

# Beginning Balance: The First Critical Point of the Delivery

by John Pinkman

**I**n our pitching school in Virginia, we have worked with many MSBL pitchers—some over 65—either preparing for the MSBL World Series or trying to improve their regular-season performance. Each one comes in with doubts as to what he can learn. This insecurity is understandable, but unwarranted. It is not hard to learn or re-learn correct mechanics if you commit enough time to understanding the entire process from the ground up. Unlike younger pitchers who can quickly learn physical skills, older adults grasp theory quickly, but it takes them longer for the body to get the message.

When adults come to our school trying to magically correct a seemingly obvious, specific problem, it rarely works. On the other hand, we have seen senior players who initially thought they couldn't improve experience great satisfaction and personal triumph.

## The Value of an Up-To-Date Teaching Professional

To improve your pitching performance, you need to learn cause and effect. Trying to fix a poorly understood problem without understanding the cause doesn't work. You need patience, solid information and video analysis to understand the flaws in your delivery and the problems they cause.

Unless you are willing to invest the time needed to work with a teaching professional or coach who has kept up with the advances in the understanding of the biomechanics of pitching, you may be working with ideas based on opinion rather than knowledge, using guess-work to find mythical "quick fixes." Moreover, without freeze-frame photography and slow-motion video, an observer is likely to see only the symptoms of

a mechanical flaw, not the flaw itself. Focusing on symptoms only exacerbates the problem. When misinformed coaches guess at solutions based on perception or personal experience, pitchers become frustrated. With sophisticated, inexpensive video systems so readily available, a knowledgeable coach will isolate the problem before he attempts to provide a solution.

## The Six Components of Pitching Mechanics

Let's start with a goal. It is not greater velocity; it's accuracy. After training thousands of pitchers, I've learned this simple truth: under the pressure of competition, a pitcher will never throw as fast as he really can throw if he doesn't know where it will end up.

In the next few articles we are going to examine the basic principles taught by the best pitching instructors in the country. We will take apart the entire delivery and study the six critical components of pitching mechanics, piece by piece: **Beginning Balance, Dynamic Balance, Opposite and Equal Arms, Hip and Shoulder Separation, Strong Glove Side, and Follow-through.**

There is a reason for the way we organize the study of pitching mechanics. You would never try to clean up the Mississippi River by starting in New Orleans. But most "quick fix" artists do exactly that. They go right to your arm and try to fix the throw or release.

A pitcher struggles with command if his body is out of control. In order to pitch with command you must develop the consistency of a repeatable throwing motion. To stay off the disabled list, that motion must be safe for

The Pitching Stance: The correct Beginning Balance Position [Figure 1] is much the same as a correct batting stance [Figure 2]. Figure 3 shows the WRONG pitching stance: a stiff-legged and/or stiff-backed starting position doesn't work for many reasons.



Figure 1



Figure 2

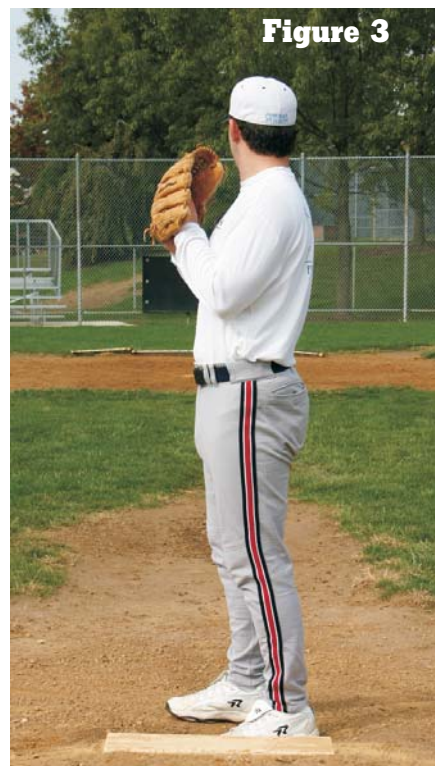


Figure 3

your arm. You achieve a safe, repeatable throwing motion by building a solid foundation. Your legs and torso are the foundation that supports the repetitive arm motion.

It's about kinetic energy. Imagine holding a hose with running water. Pinch any section, interrupt the flow at the faucet, in the middle, or just before the nozzle and the same result will occur—less water coming out the end. To analyze the total throwing motion, you have to search all the way “upriver,” where the flow of energy begins. This is where most pitchers begin to fall apart, to fall off balance.

If you are off-balance at the beginning of your delivery, you will struggle to recover balance from there onward with every pitch you throw. Your arm hurts after every game and you don't understand why your performance was below expectation.

### The Pitching Stance

In my last article (HardBall, Fall 2004) I stressed that it makes no difference to your velocity if you throw from the windup or the stretch. Because the windup is a much more complex movement, using it may make you more susceptible to bio-mechanical problems. That is why we teach young pitchers to throw only from the stretch. With a simpler startup motion, they throw harder, with more confidence and better location.

