



"THREE WALKS AND YOU'RE OUT" A Game for Training Pitchers

[NOTE FOR THE POLITICALLY CORRECT: Throughout this I refer to "he" but I mean "he or she."]

I came up with this pitcher-development game in 1996 and used it for many years with considerable success.

There was an 10-year-old player who desperately wanted to pitch but never got the chance during the regular season because his team was long on established pitchers. Finally, in his team's championship game, he got his opportunity. It was the bottom of the sixth inning, his team was ahead by eight runs, there was one out, and the manager was out of experienced pitchers. He put this player on the mound for the final two outs. You guessed it: the totally green pitcher gave up nine runs to lots of walks and extra-base hits, and his team lost the championship.

This player wound up on the summer ball team I coached that year. My son and I worked all summer season with him and others during pitcher practices, playing inning after inning of "Three Walks and You're Out." Toward the end of summer ball, this player figured he was ready to pitch an inning. I put him in to face the 2-3-4 batters in a close game we were winning. He threw seven pitches. Six of those pitches were called or swung-at strikes. The seventh resulted in a weak groundout to the second baseman. We won the game.

"Three Walks and You're Out" is also an excellent qualifier for wannabe pitchers. If a wannabe pitcher can plate five runners (if he's 9-10) or seven runners (if he's 11 or older) before issuing three walks, and do it two innings in a row, then he won't embarrass himself on the mound in a real game.

PERSONNEL: You need a coach or baseball-savvy parent, one to three pitchers, and either some players to shag balls or a huge bucket of practice balls. The baserunners are imaginary. You do *not* want players to run the bases! You do *not* want a player to hit: inexperienced pitchers are erratic, and you don't want a player to become ball-shy thanks to being repeatedly hit by errant pitches. And you don't want to use an actual catcher, unless you have catchers who need the practice. The innings in "Three Walks and You're Out" can be long, and thus hard on catchers' knees. Besides, it's better for the pitcher to visualize the strike zone without any help: this makes it easier when he's on the mound in an actual game.

THE RULES: "Three Walks and You're Out" is baseball upside down and backwards. The object is to reward the pitcher who throws strikes and penalize the pitcher who throws balls.

The pitcher for this inning assumes the mound, any pitchers for subsequent innings take infield positions, and the coach-batter sets up in the batter's box. The pitcher makes five practice pitches, and then the game begins. The coach-batter calls balls and strikes as he sees them, and no arguing from anybody!

If the pitch is a ball, the coach-batter lets it go by.

If the pitch is a strike, even an unhittable one, the coach-batter takes a swing, legitimately trying to hit the ball.

Foul balls are called as they would be in regulation baseball.

If the coach-batter makes fair contact (weak dribbler, bunt, popup, can-of-corn to the outfield, a deep drive all the way to Lake Michigan, whatever), it counts as a single and the pitcher is awarded an imaginary baserunner. Whenever the pitcher is awarded another imaginary baserunner, all the other imaginary base-runners advance one base. The coach-batter does not run the bases! He stays in the batter's box, lest the game disintegrate into pre-adolescent goofing-off and hilarity.

If the coach-batter strikes out, then the pitcher is awarded an imaginary baserunner, and all the imaginary baserunners advance one base. The imaginary runner on third base scores a run.

But if the coach-batter draws a walk, then the pitcher does *not* get an imaginary baserunner and the walk counts against his allowed maximum of three.

The coach-batter should make every effort to get out of the way of errant pitches. There's no "taking one for the team" in "Three Walks and You're Out"! If the coach-batter does get hit by a pitch, it counts as a walk and the pitcher does *not* get an imaginary baserunner.

If the pitcher can plate five imaginary runners (9-10 years old) or seven imaginary runners (11 years old or older) before issuing three walks, he wins that inning. If he walks three batters, he loses.

That's all there is to it!

TIPS:

1. First, a **WARNING:** An individual pitcher should pitch no more than one inning in a row and no more than two innings in a day. If he pitches two innings of "Three Walks and You're Out," he shouldn't pitch at all for one full day. Warn the pitcher to not practice the next day! If the pitcher is visibly flagging, he should stop immediately. Also, if the pitcher throws more than 45-50 pitches in one inning, he shouldn't pitch a second inning. Pitch-counts, especially with pitchers-in-training, can be dramatically high with "Three Walks and You're Out."

2. The coach-batter should make the lineup more "real" to the pitcher. The first several batters should show considerably more batting ability than those who come lower down in the order. Pitchers love it when the batter at the bottom of the order quivers to the plate with knees knocking and gingerly grasps the bat as if it were a poisonous snake. Also, if the coach-batter can switch-hit at all, it's best for the pitcher if the coach-batter take some at-bats from the other side of the plate.

3. Depending on who you're working with, you might want to reward particularly good pitches with two strikes. Here's an example: with a 2-and-1 count, the pitcher throws a beautiful changeup which you swing at early and high and miss.

4. For higher levels (*very* experienced 12-year-old traveling team types, or Pony League or high school pitchers), you may want to call the watermelon-sized, belt-high, straight-down-the-middle-of-the-plate fastballs as "two balls" even if you swing and miss. Needless to say, you should tell the pitcher you'll be doing this before the inning starts. It really helps the pitcher find the corners of the strike zone.