

Mastering Warm-Ups and the Change Up

Cindy Bristow - Softball Excellence

This is Part 3 of my 6 part article series for the National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA)

We're at the half-way point article-wise, and for many of you we're also entering Championship Play. For those of you that are making the post season I say congratulations! Now it's time to finish the job you started out to do back in the fall when your team met for the first time.

Championship play is about finishing the job is and so is pitching. Before we get into the two main topics for today; Warm-ups and the Change-Up, let's quickly look at how pitcher's can "finish the job" in the most commonly messed up situation, and that's whenever a pitcher gets 2 strikes on the batter.

Dominating with 2 Strikes – What's interesting to me is that pitcher's on all levels don't seem to have a hard time getting 2 strikes, but then they somehow end up losing the batter to either a walk or a 2 strike hit; both of which will make their coaches head blow off!

In order to see what a pitcher can do once they get 2 strikes to continue to dominate the hitter we first need to remember how the pitcher got those strikes. Both the pitcher and the person calling the pitches started out attacking the batter to get both the first and the second strike. But then, something changed. That something was that they switched from attacking to get both strikes to being careful by either wasting pitches or trying to get hitters to chase too many pitches (usually the same thing).

So, instead of attacking the hitter when she's at her absolute weakest with 2 strikes, the pitcher changes her approach and gives up a ball for a chase or even a waste pitch. Now it's 1 ball and 2 strikes, and it's this 4th pitch that can make all the difference in the outcome! Instead of continuing to be on the defensive by trying to get the hitter to chase a 2nd pitch, switch your approach and go back to attacking the hitter. Get the hitter out! Help your pitcher avoid those 2 ball counts where too many pitchers flip the switch to the "don't walk her" mode that almost certainly spells doom for the pitcher!

Being careful and being good are opposites! Being careful is a cautious, slow, and deliberate approach to things while being good involves relaxing, being fast, attacking and being confident. Careful is certainly not what we want from our pitchers so they can be good with 2 strikes and force the batter to be tentative and careful!

Now let's get on to our main topics today, Warming Up and The Change Up.

1. Warming Up –

Warming up is something that all pitchers have to do, but something that we don't put enough thought or purpose in to. Warming up to pitch should accomplish the same purpose it does for any other position or sport; raising the body temperature, stretching the body parts thoroughly and increasing mental focus. In addition, a pitcher needs to warm up her motion, her fastball

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and each of her pitches. All this without wearing herself out so much she can't finish the game and yet she needs to make sure she's ready for the first batter and the first inning.

Whenever I watch a pitcher warm up I'm constantly amazed at how long it takes, how many crazy drills a pitcher will include and how there really isn't a purpose or a specific ending point. Think about it. A pitcher will typically start warming up by standing about 6-8 feet away from the catcher and doing some manner of wrist snaps. She'll then move back about 5 feet and get into some kind of K position and throw a bunch of pitches before moving back to do some other kind of crane-like position and throw a bunch more pitches. The pitcher then usually moves behind the rubber and does a ton of walk-throughs before finally standing on the rubber, looking like she's standing in cement, finally starting to pitch. Meanwhile, at least 20-25 minutes have elapsed before the pitcher throws one pitch from the rubber. When this pitcher goes into the game she really isn't ready for the first batter or first inning, and yet she was "warming up" for over 40 minutes. Sound familiar?

The problem with this kind of warm up is that there really isn't a purpose or a limit to it. While pitching drills done right are a great way to help a pitcher improve a specific aspect of the motion, their place is in pitching practice where improvement is the objective instead of in warm ups where getting ready to dominate in a game is the goal. Before we look at some keys to an effective pitching warmup that will not only shorten the whole process but will result in a better warmed up pitcher ready to be her best from first pitch to last, let's take a few keys for having an efficient and successful warmup:

1. It's Not Practice:

- Warm up isn't practice so make sure your players are actually warming up their bodies, their minds and their pitches.
- Don't waste time doing something that won't improve one of these 3 things: warm up your body, better increase your focus, and improve your pitch.
- Stay on task and keep the practicing in practice and not in warm ups.

