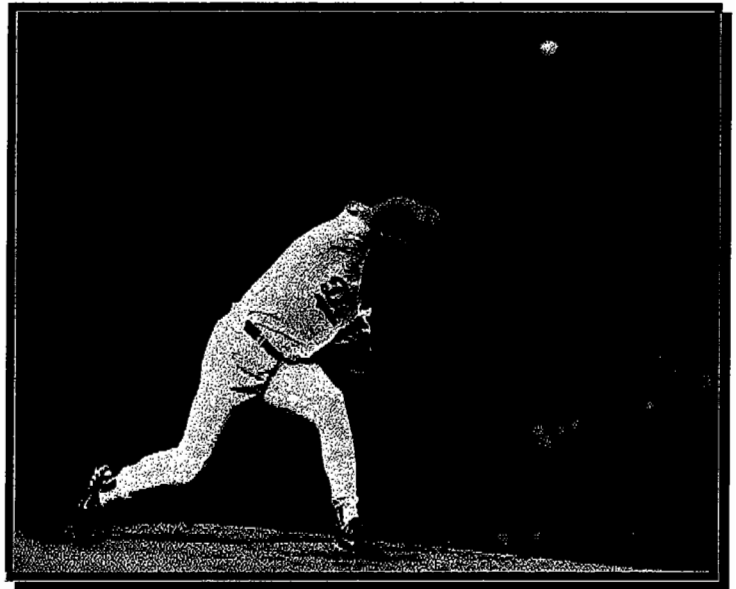
As the shoulders turn (after the ball is in the cocked position), the elbow leads the hand to the release point. The forearm rotates back. The maximum rotation back should be approximately 180 degrees. In other words, the point from the throwing elbow to the wrist should be horizontal right before the ball is brought forward to the release position.



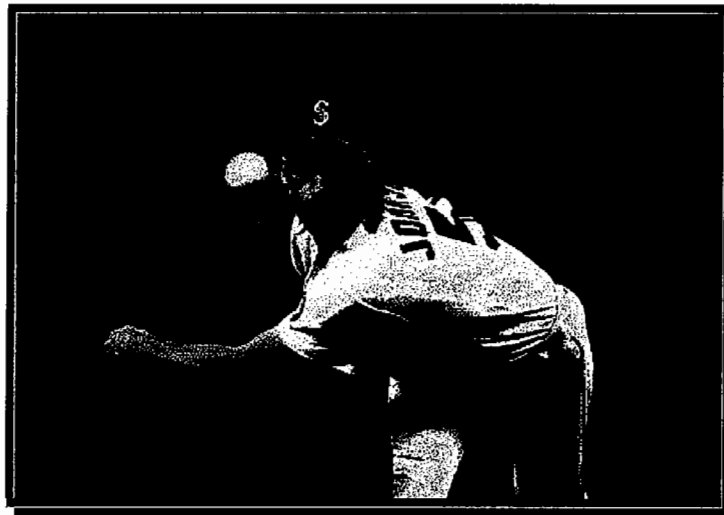
At this point the pitcher's back should be arched and the forward position of the elbow should be just in front of the throwing side hip. Checking a pitcher for good arm rotation prior to release must involve film, which should be shot at a right angle from the pitcher's throwing side.

THROWING ARM -FROM THE COCKED POSITION TO THE FOLLOW THROUGH

When the arm arrives at the cocked position, the stride foot is planted and the front hip and front shoulder are pointed at the target. As the hips and shoulders turn or open up, the throwing elbow points to the target and the palm turns from facing sideways to facing up. The acceleration of the hand (including the snapping of the wrist) determines the ball's velocity. Notice Hideo Nomo's chest is above the bent lead leg and front foot slightly closed.



The throwing hand proceeds past the head and the ball is released. The hand then crosses the chest to a point below and outside of the knee of the stride leg. This follow-through allows the arm to decelerate. Deceleration protects the arm. Pitchers should concentrate on throwing the ball downhill. This will occur if they have their elbow up at the beginning of this sequence.



FINISH THE PITCH IN A GOOD FIELDING POSITION

The pitcher's momentum should bring him directly toward the plate and into his follow-through position: feet parallel, knees bent, weight evenly distributed over the balls of the feet, head up, eyes on the ball, and hands out in front. From this position, the pitcher can prevent comeback smashes from hitting him in the chest or knees, and catch balls, which would otherwise sneak through for singles.



The best way to work on mechanics or new pitches is to throw into some kind of a large plastic or mesh screen. This allows for work on one skill at a time and eliminates much of the frustration associated with the inability to throw strikes when working on a new skill.

THE PITCHERS SECOND SHIFT

Pitchers actually work two shifts. Their first shift is throwing strikes. Their second shift begins with the release of the ball. They then become the fifth infielder. At the youth level, hard-throwing pitchers often dominate the game. However, as they graduate to higher levels of competition, pitchers must bring much more to the field besides their pitching skills. They need to understand their responsibilities as the fifth infielder and the extra effort will contribute directly to solid team defense and victories.

Their ability to quickly become an infielder can impact the game as much as anything they do from the mound. Their fielding duties will be guided by the following principles:

1. Plan Ahead - Before the Pitch!

Before every at-bat, the pitcher should skim through a mental checklist of his coverage responsibilities. He must check the game situation and the offense's probable strategy then coordinate this with his pitch selection and where he wants the batter to hit the ball. Remember - a pitcher's job is to get the batter to hit his pitch and ground out or pop up, not necessarily strike him out. Think about which is better - three outs in three pitches, or in nine pitches? Obviously, the less pitches thrown, the better.

