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Home of the **KIDS ON DECK** program, using baseball as a medium to teach boys and girls social justice and cultural awareness, breaking down the perceived barriers of race, religion, gender, border and language.

*A motion to ban players aged 13-and-under from throwing the curveball will be debated at the Ontario Baseball Association's Annual Convention on Saturday in Toronto.*

## **Ban the breaking ball for youngsters** *Not shaving yet? No deuce for you!*

by Tom Valcke  
(grass roots baseball coach in St. Marys, Ontario)

Ultimately, despite a multitude of wisecrack answers, there is only one reason a chicken crosses the road, and that is to get to the other side.

Ultimately, there is only one reason that coaches allow kids to throw curveballs, and that is to win at any cost, including the harm done the youngster's arm and his future in baseball.

Perhaps a small percentage of youth baseball coaches still are not aware that the growth plate and the inner workings of the non-shaving boy's arm are not ready to absorb the twisting, snapping or torque involved with the delivery of a breaking ball, especially the improperly thrown curveball or slider. The coaches who are aware of the short and long-term damage that coincides with the "Yellow Hammer" are simply more concerned with building their coaching resumes. Either way, it is time that everyone gets educated.

So, *can* a 12-year-old pitcher throw a curveball?

Yes.

Will it be effective enough to fool 12-year-old hitters?

Uh huh.

Do 12-year-olds like throwing the deuce?

Oh yeah.

Therefore, should 12-year-olds be allowed to snap off benders?

**ABSOLUTELY NOT!**

*Says who?*

- **Fergie Jenkins** and **Eric Gagné**, the only two Canadians to ever win the Cy Young Award.
- **Dave Stieb** and **Steve Rogers**, the all-time winningest pitchers on the Blue Jays and Expos.
- **Paul Quantrill**, Canada's all-time leader in Major League games pitched.
- **Dr. Ron Taylor**, former Major League star and current Team Physician with the Toronto Blue Jays.
- Arm care experts **Dr. James Andrews** and **Dr. Frank Jobe**, who perform the majority of surgeries on Major League pitchers.
- **André Lachance**, the Technical Director of Baseball Canada.
- **Kevin Briand**, the Director of Canadian Scouting for the Toronto Blue Jays.
- **Walt Burrows**, the Supervisor of Canadian Scouting for the Major League Baseball Scouting Bureau
- **West Raleigh Baseball, North Carolina**, who, in partnership with **USA Baseball's Medical Advisory Committee**, has taken the leadership role in protecting the health of their youth players by making significant changes in their pitching rules ... and still managing to win!
- The **Cuban Baseball Federation**, who bans the curveball until players are 14-years-old.

What is wrong with teaching young pitchers the three most important things about pitching, which, like real estate, are location, location and location? I have challenged every youngster who has asked me to teach them the curveball to throw me four consecutive strikes to the four corners of the strike zone, and to this day, not one has done it.

If a youngster does have an idea of location, and you feel he is ready to take on something new and challenging, then introduce the palm ball change up. It is a very effective pitch and the arm action, if taught correctly, is identical to that of the fastball, which inherently makes it effective as well as non-damaging to the arm. The extra friction on the surface of the baseball with all five fingers slows its speed down ten to twenty percent, which is just enough to mess up the hitter's timing.

A current example how changing speeds of pitches can equate to winning would be Tommy Glavine's masterful performance in Game 1 of the NLCS, where he pitched seven shutout innings in beating the eventual World Series champion St. Louis Cardinals. Glavine threw a total of four curveballs that night.

Perhaps Don Drysdale said it best: "The most important pitch for a kid to throw is a strike."

Dr. Frank Jobe performed the original elbow ligament transplant surgery on September 25, 1974 on 31-year-old Tommy John, who went on to pitch 14 more seasons, won 20 games or more in three of the first five seasons following the surgery, and won a total of 288 games. UCL – ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction is now commonly referred to by doctors and players as "Tommy John" surgery.

Jobe and his associates have since done Tommy John surgery on 75 other major leaguers, most recently including Minnesota Twins rookie sensation Francisco Liriano, in addition to nearly 2,000 others.

"Our patients are getting younger and younger, and fun, not winning, should drive youth baseball," says Jobe from his office in Los Angeles.

"It is not good for 13-year-olds to repeatedly throw the curveball. Their cartilage is very soft and fragile and the growth centre in the elbow is quite susceptible to damage."

Dr. James Andrews performs more Tommy John surgeries each and every year, including approximately 200 this past year. Included in his patients are Kerry Wood and Pat Hentgen, but only 20% of his patients are

major leaguers. There is no question in his mind that serious arm injuries are increasing in players under the age of 18, and is particularly concerned with those players 11 and 15 years of age.

