

7 Ways to Improve Your Pitchers During the Off-Season

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It's great that players can work on their softball skills virtually all year long but without an actual off-season it's hard for your pitchers to improve.

Learn how you can help your pitchers make sure they are better when next season rolls around.

Getting older doesn't make you better, it just makes you older. When it comes to our pitchers we want to make sure that not only are they older each season, but they're also better. That only happens when they've focused on their off-season workouts and used them purposefully.



Lots of pitchers have off-season workouts, but they're the same ones that have during the season – nothing changes for them other than the time of year. That's not going to cut it if you're trying to improve yourself or your pitchers. Depending on where you live, the off-season will vary in length. I happen to live in Tampa, Florida and our off-season occurs for about 5 minutes on Christmas Day, other than that, teams around here are playing all year long. While the coaches might think that their fall ball games don't really count, they still expect their pitchers to throw well. The same goes for spring ball and school ball and so on... So when is it that pitchers are supposed to improve, or take a break, or rest?

Believe it or not, rest is a very vital part of improvement and it's something that we offer our pitchers in very sparing doses. We always know our pitchers need to rest – particularly our good one that we throw all the time – but we figure she can get it on somebody else's team. That somebody else figures the same thing and pretty soon 12 months have gone by and that pitcher has yet to rest, so into next season she goes with her rag arm and her same old pitching self.

So let's look at 7 things I think that pitchers can do to improve themselves during whatever kind of off-season they have. Whether it's simply a lighter game schedule during fall ball or it's during a 4 month break while the snow melts, the off-season is a pitcher's time to give back to herself. It's when she gets to make herself stronger and better – it's when she turns into her 2.0 version.

Ways to Improve Your Pitchers During the Off-Season:

1. Get the Fastball Mechanics Sound: I'm not talking hip turn, K position and all that – I'm talking making sure your pitcher is getting her hand directly behind the ball at release, that she's exploding behind the ball through the release, that she's relaxed in her shoulders so her hand can be as fast as possible at release, that she's blasting from the rubber with her feet, and that her hand and feet are working together. You don't get extra strikes for hitting all the "key positions" in pitching so focus on the things that really help your pitcher throw the ball faster and with more accuracy. Don't forget the value of the fastball just because you think you're an advanced pitcher. The fastball is the basis from which all pitches are thrown.

2. Know What You Want to Improve On: In other words, have a goal. What is it your pitcher needs to do better when the off-season is over? Does she want to develop a certain pitch, or create more movement on a pitch she already has, or be able to hit a specific location more consistently with a certain pitch, or does she want to get into better mental and physical shape? What is it your pitcher wants to do better and what does she need to do better? Then chart your course by plotting out the time you have for your off-season workouts and what specific things you're going to spend that time doing to make sure you actually do improve. Most people don't improve on things because they stay too vague about them. You need to get very specific about the improvements you want to make, how much time you have to make them, and what you're going to do within that time frame to make sure you are improving. When you attack things that way it's much easier to achieve your goals.

3. Help Each Pitcher Make the Proper Adjustments: Great pitchers still throw bad pitches, they just don't throw a bunch of them in a row. Learning how to calmly make an adjustment on the next pitch is THE BEST skill a pitcher can have. That means we've got to include learning this skill in our practices. Helping pitchers understand what they do that makes pitches go too high (letting go too late) or too low (letting go too early), too left (hand going left at release), or too right (hand going right at release), and then making the right adjustment in the right amount is definitely something that can be learned, practiced and mastered. During the off-season, instead of the pitching coach immediately telling the pitcher what she needs to do better or fix on the next pitch, make the pitcher tell you. Involve the pitcher in her own workouts and progress. Some great training tools to use to help your pitchers learn to make the proper adjustments include:

- Zip Balls
- Spinner

4. Practice the Physical and the Mental: Following along with point #3, don't give your pitchers all the answers – ask them questions about what they feel they need to correct on the next pitch in order to improve it. This really helps them involve their minds as well as their bodies. Pitching Zombies don't ever make it to the big game so we don't want our pitchers getting better at pitching with their brains on vacation. Thoughtful, purposeful pitching will help a pitcher improve faster than anything else. This means the pitcher has to be mentally involved with the pitch before she makes it to help ensure her body does what it needs to do,

and then after she makes it in order to make any necessary adjustments. This is also when you can start helping those really negative pitchers that are extremely hard on themselves gain a little better mental approach. Always telling yourself what you did wrong (or always being told what you do wrong) is not a mindset that a successful pitcher needs. Start every comment to your pitcher or yourself with pointing out something you did right. Pitching is a very negative feedback skill. NOBODY knows how to help you fix a problem but EVERYBODY can point out the problem. Try being in that situation for an entire game – oh, and they draw a circle around you for good measure! Huge strides can be made during the off-season to help our pitchers really increase the strength of their mental game!

5. Increase Endurance: Gradually increase the length or the intensity of the workouts to help your pitchers get stronger and then stay stronger longer. Again, it isn't just physical improvements that need to be made but mental ones as well. Helping your pitcher's mental game stay strong when their body starts to fatigue is crucial if they're ever going to successfully finish a close game. A great way to help improve mental and physical strength is to sometimes hold the conditioning workouts right BEFORE their pitching workout. Alternate days where the pitcher conditions first and then pitches and pitches first and then conditions. Their conditioning doesn't have to be anything exotic. If you don't have access to facilities then simply having your pitchers compete against all the other pitchers (or even just themselves) in the following 2 drills – and then pitch – will really help them improve their mental and physical strength:

- **Pitching Sprints**
- **Toss Pitch**

6. Split It Up and Make It Fun: Mix things up and avoid boredom. On certain days split up the workouts into different parts and focus on different things during each part. For instance, the first portion can be slow work on feeling the finger pads at release. This could be from any distance, but the key is slow, thoughtful work. The middle portion could be speed work – working on the fastball and focusing on driving with the feet at the beginning and exploding with the hand at the release (or all elements involved with throwing fast). And the final segment could be spent on a particular pitch. Other days could be spent focusing entirely on a specific pitch that you identified as one that needs improving in the off-season. Other days could be spent combining that one pitch you're working on with all your other pitches. So let's say you're working on your riseball during the off-season. During your combo day workouts you'd get your riseball all warmed-up, and work on it just a bit, and then you could do a couple series of each of the following: riseball – curveball (repeat), riseball – screwball (repeat), riseball – dropball (repeat), riseball – change up (repeat).

Including a pitching game or competition somewhere in each practice not only makes it more fun, but also get your pitchers comfortable with competing. Check out the following sources for more Pitching Games: **Book – The Complete Book of Pitching and Manual – Practices & Workouts for Pitchers**

7. Monitor Soreness: Remember that part about rest and recover? Well here's where it comes into play. If your pitcher is sore, and can't shake it off during warm ups then have her throw at half-speed from half-the-distance that day. Don't let her throw full blast. Throwing slower is much more difficult from a body-feel point of view since it makes you control all of your body parts. But it's also VERY powerful as a way to help your pitcher improve that day without hurting her arm.

For more help on this topic check out the following resources:

- **Book: The Complete Book of Pitching**
- **eClinic: Improving Your Pitcher's Accuracy**
- **eClinic: Increasing Your Pitcher's Speed**
- **eClinic: Critical Counts: How to Stop the Walks**
- **Pitching eSkills**
- **Pitching eDrills**
- **Zip Balls**
- **Spinner**