2. Drill it Right:

- If you're going to do drills during warm-ups then make them as game-like as possible. This means the pitcher needs to be in as close as possible to the same pitching position she's in during the drill as she is in during that same position during her pitching motion.
- Too many pitchers do all these crazy things during warm ups that have way more to do with practicing pitching than with warming up.

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- A look at the following pictures shows how the 3 most common drills done during pitching warm ups really don't have much to do with that same skill when the pitcher is in her actual pitching motion:



Wrist Snaps



K Position



Crane or Stork

Now let's look at these 3 drills during that same part of the actual pitching motion to see if doing these drills, in this fashion, is going to be helpful for a pitcher to improve her motion, or not. Remember, your pitcher isn't trying to warm up in order to win a drill-off, she's trying to warm up to win a game! So make sure that if you're using drills in warm ups (or at any time) that the drills is done in as close to the correct pitching motion position as possible.

Wrist Snaps: (picture 4)

- This drill is designed to work on the release of the ball and as you can see from the comparison picture to the right, when a pitcher releases the ball (by snapping her wrist) her feet certainly aren't next to each other nor is her entire body facing forward with her feet together and flat.
- So if you're going to do wrist snaps then do them with your body in the same position it's in when you actually let go of the ball.



K Position: (picture 5)

- This is a really popular drill that I've never really understood.
- As you can see from the drill position on the left side of the picture on the right, that this is not even close to the position the pitcher is in during this part of her motion.
- The pitcher does not have both feet flat on the ground but instead has her weight on her back foot ready to transfer to her front foot.



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- And the pitcher's glove is not up making the top leg of the letter K but instead is forward and ready to move down.

Crane or Stork: (picture 6)

- Again we can see how very different the drill position is from the actual position within the pitching motion.
- In the drill the pitcher is very stiff and upright while in the real motion the pitcher is far more forward and explosive.



3. The Role of SLOW:

- In my first article I talked about the value of going slow and how that can anchor the correct motion for a pitcher.
- Going slow also creates a great warm up routine that not only helps the pitcher master the details of the motion but it also helps keep that pitcher's arm fresher for the game and the end of the season.
- For a great warm up, try this:
 - a. Start about $\frac{1}{2}$ way and pitch $\frac{1}{2}$ speed
 - b. Move back to $\frac{3}{4}$ distance and pitch $\frac{3}{4}$ speed
 - c. Then move back beyond the rubber and throw full speed using the regular motion (not the walk-through as this gives the pitcher a false sense of speed and power) but using her regular motion.
 - d. The pitcher then stands on the rubber and works on her locations. This same routine can be used for all of her pitches.

4. Set a Limit:

- The final piece of the warm up picture is to set a limit on how long a pitcher will stay at a certain point in their warm up before moving on.
- Typically, if you ask a pitcher how long they do their wrist snaps or the Crane or the K position or the Leg Swings and they'll all tell you – until it feels good, or until they're comfortable. Well, on some days, that could be forever and you don't have forever to warm up.
- So, the better way to do it is to say I'll do this particular aspect for 10 pitches, so after 3 if you're not getting it right or it doesn't feel good then you better hurry up and make an adjustment because you're running out of pitches.
- This forces the pitcher to make an adjustment and do it quickly instead of just pitching until things get better.
- This also makes it much easier to know how long your warm up will take since each aspect has a definite limit. But, the most important benefit to having a certain limit on each part of your warmup is that it puts the pitcher into the game adjustment mode where the pitcher must make the adjustment since she can't stand out there pitching "until it feels good" because she'll probably be sitting next to you on the bench by then.

When I used this type of scaled down and more focused type of warm up with two different skills of pitchers it was amazing how fast each pitcher got warm. I didn't tell them how to warm up or what to do, they each did the above mentioned warmup and limited each stop to 10 pitches. They started completely cold and stopped when they were ready enough to go into a game and pitch.

