

Working With the Beginner Windmill Pitcher

The single most important position on the softball diamond is pitcher. Pitchers control the pace of the game and have more to do with the team's success or failure than any other player on the field. Kids recognize this very quickly and soon begin clamoring to pitch. But pitching is something which takes an incredible amount of work. You have to earn the right to pitch by working through hours of drills and improving your skills.

To me, there are two ways to teach windmill pitching. One starts at the beginning of the motion, the other the end. I have seen the results of both methods and far prefer teaching from the end. The beginning of the motion is less important and learning wind milling from this point is often confusing to someone who has never wind milled before. So here, in order, are the steps I find useful:

Step 1 - The Grip

Before we discuss the snap, a brief mention of the grip is in order. Beginner pitchers focus on throwing straight pitches and that's all we'll discuss in this article. In order to throw a good straight pitch, you need to have a good grip on the ball. Depending on the size of your hands and the ball being used, you should get as much of the laces as possible.

Holding the ball in the palm of your hand, you should grip the laces with your four fingers across the longest part of the seams. Then, your thumb should likewise be closed on a seam. The last segment of the four fingers should be just beyond the laces - they should be right around the inside of the last knuckles. The other lace will probably be about midway to the end of the last segment of the thumb, or, if your hands are bigger, about in the same position on the inside of the last knuckle.

Step 2 - The Snap

The snap is critical to throwing straight, fast pitches. Standing straight with your shoulders and hips square to your catcher (about ten feet away) and the arm holding the ball hanging at your side, cock your hand backwards so the palm is facing the ground. Now snap only your wrist forward until the palm is facing the sky. Now try this while releasing the ball right at your hip. Your arm should remain motionless as if it were pinned to your side. You are only looking for wrist action. You should be trying to get the ball to spin. If it doesn't spin rapidly on release, keep trying with that being your objective. If you cannot get the ball to spin, you are holding on to it too tightly and not letting it roll off your fingers. The thumb releases first but this should occur naturally.

Repeat this drill often and if you don't have a catcher available, reach across your body with your glove hand and snap the ball into your glove. Ten to twenty snaps is a good drill for beginners, more if you need it. Familiarize yourself with this technique as you will be doing it to warm up for the next decade even after you are playing professional softball! Every throwing session should begin with some snaps. If you are playing in a game and cannot get a real chance to warm up, throw snaps into your glove can get you at least part of the way there. Also, when you are on the mound in a game having some troubles with your mechanics, snapping the ball into your glove will be an excellent way to center yourself and clear your head.

Step 3 - The Follow Through

Performing the same snap drill we just discussed with your arm pinned to your side, allow your arm to come forwards and up by bending at the elbow as you snap. You do not want your arm to swing backwards to begin. The only motion of the arm should be forwards. Your finishing point should be with your elbow pointing at your catcher who should be standing a little further away now since you will probably be throwing a little harder.

You can also begin to bring up your pitching hand side knee with your arm. When actually pitching the full motion, you will be pushing off with this side's foot and as you come through with your pitching hand, your leg will also be coming forwards. The momentum of your knee coming forward is part of the weight shift which gives you power. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

You can practice this drill without a ball if a catcher is not available. If you have either a pitch-back or net available, practice this drill throwing into that. Just as with the snap, you want to make sure you are getting rapid rotation on the ball. You want to over exaggerate your motion by really pointing your elbow. Make sure it is pointing at the target when you finish. Do ten to twenty of these. This also is a good second step when warming up.

Working With the Beginner Windmill Pitcher

Step 4 - The Arm Circle, Phase One

It is very difficult to swing the arm in a complete circle and release the ball with a proper snap at the right moment. For that reason we have broken the circle down into two parts, the last half followed by the full circle. The release point is right next to your side as you did in the snap drill.

Before we get to the actual arm motion, let's just briefly discuss two terms, open and closed with respect to the hips and shoulders. Open means your hips and shoulders are square to third base if you are a right hand pitcher, or first base if you are a lefty. Closed means your hips and shoulders are square to home plate. Pitchers generally begin closed, open in the middle of the motion and then close right at the release point.

Stand sideways to your catcher or net with your glove arm facing the target. Your feet should be shoulder width apart. If you are on a field, your pitching-hand foot will be on or near the rubber and your glove-hand foot towards home plate. Raise your glove hand with your arm straight and pointing at the target. Your pitching hand is raised directly over your head. Your shoulders and hips should be open. Now swing your arm downwards to the snap point while simultaneously closing your hips and shoulders and releasing the ball next to your hip. Your arm can be slightly bent over your head to begin but must be totally straight as you swing it down to the release point. Next you follow-through with your elbow pointing at the target. When you close your hips and shoulders, bring your throwing side knee forward too. This should be timed to come forward with the throwing arm but will likely happen without much effort.

