

How To Choose A Pitching Coach

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I recently received an e-mail from a parent asking me to help him choose the right pitching coach for his son. People at my son's school have been asking me this question as well, so I decided to put down my thoughts in this article. The idea is for this to serve as a kind of buying guide for pitching coaches.

When reading this article, you should know that my perspective when working with kids has two key points.

First, I think that young pitchers (e.g. under 15 or 16) should learn how to actually pitch, and not just throw. That means that I place a high value on things like deception, movement, and changing speeds (the Greg Maddux model) and am not overly concerned about velocity. I want my guys to throw only as hard as they need to throw to be effective, and no harder.

Second, I am very concerned about injury prevention. As a result, I will not teach my guys the different tricks that I know that may increase their velocity but that will certainly increase the risk that they will injure themselves. Instead, and as I just said, I want my guys to throw only as hard as they need to throw to be effective, and no harder.

Now that I have made that clear, let me tell you how I evaluate both pitching coaches and facilities.

How experienced are they when it comes to kids of your son's age?

Too many people are overly impressed with a person's credentials (e.g. ex major leaguer) and don't pay enough attention to whether the guy is a good teacher or not. The truth is that many guys who were great athletes are horrible teachers because everything came naturally to them and they never had to think hard about the subject. It can also be much harder to work with young kids than major leaguers (and vice versa).

What is their background?

Do they know anything about physiology, kinesiology, or biomechanics? They should.

Have they looked a high speed film of pitchers?

This is the only way to really understand the pitching

motion.

Do they know what determines a pitcher's arm slot?

This can help to determine if they really understand the pitching motion. The right answer to this question is how much a pitcher tilts his shoulders. The wrong answer is taking the elbow above the level of the shoulders.

Do they shoot video of their students?

I believe that one of the reasons that the state of the art of pitching instruction is so primitive is that too many people rely on just their eyes. The reality is that the human eye is too slow to see what's going on in a pitcher's mechanics. Instead, you have to tape a guy and go through the video frame by frame.

As an aside, and as proof of this, I have reached the point where, when I am sent a video clip of a major league prospect, I don't even look at it at full speed. Instead, I go frame by frame through the clip 40 or 50 times before I give my opinion of a guy's mechanics. Looking at a clip at high speed isn't that informative and in some cases can be downright deceptive.

What pitchers do they suggest their guys emulate?

What posters do they have around their facility?

I think you can learn a lot about a guy's philosophy, and general knowledge, by considering who he suggests his students emulate. The way to do this is to ask any instructor who is favorite pitcher is and who he wants his guys to emulate.

Green Flags

These guys don't just throw, they actually know how to pitch. Their mechanics are also a reason why they have been injury free.

- Greg Maddux
- Tom Glavine
- Jeff Suppan

Yellow Flags

These are all great pitchers who had solid mechanics, but I'd be concerned that the teacher might be overly concerned with velocity.

- Roger Clemens
- Randy Johnson
- Sandy Koufax
- Nolan Ryan

Red Flags

This is probably an indication that the person doesn't

understand what proper pitching mechanics look like.

- Mark Prior
- Anthony Reyes
- Billy Wagner
- Kerry Wood
- Joel Zumaya

Do they advocate the Inverted W?

This is a gigantic red flag. I would never recommend that a pitcher be taught to make the Inverted W (ala Mark Prior or Billy Wagner).

How much emphasis do they place on radar guns?

I'm not a big fan of the use of radar guns when it comes to pitchers who are younger than 15 or 16. However, I could see how, if used sparingly, they could help you judge a kid's improvement. However, if a guy is completely fixated on radar guns, then I would be concerned that he is overly concerned with velocity for its own sake (rather than as a means to an end).