“You should not allow your son to throw curveballs until they have shaved, as this enables their bones, muscles, particularly the cartilage and tendons time to develop enough to absorb the torque that coincides with delivering the pitch,” said Andrews from his Orthopaedic Centre in Alabama.

“To those who say the stress is less if the curve ball is taught and thrown correctly, I would tend to agree except for two things: Number one, throwing a curveball is a highly technical pitch and requires a lot of neuromuscular control. Kids in the age group before they close their growth plates in general don’t have enough neuromuscular control to really throw it properly. If they throw it improperly, obviously the stresses go way up and that is where the major problems occur; Number two, the youth coaches usually don’t have enough experience to really teach them how to throw it properly.”

“Of course, the next problem is that coaches will have them throw an excessive number of curveballs because it gives them a competitive edge. Pitchers in the Little League World Series are throwing somewhere around 60-70% curveballs.”

There is no record of how many times Tommy John surgery has been performed, but the newspaper database Factiva has 14,611 mentions of it and Google.com brings up over one million links to “Tommy John surgery.”

Dr. Ron Taylor is the current team physician for the hometown Toronto Blue Jays and was inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in 1985 for his eleven-year career ERA under four coupled with his two World Series rings where he pitched a total of seven innings, never allowing a run or even a hit.

“I have an extraordinary number of teens coming into our sports medicine clinic whose elbow joints, particularly the medial epicondyle of the humerus, need treatment due to throwing the curveball at young ages,” said Taylor from his office at Mount Sinai Hospital.

“I can almost guarantee that if a 12-year-old pitcher is throwing Uncle Charlie, that he won’t be a pitcher when he’s 18. So is the risk worth the reward?”

“I wish that they would wait until they are 17 or 18 years of age before throwing the hook. Youth pitchers need to focus on a smooth follow through and a natural deceleration of the arm.”

Fergie Jenkins, undisputedly the greatest Canadian pitcher in history, having chalked up 284 wins in the major leagues, six consecutive 20-win seasons, more than 3,000 strikeouts and a Cy Young Award, only started pitching at 16 years of age.

“I never had to face the decision of whether or not to throw the yakker when I was a kid,” said Jenkins when recently representing the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in the House of Commons.

“I don’t care how physically big they are, their arms are not developed yet. I know kids see the curveball on TV and want to throw it, but it is disgraceful that any coach would allow it to be thrown by early teens.”

“Otherwise, the kid is going to develop arm problems that will never go away.”

Eric Gagné, the only other Canadian ever to win a Cy Young Award, set the consecutive saves record (84) with the Los Angeles Dodgers that may never get broken.

“Coaches of young pitchers should preach arm care, the importance of location, and possibly the change-up pitch,” said Gagné from his Montreal home.

“Anyway, kids are playing to have fun and be with their friends on a team. I’m okay with trying to win, but a fastball you can spot and a deceptive change-up are enough of an arsenal to win with, no matter what level of baseball.”

Dave Stieb and Steve Rogers, the all-time winningest pitchers for the Toronto Blue Jays and Montreal Expos, respectively, were inducted together into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in 1985.

“Long toss is the best thing any player could do on a daily basis, especially pitchers,” said Stieb from his home in Reno, Nevada.

“Young pitchers should concentrate on throwing a fastball to all four corners and changing speeds. A cutter and then a slider would be the next pitches to introduce, but only in their mid-teens.”

Rogers’ father did not allow him to throw a curveball until the summer after his junior year of high school.

“I was 16 at the time, and pitched for the eventual American Legion State Champions of Missouri. The competition was very intense. I pitched about ten games that summer and I threw a complete nine-inning game in the quarter final game of the state tournament and I had my best curveball of the summer that day.”

“The only thing is that I couldn’t straighten out my right elbow for a week after that game due to acute tendonitis. I wasn’t consistently throwing the curveball with correct mechanics and it severely stressed my elbow.”

“I lived it – youngsters never learn the correct way of throwing the curve consistently, and therefore, regardless of their age, they hurt their arms.”

“My recommendation would be that when the youngster reaches the level of baseball where the mound distance is 60’6”, then the proper way of throwing a curve ball can be taught but it should be at less than full speed.”

Paul Quantrill, who has pitched in more games (841) than any Canadian in history, and stands 28th on the all-time list of major leaguers, had the misfortune of watching an PeeWee game at the OBA provincial championship in September, where he watched a 13-year-old with a tremendous arm throw a curveball almost every other pitch.

“What made it worse was the fact that all the pitchers were called from the bench, so the coach managed to not only put a beating on the kid’s arm, but he also ensured that he didn’t actually use his own head to *pitch* his way through a game,” added Quantrill from his home in Port Hope, Ontario.