The arm circle is where about half the speed of pitching comes from. Much of that comes from this second half. This drill is probably your most important one and, therefore, you should perform much more of it than the previous or following ones. Some young pitchers actually pitch with only this motion. At this stage of the game, you really don't care what comes before this second half of the circle motion. I suggest doing at least 50 of these pitches when practicing with beginner pitchers. Actually, early on, you really don't have to do anything beyond this point. To work your beginner pitcher after the first lesson, do ten snaps, ten snaps with follow through, and then fifty pitches with this half circle motion. You can do this for weeks without needing to progress further into this article.

A few words about patience are appropriate at this point. I emphasize again that it is very difficult to swing the arm in this half circle and find the right release point. You should expect long hours of balls being bowled or flying way over your head. I've told you in previous article not to worry about **pitching strikes**, especially early on. That is more true here than anywhere else. It takes a long time to become a decent pitcher. If you get frustrated with your daughter's inability to get the ball even close to you during this drill, try it yourself. It's not so easy, is it? Eventually a girl will learn to release the ball at the right moment. It is extremely important at this point to be patient. Loads of repetition is the key. Do not try to throw a strike. If you do that, your arm will begin to shorten - bend at the elbow to just get it over. This is wrong. The arm should be perfectly straight. The hand and wrist do the releasing.

One variation on this half circle drill is to remove the legs from it by kneeling on some sort of cushion like a base with your pitching-hand leg and glove-hand leg stretched towards the target. This is simple enough and provides the opportunity to focus on the closing of the hips and shoulders. You start just like when you were standing but now you are kneeling. Your shoulders and hip start in the open position and close as you come to the release point.

Another variation while standing is to take a step before swinging the arm downwards. Standing sideways to the target with feet together, take a step at the exact moment you raise your glove hand to the target and your pitching hand over your head. Perform the rest of the motion as before. When you close your hips and shoulders, remember to bring your throwing side knee forward too.

With each of these three drills, the emphasis must be on closing the shoulders and hips. I cannot over-emphasize this as it is the key to sideways control and getting enough torque to throw the ball hard. You can do all these drills in different sessions to mix things up and avoid boredom. But there is no reason to feel that you must do all of these half-circle drills in a single session since they are all really after the same aspect of pitching. Adding the step in the last variation can be used later as it is a little more advanced than the other two and can confuse the young pitcher causing her to not close down.

Working With the Beginner Windmill Pitcher

Step 5 - The Arm Circle, Phase Two

The next step in learning to pitch is to start with the arm hanging at the side. The objective here is to move the arm in a full circle with a single motion but that's not how to start drilling. First start standing on, or as if on, a rubber with feet side by side, hips and shoulders closed. Then step forward with the glove-hand foot while opening the hips and shoulders. Simultaneously point the glove-hand to the target and lifting the pitching hand above the head in a straight-arm swinging motion. But stop at this point and hold the position as in the last half-circle drill. Now complete the motion and throw. You should stop and hold the middle position for a count of three or longer. You are getting used to doing the full windmill but doing so in the controlled circumstances of stopping half way.

One of the key elements of pitching is balance. This drill requires the pitcher to remain balanced throughout. There are just so many moving parts in pitching that it is difficult to keep them all together. If at any point balance is an issue, slowing down the overall motion is a good way to address things. Coming back to this point and stopping half-way is advisable if balance issues pop up with the full motion.

Once you have worked through stopping the motion at the half-way point, you can move forward by simply not stopping. At first finding the release point is a little difficult. Be patient, you will find it. If you have difficulty finding the right release point, go back to stopping at the half-way point. If you still have trouble, don't despair. Just go back to the beginning and start the overall process with the easiest drills. Experience of throwing windmill will teach you to find the right release point. The more you do these drills, the better you will get and eventually, one day, things will just click for you.

Step 6 - Legs

Now, assuming you are able to pitch a full windmill as we have instructed you, it is time to add leg power to the motion. Your legs are the strongest part of your body and these add most of the real power that is not added by your arms. Basically you jump forward while performing your windmill but this is more difficult than my words make it sound. So let's break it down into drills.

The first of these drills is called the "side leg drive" and you begin it with one foot on the rubber and the other right next to it. Your shoulders and hips are open, arms hanging and knees bent. Now step hard forward with your glove side foot while lifting your glove to the target and swinging your hand over your head. Stop at this point like you did in previous drills. Now complete your motion and throw the ball. You should gradually push harder with your back leg to gain more and more momentum. It is almost like the crow hop you take when you are throwing a ball overhand. Again balance is critical. If you have trouble balancing or with any other aspect, go back to the appropriate beginning drill and work up to this point again. Like in other drills, once you are successful doing this while stopping your motion half way through, do it all in one motion.

The second drill is a "front leg drive" which begins with both feet on the rubber, shoulders and hips closed, arms hanging at your side. Bend your knees and lean forwards slightly so you could see your ankles if you chose to, but keep your eyes on the target. Now push off with your throwing side leg while stepping forward with the other. Your hips and shoulders fly open. Again stop at the halfway point, hold, and then finish by closing down and releasing the ball. Work this until you are comfortable doing it in a single motion without stopping. If you look back at the previous drills, you are really just taking a bigger step. You are doing this by pushing off harder. Your legs drive you forward.