The pitcher can enhance his mental game by visualizing himself performing his defensive role with a successful result.

2. Hustle to the Ball

The faster the pitcher gets to the ball, the more time he'll have to set his body for a good throw. Quick feet can spell the difference between double plays and higher ERA's. The pitcher cannot shuffle around the mound, simply watching the play unfold. His first few steps must be swift and decisive.

3. Turn Toward The Glove Side

If the pitcher has to come in to field the ball, as on a bunt or a swinging roller, he should come over the ball, field it with both hands, pivot toward his glove side, and stride directly to his target for the throw.

If he receives the ball from another fielder, say when covering first or backing up third, he should also spin toward his glove side to ensure a strong, accurate throw.

4. Throw to the Letters

The pitcher should grip the ball across the seams and deliver it to the receiver about chest high. This gives the receiver a clear view of the ball and an opportunity to get off a quick throw or make a tag. I encourage pitchers to use sound throwing mechanics off the mound as well as on it. This involves executing a crow hop to achieve balance and keeping the fingers on top of the ball to apply backspin and to throw straight. Unless impossible, the pitcher should always take a step on his throw. Throwing flat-footed can lead to wild throws.

Beyond these fundamentals, the pitchers have specific fielding duties that vary according to the number of runners on base, the runners' foot speed, which bases they are on, the inning and score, the number of outs, and where and how hard the ball is hit.

5. Backing Up the Plays

Backing up usually consists of standing in foul territory at least 20 feet behind a base (usually third or home) and in line with the throw. If the fence is closer, the pitcher can stand with his backside brushing it.

Most hits to the outfield will trigger the need for back up. The pitcher's immediate response should be to sprint halfway between third and home, turn around, and quickly assess where the throw will go. The pitcher should expect every throw to skip past the base, and be ready to catch it.

6. Run Him Down

The pitcher will always participate in rundowns (don't be a spectator!). He should occupy a backup position behind either first, third or the plate. The pitcher can become a primary ball-handler whenever he initiates the play or fills a gap created by infielders weaving in and out. Either way, the pitcher's objectives should be: 1) to position the ball between the runner and the lead base, 2) force the runner back toward the trail base, 3) secure the put-out after just one throw.

7. Turning Two

In any kind of double-play situation, the pitcher and middle infielders should communicate before the pitch to determine who will cover second on a come-backer. After fielding the ball and spinning toward his glove side, the pitcher should throw to the bag - delivering the ball chest-high to the player covering second.

8. Covering First

On all balls hit to the right side of the infield, the pitcher must break for first base. He must always assume that the first baseman will not reach the bag in time.

The pitcher follows one of two paths to the bag. In a double-play situation, the pitcher should run straight to the base, tag it with the right foot, stop, and turn toward the infielder making the throw. If the initial play is to first, he should sprint to a point on the foul line about 10 feet from the bag, then reduce his speed and run along the inside of the foul line to the bag. Remaining inside the line will prevent collisions and provide the first baseman with an easy target. Upon tagging the bag with his right foot, the pitcher should wheel around to check the other runners on base.

9. Fielding Bunts

With a runner on first or runners on first or second in a sacrifice-bunt situation, the pitcher will share coverage of the infield with the third baseman, the first baseman, or both.

The pitcher must field anything he can reach and, whenever possible, cut down the lead runner. The toughest play for a pitcher to make on a bunt is a force-out at second. Because the base runner already starts with a leadoff, the pitcher has a very small window of time to field the ball and

complete the long throw to second. To improve his chances, a pitcher should turn his body toward his glove side as he approaches the ball - pointing his throwing side toward the plate and his glove side toward second. He then fields the ball off his back foot with most of his weight on the back leg. From this position, he can straighten up, push off his back leg, and make a strong throw to second.

If the pitcher cannot get the lead runner, he should regroup and “step and throw” to first for the sure out. All throws to first should be to the inside of the foul line so the first baseman can avoid extending his body across the line and avoiding a collision with the base runner.

With runners on first and second, the pitcher has to coordinate his movements with those of the third baseman. The latter should charge in on the bunt and promptly decide whether the pitcher can reach the ball in time. If the pitcher can get there, the third baseman should immediately scramble back to third for the possible force-out. If the pitcher cannot get to the ball in time, the third baseman should continue on in for the bunt and throw to first or, on a hard hit ball, maybe throw to second. The pitcher should get out of the third baseman’s way and cover third for a potential play on the lead runner.

10. Infield Pop Ups

I prefer position infielders handle all infield flies unless the ball is hit around home plate area. But the pitcher can still make himself useful. He can:

- A. Help your teammates locate the ball by communicating and pointing skyward at the ball;
- B. Cover any base vacated by a position player.

11. Passed Balls and Wild Pitches

Whenever a pitch flies past the catcher with runners on base, the pitcher should:

- A. Sprint and cover the plate while the catcher tracks down the ball, and;
- B. Point at the ball and yell directions to the catcher to help him locate the ball quickly.

The Stars are taught to yell “feet” if the ball is at the feet; “back” if behind the catcher towards the backstop; “one” if the ball is to the catchers right or to the first base side of the plate; and “three” if the ball is to the catchers left or to the third base side of the plate.