



## A WINNING STRATEGY FOR USING PITCHERS IN A PITCH COUNT LEAGUE

During the Spring season, the NSYBA uses a pitch count system for saving pony league pitchers' arms and shoulders. In the past, NSYBA had used an innings-pitched system. However, reviews of pitch count records showed a wild variance in the number of pitches thrown per inning: during a 12-year sample period, there were as few as four pitches to as many as 52 per inning! Clearly, "innings pitched" was worse than useless.

Here's Local Rule 8G governing pitches thrown and rest required:

8G A pitcher may pitch a maximum of 90 pitches in one calendar day.

- If a player pitches 65 or more pitches in a day, three (3) calendar days of rest must be observed.
- If a player pitches 35 - 64 pitches in a day, two (2) calendar days of rest must be observed.
- If a player pitches 21 - 34 pitches in a day, one (1) calendar days of rest must be observed.
- If a player pitches 20 or fewer pitches in a day, no (0) calendar days of rest must be observed.

A "calendar day" constitutes the entire day. Thus, if a player pitches 38 pitches on Monday, he or she is ineligible to pitch again until Thursday. If a pitcher pitches 90 pitches on Monday afternoon, he or she is NOT eligible to pitch in a Thursday night game; he or she is not eligible to pitch again until Friday. There are NO EXCEPTIONS to this rule, including all play-off and championship games.

EXCEPTION: If a pitcher reaches the 90-pitch limit while facing a batter, the pitcher may continue to pitch until any one of the following conditions occurs: 1. That batter reaches base; 2. That batter is put out, 3. The third out is made to complete the half-inning. The pitch count beyond 90 must be included in the pitch count report.

In setting these limits, the NSYBA relied entirely on the first version of the *Official Rules of Little League Baseball* which contained pitch count limits for various age levels. These had been set after consultation with many of the very best orthopedic surgeons and sports medicine specialists. Thus, there are good medical and scientific reasons for setting precisely these limits.

These limits also correspond roughly to innings pitched. Twenty pitches is roughly one inning. After the pitcher has been on the mound for one inning, then he's warmed up and thus more efficient. So 34 pitches corresponds roughly to two innings. Sixty-four pitches corresponds to roughly three innings for inefficient pitchers and four innings for efficient pitchers. Ninety pitches can be a complete, seven-inning game thrown by an efficient pony league pitcher: we found seven complete games of 90 or fewer pitches in our study of pitches thrown.

There is a tendency by pony league managers to treat these limits as numbers to strive for, something like a posted speed limit to be equaled as closely as possible. Thus, you'll see a pitcher pitch right up to whichever limit the manager has chosen, then get relieved in the middle of an inning (sometimes in the middle of an at-bat!) — typically with runners on base and the reliever coming in with a cold arm. The game comes to a screeching halt while the reliever gets his warmup throws. Base runners sit on their bases; infielders draw pictures in the infield dirt with their toes; outfielders look for pictures in clouds or examine the grass around them for four-leaf clovers. Then the game starts again. The reliever with his cold arm either grooves pitches down the middle of the plate to be clobbered deep into the outfield or, more likely, walks the first couple of batters he faces. Before the inning ends, several more runs have scored. If this happens often enough, sometimes the game gets suspended on account of darkness and has to be finished at a later date.

Here is a vastly superior pitching management strategy that managers can use to win games. It breaks down into four simple concepts:

1. Set your pitching strategy before the game.
2. Warm up all your pitchers.
3. Only relieve your pitchers at the start of an inning.
4. Keep your pitcher warm.

## 1. SET YOUR PITCHING STRATEGY BEFORE THE GAME

Determine which pitchers you'll use and in what sequence. Let's say your pitching staff consists of these players:

George Washington ..... accurately throws two- and four-seam fastballs and has a good changeup  
Thomas Jefferson ..... tall (6 foot 2 with eyes of blue), features a blazing fastball and a cruddy curve  
Abraham Lincoln ..... gangly, has a good fastball which seldom finds the strike zone  
Grover Cleveland ..... a light tosser who can throw strikes; best for the bottom of the order  
Lyndon Johnson ..... crafty pitcher: decent accuracy, only good for an inning, then quits  
Jimmy Carter ..... another light but accurate tosser — can pitch lots of innings  
Bill Clinton ..... crafty pitcher: mediocre fastball, exceptional curve

The general rule in pony league baseball is to never let a lineup see the same pitcher more than once in a game. Pitchers at this age with very few exceptions ever have an idea of good pitch selection, and good batters towards the top of a lineup do pick up on a set strategy (like "first pitch fastball, second pitch breaking ball"). Also, once you get past a certain number in the batting order, you find batters who are up there mainly to take a walk. So, match your pitchers against the opposition's lineup. Use a fireballer or a crafty pitcher to face the top of the order and the slow-but-accurate pitchers to strike out the bottom of the order.