Step 7 - Wind Up

With all this in mind, you are ready to do the full motion. I don't so much care what goes on at this point as you are really already pitching. But since the wind up is where it all begins, I suppose I should address a few key points. The first of these has to do with where you start your feet. Technically, you should start with both feet on the pitching plate or rubber. I've watched many pitchers at high levels not do this. But it is probably best to start out that way since you never know when the powers that be will decide to enforce these rules.

Standing with both feet on the rubber, you take a short step back with your glove-side foot. I've seen pitchers take very long steps back and I've seen some take almost none. The important aspects here are balance and comfort. Don't take a big step because you think it is necessary. It isn't. This part of the motion has little positive benefit to the pitch. But it can seriously derail you by throwing you off balance.

Many pitchers begin their motion with almost comical movements. The head bobs up and down, or they begin to shake and quiver like some rock and roll dancer. I believe there is a lot of wasted motion in the beginning of a wind up since the real power begins with the pitching side leg. It is important to keep the head somewhat still and the eyes focused on the target. So don't get into a habit of jerking your head around or trying to start your engine

Working With the Beginner Windmill Pitcher

with big movements. Simply step back while keeping your balance.

As you step back, your arms should come up in front of you. Your hands come together and then separate as you begin to step forward with your glove-side leg. Freeze here for a second. Your body position should be slightly bent forward as your arms swing down but you must maintain balance. You should now be in roughly the position you were when we did the "front leg drive." And that's really all there is to the motion.

The pitching rule book says not only that both feet should be on the rubber at start but also that the hands should be separated and the pitch begins when the hands come together and then apart. You must avoid double pumping where you swing your arms together, then they come apart and then they come together again. One swing up, one swing down, "front leg drive," and throw. But don't forget to snap up and point your elbow at the target!

Another rule you should be made aware of is the "crow-hopping" rule. Crow hopping is technically illegal and this is defined as when a pitcher does her leg drive then replants her pitching-arm side foot before releasing the ball. It is OK to drag the back foot but you cannot replant it and push off. In don't see how this can actually benefit a pitcher but it is an important rule to consider even if it is never enforced! If you get a chance to watch Cat Osterman pitch, you may see her crow hop. I know I've seen her do it and not ever get called. But never-the-less, you should be aware of the rule. And since there is no benefit apparent to me in crow-hopping, you should avoid it.

Putting It All Together

We've actually already pulled the whole motion together but I want to make one point here. That is, you should always do some of the lesser advanced drills while warming up. And if you encounter mechanical problems at any point in your pitching career, you ought to return to the beginning and work through the drills again.

Pitching Practice

There is some debate about how much girls doing the windmill should be allowed to pitch. Most experts say that this motion does not because the wear and tear that overhand throwing does. I agree although I have not seen definitive studies. You can hurt yourself doing just about anything too much but my experience is that windmill pitching is something you can do as often as any sort of exercise. Let the pitcher's body be the deciding factor. Especially early on you are looking for the correctness of the motion as opposed to getting as many repetitions as time allows. If a girl is 7 - 10 years old, 50 pitches are probably plenty. Older girls can work to 100 or 200, perhaps more. Young kids typically are only allowed to pitch 3 innings but older girls face little restriction. A typical inning for a young pitcher is likely to be around 25 - 50 pitches depending on the number of walks. You don't need to have your six year old throwing 200 pitches twice a day. This will not help her make the Olympic team before they stop having softball.

Older girls should look to build up stamina while holding the correct motion. Pitchers need to learn to work through periods of wildness and fatigue. You "work through" these by concentrating on pitching mechanics. If a 12 year old girl has been wind milling for more than a year but she cannot seem to pitch more than two innings without losing her motion, more work with greater number of pitches is probably in order. Try counting her pitches until the point of fatigue then increasing her practice sessions to double her fatigue count. When you see her getting tired, start emphasizing mechanical issues. Most often the things which break down are snapping and the opening and closing of hips and shoulders.

An aspiring pitcher should as a general rule try to throw at least a little three or four times a week. The sessions do not all have to be long. They do have to involve good body mechanics. If a pitcher cannot throw well three times a week, a few short sessions of as little as 25 throws (after warm up) is probably a good idea. At least one session each week should be long and intense. If you don't do this, much of what has been gained will be lost. The thing which gets most fatigued while pitching is the legs. But no amount of road or treadmill work will solve this. There is no practice for pitching like pitching itself. Don't make pitching practice into drudgery. That is the way to get flat or, worse, allow mechanics to break down.

As a final word, I will reiterate my biggest pitching point. You learn to throw strikes by throwing a lot with a good motion. Bad pitches most frequently result from improper body mechanics. There is no reason for a beginning pitcher to "try to throw strikes." We're all hoping for strikes. But working the motion will cause the strikes to come. No amount of psychic activity will make a pitcher throw strikes. But pitchers who try their hardest to "just get over" generally alter their motion incorrectly and eventually end up losing all desire to stand in the circle. If you are the parent of a young aspiring pitcher, exercise patience. Pitchers are not built in one outing.