

Helping Pitchers to Manage their Minds!

Cindy Bristow - Softball Excellence

This is Part 2 of my 6 part article series for the National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA)

Welcome to my second of six articles that explores the kind of things we can do as coaches to help create pitchers that are game-dominators – pitchers that are self-correcting, self-determined and self-accountable. When it comes to our pitchers we want to do everything possible to unlock their limitations and release their maximum success force. I certainly don't think every pitcher out there is lacking in these three self-categories but a great many are, and what's worse – more and more are falling into this category every day.

The skill of pitching is basically doing the same motion over and over and over again, under extreme stress, against a batter with a weapon in her hands, to a strike zone that is constantly changing and with little room for error. The concept of pitching isn't complicated; in fact to me it's as simple as the concepts of throwing overhand or hitting. But it's the stress and pressure under which pitching occurs, along with the amount of times it must occur successfully in a game that makes it more challenging than any other position on the field. The more our pitchers know their own motions, know how to control their body parts and are crystal clear on how to accomplish exactly what they are after then the more likely it is our pitchers will be successful.

In this issue I will explore the concept of Thinking as a Fundamental in addition to ways we can help our pitchers make immediate adjustments and thus learn to dominate their motions instead of their motions dominating them.

1. Thinking is a Fundamental Too!

- The power of treating Thinking as a fundamental means that we can understand it, we can break it down and most importantly – we can practice it!
- Most of our pitchers think a lot while pitching, but it's usually after the pitch, and it's usually negative. Thoughts like "that pitch was horrible!", "why didn't she call that pitch?", "how did that pitch miss?", and "what was wrong with that pitch?" are typical post-pitch thoughts filling up a pitchers brain. Those thoughts are usually followed by "don't" thoughts as the pitcher steps on the mound to throw the next pitch. Things like "don't throw another bad pitch", "don't walk her", "don't hang another dropball", "don't hit her on the screwball" are common "don't thoughts" for pitchers and are extremely harmful. Since our body can't process the word don't it falls out of those sentences so all we're left with is the thing we didn't want to do. It's no wonder that immediately after calling time out and making a trip out to the mound to tell your pitcher DON'T throw this hitter low-inside, that you're not even back to the dugout before your pitcher has not only thrown it low-inside but the ball is now travelling like a rocket over the outfield fence.
- Instead of telling our pitchers what not to do we need to tell them what To Do. Instead of saying "don't throw her low-inside", tell her to pitch this hitter high and outside. Instead of telling your pitcher "don't close your hips too soon" have her work on getting her hand past her hips faster at release. Finding the "DO" is much harder than simply stating the

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don't, but that's what's makes a good coach – being able to do the hard things, being able to take the complicated and break it down simply for our players. The more we do this on a daily basis for our players the more our players will be able to learn to do it for themselves.

- It's because of this "don't" type of thinking that results in poor pitches, many coaches have resorted to telling their pitchers not to think at all. What's funny is we usually tell them like this, "Don't think, just pitch". Which means the pitcher is left with "think, just pitch" the very thing you were trying to get her to avoid. So let's give our pitchers a method for helping control their thoughts and to let their thoughts be their friend instead of their enemy.

2. Manage the Mind

- To help our pitchers learn to practice good, or positive, thinking we need to help them manage their minds by giving them some thinking routines. A routine is a pattern to follow that I believe in, that I know works for me. A routine helps me do important things that I might otherwise forget or leave out without my routine. So let's look, at a great thinking routine for pitchers:

- Start with the Good. Negative thoughts are usually centered on the obvious – the obviously wrong. When a pitch sails over the catcher's head the pitcher usually only notices how high the pitch was instead of seeing that the pitch was fast, and it was directly in line with the glove (that's 2 things that were right with the pitch). Instead of simply noticing and dwelling on the Bad thing we need to train out pitchers to start by noticing the GOOD. What things did they do good on the pitch. Maybe they threw it fast, maybe it moved the right direction, maybe it was in line with the glove. Find the Good thing or things first before starting in on the negative. If a pitcher is ever going to build up a strong and solid positive thought process they must learn to notice anything good they do on a pitch. Otherwise they will constantly beat themselves into the ground and never hold up under the pressures of a game.

- Get your pitchers to ask themselves, after every single pitch, *What Did I do Good* because they will want to repeat those things. If you're really brave the try this with your pitchers: Once your pitchers have warmed up, have them start pitching. Then suddenly say *stop!* and ask each one to quickly tell you something they did right (or good) on their last pitch. You will be amazed (probably horrified) at how none of them will be able to quickly come up with anything they think they did right. But, if you then say, "OK, tell me what you think you did wrong" they'll go into great detail. It's sad but true that a pitcher's mind has been trained over the years to focus on the negative, those things that someone else has constantly pointed out they feel the pitcher is doing "wrong", so the pitcher quickly learns to find those things themselves. Instead, we need to help our pitchers change their mental focus to seek out and find the "good" first. Finding the bad, or wrong things first is the most harmful type of thinking our pitchers can have. Remember – To Pitch the Good we've first got to Find the Good!

