**[Developing Young Pitchers the Safe Way](http://ericcressey.com/developing-young-pitchers-the-safe-way)**

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Written on December 2, 2009 at 9:42 am, by Eric Cressey

*This is another excellent guest post from Matt Blake.*

Now that fall sports are beginning to wrap up and the winter training season is upon us, I thought it might be timely to contribute some more information for the youth baseball development community.

Recently, I have been running some pitching clinics on the weekends for the 9-12 year old age group – and it got me thinking a lot about the importance of proper development for the youth baseball player.  This is especially true in what has been traditionally considered a “dead period” or off-season for baseball players in the Northeast.



For better or worse, I believe this mentality is beginning to change a lot, as the greater population is forcing players to become more and more specialized at earlier ages. This may not be true across the board, but there are definitely some undertones driving this movement, such as showcases during the December/January months, where players are expected to show up to a workout and light-up a radar gun in order to impress college coaches or scouts. This thought alone might send shivers down Eric’s spine and will probably hold its own as a blog topic in the near future.

To give you an idea, [**one study published by Olsen et al (2006)**](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16452269?itool=EntrezSystem2.PEntrez.Pubmed.Pubmed_ResultsPanel.Pubmed_RVDocSum&ordinalpos=1) at the American Sports Medicine Institute in Birmingham, AL actually documented that injured baseball players (requiring elbow or shoulder surgery) went to four times as many showcases as those who were in the healthy control group!



Now, I certainly can’t say I think specialization at a young age is a healthy thing with regard to developing baseball players, as there are tremendous demands placed on the body in the act of throwing a baseball overhead.  But at the same time, if players and parents decide that is what they would like to do and it is in the best interest of the kid, there needs to be a safe way to approach development during this time period for this population.

When I say this population, I’m speaking to the baseball population as a whole, but when I say a “safe approach,” there obviously needs to be some clarification on the intended goals and ambitions of the particular player.

Some of the major concerns that I believe need to be addressed before engaging a player in a throwing session include:

-How much has this player thrown over the last day/week/month/year? Has he taken any breaks in his development to rest his arm for at least three weeks (at the very minimum)?

– Has he complained of arm pain during practice or competition during this period? If so, where was the pain? How often did it occur and to what degree?

These are just a few of the important signs and indicators that need to be tracked throughout the year, specialized winter training or not.  The study referenced above by Olsen et al identifies a host of other variables found in the injured population and should be a must read for anyone who is working with amateur baseball players.

Now there are obviously a lot of different ways to look at this, so I’ll try to explain what I think “proper development” means for players depending on their age range, and the level of performance they desire to reach.

This winter alone, I will be aiding the development of pitchers ranging from the professional and collegiate baseball players taking part in Eric’s Elite Baseball Development Program all the way down to the 9-12 year old population, where players are trying to figure out how to throw a baseball in the right direction.

Obviously, the pro players are extremely specialized and probably have been for awhile. A lot of their development has already occurred and their windows for adaptation are a lot smaller, so we’re working more towards preparing them to handle the stress of a 140+ games than we are skill refinement.



On the other end of the spectrum, the 9-12 year olds one might be dealing with are incredibly raw and undeveloped with huge windows of adaptation ahead of them from pure maturation of their bodies to the development of their motor patterns. This time period is huge for kids to begin ironing out the proper motor patterns that they will use to refine their athletic skills in their teen years of development.

With this in mind, a substantial amount of throwing might not be in their best interest and maybe getting more athletic in general would be more beneficial in the long term. How can you expect a player to repeat his mechanics with any sense of consistency if he doesn’t understand how his body even works? One way that I like to spend time with this type of player is to extend the warm-up and movement training portion of these clinics to really drive home the importance of being in good physical shape.  We also use more group oriented video analysis sessions for the players and parents to point out what common mechanical faults look like in this age group, and what verbal cues the parent might be able to use to help correct when playing catch on their own.

I actually find this portion of the clinic to be the most beneficial for all involved, because when you think about it, you only get about 3 to 4 hours with these players in a clinic setting. In order to get the information to settle in for these players, it needs to be constantly reinforced as their mind and bodies continue to develop. This is where mom or dad need to be informed, because they are the ones who will do much of the reinforcing, whether or not they are qualified to teach their son to throw a baseball. The more information they can have at their disposal and the more teaching tools you can give them, the better off they will be at aiding their child’s development in the backyard.

This is the main reason why Eric and I are holding a FREE clinic this coming Tuesday, Dec 8th at 7pm for parents and coaches in the area, who are interested in learning more about how to prepare and protect the amateur baseball player.  We’ll be discussing the current injury epidemic in youth baseball, how it stems from overuse in competition, and what some of the major developmental needs are for the youth baseball player.If you’re interested in attending, please RSVP to CresseyPerformance@gmail.com.  Hopefully we’ll see some of you there!

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