Assuming each pitcher will face an average of six batters per inning, a sensible pitcher sequence might look like this:

first inning ..... Thomas Jefferson  
second inning ..... Lyndon Johnson  
third inning ..... Abraham Lincoln  
fourth & fifth innings ..... Jimmy Carter  
sixth inning ..... either Bill Clinton or Grover Cleveland  
seventh inning ..... George Washington

Be prepared to alter the number of innings pitched, depending on where you'll be in the opposition's lineup. But don't alter the sequence of pitchers.

Be certain you tell your pitching staff the sequence for this game and post it in the dugout. This simple step shows that you actually have a plan. Pony league pitchers find this highly reassuring and relaxing. Then they're set up to give their best pitching performances.

## 2. WARM UP ALL YOUR PITCHERS

Pony league pitchers all too often go into the game with cold arms. The result is that mayhem occurs with their first couple of batters while they warm up on the mound. Either the hit ball goes much farther than it would otherwise, or the pitcher walks a batter or two. It's best to send a pitcher with a warmed up arm to the mound. Here's how to warm up your pitchers.

**a. SET UP A BULLPEN.** Before the game, measure off 54 feet with a pound-in pitching rubber at one end and a throw-down home plate at the other (if your league doesn't furnish these, you can obtain them for less than \$40.00 from a

sporting goods shop or via the internet). Now you have a makeshift bullpen. (Why park districts don't include two permanent bullpens near each diamond is totally beyond me, but they don't.)

**b. WARM UP WITH TOSSES AND THROWS.** Also before the game, each and every one of your pitchers should follow this throwing sequence (more throws if it's cold, fewer if it's warm):

Bench stretching exercises: see any good baseball manual or develop your own  
Light toss from 50 feet ..... 8-12 repetitions — done with another pitcher  
Light toss from 60 feet ..... 5-10 repetitions — done with another pitcher  
Light toss from 70 feet ..... 5-10 repetitions — done with another pitcher  
Hard throws from 50 feet ..... 5-10 repetitions — done with another pitcher

**c. BEFORE THE PITCHER TAKES THE MOUND.** Your starter should do this before the game; relievers should do this while your team is at bat in the inning before they relieve. You'll need either a pony league catcher in full tools of ignorance or a coach wearing a mask.

Pitcher and catcher go to the bullpen you set up before the game. The pitcher, from the rubber, throws 5-10 light tosses to the catcher, standing on home plate. Then the catcher assumes the catching position behind the plate, and the pitcher throws 15-25 pitches to the catcher, full-out but striving for accurately hitting the strike zone. He should throw equal proportions of all the pitches in his repertoire and mix them up (i.e., not throw five two-seamers, then five four-seamers, then five changeups all in a row).

By this point, your pitcher has made 18 to 32 light tosses, 5 to 10 hard throws from roughly pitching distance, another 5 to 10 tosses from pitching distance in the bullpen and practiced his pitches with 15 to 25 repetitions, for a total of 43 to 77 throws or pitches. He is thoroughly warmed up, at the peak of his pitching game, and raring to go slay batters.

And none of this warmup activity counts against his pitches from the mound!

**3. ONLY RELIEVE YOUR PITCHERS AT THE START OF AN INNING.** At the start of an inning, the bases are empty and the pitcher gets to start with a clean slate. This is a definite confidence builder. By contrast, very few pony league pitchers have the aplomb to enter a game with one out and the bases loaded. Remember, these are pony league players, not professionals making millions of dollars per year, so sheer jitters guarantee mishaps until the pitcher settles down on the mound.

**4. KEEP YOUR PITCHERS WARM WHEN ON THE BENCH.** If you're going to use a pitcher for more than one inning, keep him or her warm! If the air temperature is 75 degrees or less, they should have a jacket or similar with them. If they don't, include a junky old blanket in your equipment duffel and make sure that pitcher is swaddled in it while sitting on the bench. (I used a scratchy wool blanket that I told my players had come from a horse stable. They got the point and brought jackets.) Especially, pitchers' backs stiffen up between innings on the mound in those "lake breezes" we get off Lake Michigan in the Spring. Some bench stretching exercises are also recommended, but it's hard to get most pony league pitchers to do this.

Following these four simple concepts will enable you to get the very most from your pitchers and help you win lots of games.