“The spinners were effective, but I wish the coach was more concerned with the kid’s development than winning a ball game. Unfortunately, most coaches live in the ‘now,’ and if a spinner can help him win – whoops, I think I meant help the kids win – then the long-term implications become irrelevant.”

“My opinion is that young men should not throw breaking balls until they are at least 16 years old. I have no problem with incorporating the change-up, as this teaches the youngster how effective changing speeds can be in getting hitters out.”

“The problem with breaking balls is that, even if thrown correctly, they still put a lot of stress on the arm. That said, to this date I have yet to see any kid Bantam or below that throws a breaking ball correctly with any consistency.”

“All kids, including my own, want to throw a curve or slider to their dad or buddy now and then. There is not stopping that. But to have a breaking ball in your pitching repertoire – I don’t think so.”

André Lachance, Technical Director of Baseball Canada, agrees with the panel of experts, but fears that the motion may not pass because some people will be concerned about training an umpire how to detect the curveball, especially young umpires.

“But I have a philosophy about that,” he added from his office in Ottawa.

“We cannot stop thinking about the wellness of our youth because of some problems that the implementation of new rules may create. The same thing applies to limiting pitch counts instead of innings pitched. We first have to identify what is right, and then simply find solutions to the legislation issues.”

Little League USA has recently changed from limiting pitch counts versus innings pitched. It means now that grassroots coaches are going to have to carry a pitcher’s log book and trade it with the opposing coach when the line-ups are exchanged pre-game. Then, each team will be required to have a designate to count the number of pitchers thrown by the opponent’s pitchers.

Will this new legislation be easy, and free of errors and distrust and arguments? No. Is it the right thing to do for youngsters? Absolutely.

West Raleigh Baseball, who studied the research and recommendations of the USA Medical & Safety Advisory Committee, found that their coaches bought into the ruling far more than they anticipated, and umpires rarely have to call the illegal pitch.

The Committee’s findings were that pitchers who throw curveballs at an early age – under 13 years old – experience significantly more injuries, shoulder and elbow pain than pitchers who do not.

West Raleigh defines new illegal pitch as “Any breaking ball in which the pitcher deliberately breaks his or her wrist or snaps the elbow in order to induce a forward or side-angled spin on the ball.”

As evidence that young teams can win without the curveball, the 12-year-old West Raleigh All-Star Team did not throw a single curveball during the Southeast Regional last year, despite the fact that all of their opponents did, and they advanced to the Cal Ripken World Series in Aberdeen, Maryland.

From a recent article in USA Today written by Johnnie Whitehead and Dick Patrick, it was noted that “two pitchers for the Vista, California team that reached the Little League World Series US Championship game suffered fractures in their pitching arms. Neither Nathan Lewis nor Royce Copeland, then 12 years old, had experienced any symptoms until the latter stages of regional qualifying tournaments, said their fathers.”

“Lewis had pitched six innings in the West Region final but felt a pop in his left arm during the fourth inning. Two mornings later, while showering before the team’s flight to Williamsport, he tossed a towel over a railing and felt excruciating pain. He had to comb his hair right-handed.”

“‘If I had to do it over again, my kid wouldn’t be a pitcher,’ said Lewis’ father Jim.”

“Copeland’s arm deteriorated gradually, as did his velocity. His father Don said that it happened over time, that was no single moment when the injury occurred. The youngster complained that the arm wasn’t 100% and that it just didn’t feel right.”

Kevin Briand, the Canadian Director of Scouting for the Toronto Blue Jays, can relate to the misfortunes of the Little Leaguers.

“Like all kids, I was fascinated by the curveball, and nobody discouraged me from throwing it. But not long after, my fastball went from 84 (mph) to 64.”

Walt Burrows, the Canadian Supervisor of the Major League Baseball Scouting Bureau, says the curveball can and should be taught to players only when they reach shaving age.

“I’m definitely opposed to seeing youngsters throw curveballs. Pitchers get better by becoming physically more mature and by fine-tuning their mechanics, nothing else. The curveball only becomes relevant when they get to be 16 or 17.”

Perhaps Billy Atkinson, who toiled for Expos from 1976-79, sums it up best.

“The curveball was my bread and butter,” said Atkinson from his home in Chatham, Ontario.

“But the curveball isn’t a natural motion for the arm to be going through. It can cause a lot of strain and tension on the shoulder and elbow, so until these areas are developed, players under 15 should avoid it.”

“I would suggest to young ballplayers that they wait until their arms are strong and developed, and then find someone who knows how to properly throw a curveball, and learn from them. You will appreciate this advice later in life.”

“You only get one pitching arm – respect it and take care of it!”