

Making a pitch to save Little League



IF YOU disdain victory-obsessed Little League coaches and parents who value winning above all else, there's

hope this spring, Little League Baseball has instituted a pitch count regulation that will ensure the integrity of the sport, and hopefully chase away the Morris Buttermakers of the world.

Buttermaker, you may recall, was the unattractive coach in the 1976 film "Bad News Bears." An alcoholic ex-professional baseball player, Buttermaker recruited a hard-throwing ex-girlfriend's 11-year old daughter to pitch for his team. As a result, the cellar-dwelling Bears almost capture the league championship.

Although the film was intended to be a parody of the scathing competition that victory-obsessed adults bring to youth baseball, I have observed, first-hand, some of the destructive behaviors. Among the most serious problems has been favoring one or two hard-throwing youngsters by pitching them game after game.

While such a strategy tends to result in a winning record, it does a disservice to the pitcher and his teammates.

Dr. James Andrews of the American Sports Medicine Institute found that the "alarming increase in serious injuries to adolescent pitchers" beginning in the mid-1990s was due to "increased amounts of pitching at a younger age." In fact, a recent study comparing young surgery patients with healthy adolescent pitchers found that youngsters who often pitched past the point of fatigue were 36 times more likely to end up in surgery.

COMMENTARY

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The point is clear: Little League coaches who emphasize "throwing hard" instead of the quality of mechanics, speed variation and control are doing a grave disservice to their pitchers.

"I've said all along, a pitcher's arm has a certain number of throws in it before it gives out," insists Randy Morris, manager of the 2006 Little League Baseball World Championship team from Columbus, Ga. "Little League is for fun, no matter how you look at it. It's not about throwing a player's arm away to win a game."

Other risk factors include participation in showcases and year-round baseball without sufficient rest. A young player's arm needs time to recover from the rigors of a baseball season — at least four months away from throwing.

But physical injury is only part of the problem.

Little League Baseball has always emphasized teamwork and player development; qualities that are ignored by favoring one or two hard-throwing pitchers.

Naturally, the rate of physical development for each youngster is different. The older the player, the stronger he tends to be and, hence, the harder he can throw. But every player, regardless of his physical development, should have the opportunity to learn the mechanics of pitching and, if he desires, be given the opportunity to pitch in a game.

By denying all but the "hardest throwers" the opportunity to pitch, the Little League coach

is not only failing in his responsibility to develop all his players, but doing a disservice to the entire team.

Fortunately, Little League Baseball will enact the new pitch count regulation this season in order to protect the arms of young hurlers and to insuring that more players receive the opportunity to pitch in a game.

According to the new rule, the Little League manager must remove the pitcher when he reaches the limit for his age group. The limit for 11- and 12-year-olds is 85 pitches per day, and for age 10 and under, 75 pitches.

In addition, Little League pitchers are required to observe the following rest requirements: If a player throws 61 or more pitches in a day, three calendar days of rest must be observed; 41-60 pitches, two days rest; 21-40 pitches, one day; 1-20 pitches, no day of rest.

Every league must designate the scorekeeper or another game authority as the official pitch count recorder. That person is responsible for providing the current pitch count for any pitcher when requested by either team's manager or an umpire. Managers will also be responsible for knowing when his pitcher must be removed so ignorance cannot be used as an excuse.

Violation of these rules will result in protest of the game.

Many of us who coach Little League Baseball have been waiting for a pitch-count rule for a long time. Now, with this injury-prevention step, we finally have it.

Play ball!

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