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- What Do I Need to Fix, then Fix it. After your pitcher has identified what she did good on the last pitch, she's got to figure out anything on the last pitch that must be fixed and then fix it. Those things don't need to be thrown into the "Bad" pile, they just need to be thought of as "things I need to fix" and then fix them. Usually, these are simple things like letting go a little sooner, snapping more around the ball, making sure I follow through more on my changeup...things like that. But, it's vital that the pitcher figure out what things from the last pitch must be fixed and know ways to fix them before stepping on the rubber to throw the next pitch.

- De-Emotionalize the Pitch. While emotion can often provide the energy necessary to perform a strength and speed skill like pitching, it can also make the brain cloudy and gum up the works, never mind the up and down roller-coaster that emotions take us on. We want to avoid the negative aspects of emotion by eliminating it from our pitching thoughts. To do this we need to get our pitchers to learn to De-Emotionalize their pitching, or in other words, to take the emotion out of it. Here's a great little saying I've found that works really well with helping pitchers de-emotionalize their pitching. Immediately after every single pitch a pitcher should:

- i. *Fix it* (fix the last pitch before stepping on the rubber)
- ii. *Flush it* (flush the last pitch from your mind instead of carrying around a bunch of old pitches like negative weights)
- iii. *Throw it* (simply throw the next pitch)

- Rubber Routine. Once your pitcher steps on the pitching rubber she needs to manage her mind by a very simple routine. By following this routine your pitcher will give herself instructions PRIOR to the next pitch instead of simply doing it after the pitch:

- iv. *See it* – When you get the pitch and location immediately imagine yourself throwing the pitch by seeing it in your mind.
- v. *Review it* – Just before throwing the pitch quickly review 1-2 key things you must do to make this pitch work.
- vi. *Throw it* – Then simply throw the pitch. Believe in the 2 steps you just did and then trust yourself and pitch.

3. Keep the Noodles, Throw Out the Water

- I try to talk in pictures anytime I can and a great picture that seems to really get across this whole idea of positive mind management for pitchers is that of a spaghetti sieve. The whole idea of straining spaghetti into a sieve is to capture the noodles (the good stuff) and let the yucky water (the bad stuff) go through and get out. It's basically separating the good from the bad (Picture 1).

- Well that's just how we need to manage our mind as pitchers. We need to keep the good stuff and let the bad stuff go through. Too often though, we do just the opposite. We hold onto the bad thoughts and negative stuff and let the



Picture 1

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good things we did escape with the spaghetti water (Picture 2).

- Sharing this example with your pitchers of the spaghetti strainer will help give them a very clear picture of how they need to let the water – which represents all the negative pitching thoughts – go through the holes and they need to hold onto, or keep the noodles which represent the good pitching thoughts.



Picture 2

4. What's Your "Until" Moment?

- *I was pitching really good until....* sound familiar? Well that's your "until moment" and if you're ever going to get past it successfully then you better tear it apart and figure out what the small pieces of it are and how you're going to practice them to be successful the next time it happens. Because trust me, it WILL happen again!

- All players and all teams have "until moments" but too often our only methods for dealing with them are either "hope" or blamed. Hoping they don't happen again like the title of the book says, *Hope is Not a Method*. Hoping things won't happen is what you want your opponents to rely on, not you! Or, we just blame things when that moment happens. The strike zone changed, it was hot, it was cold...

- To fix your pitcher's "until" moments you need to get them to really think in smaller details about anything that changed to make them say "until". As with all the thinking we've been asking our pitchers to do up to this point, it will be hard, and painful and slow going – but necessary. Here's an example of a typical pitcher's "until moment".

Pitcher - *I was pitching good until around the 5th inning*

Me – what happened in the 5th inning?

P – *I started throwing more balls than strikes*

Me – why?

P – *I don't know*

Me – ok, think smaller. What changed?

P – *well the umpire stopped calling high pitches*

Me – and how did you adjust?

P – *well, I didn't, I just got frustrated and quit thinking clearly and making adjustments and instead I just got mad and frustrated.*

- By probing and asking smaller questions the pitcher now understands that what caused her "until moment" was that the umpire changed the strike zone and that she didn't adjust with it but instead, fought it. We can help a pitcher understand that umpires typically get tired around the 4th – 5th inning from all those squats so we should expect the strike zone to change and be ready for it as soon as it does. We want to take pride in out-adjusting the other pitcher. In practice we could have our pitchers throwing pitch sequences to our catchers and the catchers calling balls and strikes. Then our catchers could suddenly changing their zone and start calling a completely different strike zone and the pitcher that figured it out and adjusted the fastest would win!

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By learning to better use our minds as pitchers we can make immediate and appropriate adjustments in competition. Understanding that the mind is a body part just like any other body part the pitcher can start to talk to, strengthen and improve her mind and how she uses it just as she does her other body parts. Successful pitching requires constantly making adjustments to things like; the umpire slightly changing the zone, the batter slightly changing her approach on her next at-bat, a particular pitch that was great during warm-ups and is flat as a board in the game, or a shortstop that suddenly starts fielding groundballs with her ankles. All skills require making adjustments but pitching requires the most and the fastest ones and all great pitchers have a great ability to control their mind instead of letting it control them.

Next issue we'll look at warm ups and how we can do things more efficiently to be sharper in the first inning as well as stronger at the end of the game and we'll explore the Change Up. See you next time!