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The following figures are from 1st pitch to completely warm and ready to go into the game:

15 year old Pitcher:

- She warmed up her Fastball and a Changeup
- It took her 3 minutes and 23 pitches from 1st pitch to completely warm

College Pitcher:

- She warmed up her Overhand & Underhand, Fastball, Dropball, Riseball, Changeup and Combinations
- It took her 16 minutes and 57 pitches from 1st pitch to completely warm

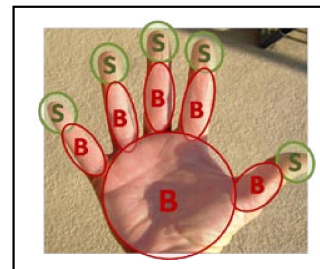
I know it seems incredible but we need to examine why we do things we've always done and see if there might be a better, and more efficient way to do them – warm ups included.

2. The Change Up

Now let's look at the change up, either the Backhand or Palm Forward type doesn't matter. If your pitcher is still struggling to find the best change up for her she should try all the different types and see which one she can throw the slowest. Having control doesn't matter at first, it's only important when picking a changeup that your pitcher be able to pitch the ball slower.

Now, if your pitcher already has a change up but it isn't what it needs to be, for whatever reason, then let's look at some common issues that are critical to the change up:

1. The Speed - The speed for the change up obviously needs to be s-l-o-w, and it's the grip and release that create the slow speed. So if your pitcher's change up is too fast then check to make sure that the ball is deep in your pitcher's hand, and that she's got the brakes of her hand on the ball. The picture on the left shows (picture 7) a pitcher's hand and how the long part of the fingers and the palm are the Brakes (B) and the pads or snapping part of the fingers are the Speed (S) parts. When a pitcher throws a change up – either the backhand or the palm forward – she needs to keep the brakes on the ball to help slow it down. With the back of the hand change up pitchers will often get too much speed on the pitch if they wait too long to turn their hand. Pitchers should turn their hand backwards at the top of their arm swing instead of waiting to turn it as they release the ball.



2. Distance – Distance is the other problem with the change up, and yet it's probably the easiest problem to fix. While grip and release are the things that make a change up go slow, fastball hand speed at release is what a pitcher must achieve to get fastball distance on the pitch. Too many pitchers slow down when releasing the ball in order to try and make the ball go slow and as a result, they end up losing distance on the pitch. Hand speed at release is distance on a change up so if you pitcher's change up is falling short in the dirt then get her to explode her hand through the release point.

3. Accuracy – Change up accuracy is a lot like fastball accuracy, basically the ball goes where the pitcher's palm is pointing at release. With that in mind the Back of Hand change up pitchers will need to

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take their fingers to the glove on the follow through and the Palm Forward pitchers will need to shove their palm at the catcher. In addition, here are some other tips for helping the accuracy of your pitcher's change up: Follow through to the glove vs stopping at the release point, For the Palm Forward change up keep the fingers stiff until the catcher catches the ball, PRACTICE! – in fact, make at least one day a week Change up day, and finally alternate change ups in with the faster pitches instead of just throwing millions of changeups in a row. Have your pitchers throw a fast pitch, followed by a change up, then fast, then change, then fast, then change. Work with your pitchers to alternate their change up with each of their other pitches continually throughout the week.

4. Tipping the Pitch – Finally, it's vital when throwing a changeup that the pitcher not tip her change up, or do anything to let the opponents know its coming. The most common ways that pitchers tip their change ups include: Taking too long to grip the pitch, struggling to grip the pitch, gripping the pitch outside of the glove, slowing down the stride (this is really common so watch for this in all pitchers), and finally slowing down the arm swing.

Having a dependable change up is the quickest way for a pitcher to get faster and to disrupt the timing, balance and confidence of the opposing hitters.