So begin in the stretch position. The **Beginning Balance Position** is much the same as a correct batting stance. See Figures 1

**Leg Lift:** DO raise your knee straight up with your foot directly beneath it (Figure 4).



**Figure 4**

and 2. In fact, we regularly put a student on the mound with a bat and tell them to pitch like they hit. Your legs are bent, nose over toes, hands in front of and slightly away from your chest, balanced and relaxed.

### Bent Legs and Back

Many pitchers start with a stiff back and straight legs [Figure 3]. You would never try to hit that way: no power or balance. If you stand stiff-legged, you will have to bend your legs anyway before you glide down the mound. You can't throw a ball any other way.

Shifting from a stiff-legged to a bent-leg stance increases your delivery time to the plate with men on base, and it's a sure sign to the base runner that you are going home. More important mechanically, as the game wears on, the distance you drop or bend may vary with fatigue. Variation in the beginning of your delivery leads to loss of command.

### Stagger Your Feet

Arrange your feet directly under your shoulders with your lift-leg foot slightly staggered in front of the foot on the rubber. This will give you remarkable new stability and make it easy to lift the leg. Too wide a stance will cause you to overshift your weight to your back foot as you lift the front foot off the ground, and throw you off balance for the rest of the delivery!

### Leg Lift

After obtaining what we call “a proper pitching stance,” raise your knee straight up with your foot directly beneath it [Figure #4].

Off balance positions to avoid. **DON'T** kick up violently as if you were punting a football (Figure 5) . Figure 6 shows what we call the “sleeping flamingo.” **DON'T** contract your lower leg and foot to place it under your butt, like a sleeping flamingo. Both of these motions will disturb your balance.



**Figure 5**



**Figure 6**

The height can vary but the angle of intersection between your left leg and your body should be no less than 90 degrees.

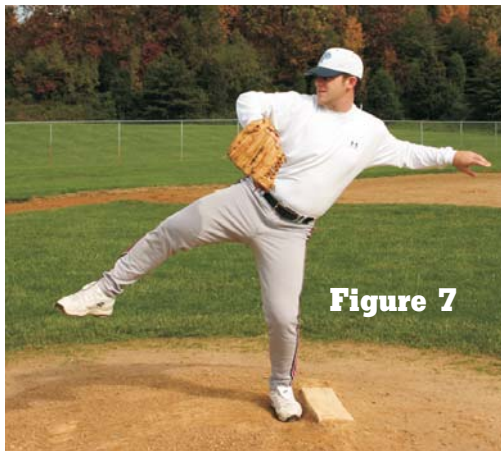
Don't kick up violently as if you were punting a football [Figure #5]. Don't contract your lower leg and foot to place it under your butt, like a sleeping flamingo [Figure #6]. Both of those motions will disturb your balance, and, as we now know, once you lose your balance, bad things happen.

### Stabilize your Core

As you lift your leg, be careful not to lean your head back to toward second base [See Figure #7]. This touches upon a controversial area. “Old school” terminology (keep your weight back; push off the rubber; drop and drive) has given generations of pitchers all sorts of incorrect ideas about achieving velocity.

According to the widely accepted bio-mechanical research of the American Sports Medicine Institute, velocity is achieved by the proper sequencing of energy, starting at your toes and ending after the ball leaves your hand. Arm speed creates velocity and body mechanics sustain and control it.

Timing, which we'll explore further in later articles, is vital to a pitcher's control. Timing is the proper sequencing of body parts involved in the throwing motion. Leaning back toward second creates arm problems due to a disruption of timing. The upper body, shoulder and arm fall behind. Leaning back toward second can make you feel like your arm is dragging through the throw.



**Figure 7**

**ABOVE:** Be careful not to lean your head back toward second base, as illustrated in Figure 7.  
**RIGHT:** "Rocking," as illustrated in Figure 8, throws off your direct focus on the catcher's glove.



**Figure 8**

### Keep a Level Head

Pulling your head away from the direct line between your center and the catcher's glove causes control problems and is a major cause of sore arms. Furthermore, where the head goes, the rest of the body follows, and your pitch location will suffer dramatically. Pulling your head usually will make the ball go up and in to a right-handed batter. Trying to compensate for that will produce the opposite; balls low and outside. Pitchers with this problem have great difficulty throwing low and in or up and away.

Rocking is easy to fix if you know that you are doing it. Video is a great training tool; use it often. Practice in a full length mirror. Keep your arms and upper torso very still and just lift the leg slowly until you can isolate that motion. Don't even attempt to throw the ball until you have re-programmed or trained your proprioception.

Leaning back can cause the hand to stay underneath the ball at release, rather than on top of and in back of the ball. This causes the pitcher to continually miss the strike zone high or low.

### Stay Vertical

Leaning toward first base (or third base for left-handers) is a frequent problem (see Figure #8). Pitching coaches call this "rocking." Most pitchers don't realize they are doing it. It happens when a pitcher raises his leg and moves his back at the same time as if the leg and back were connected as one body part. It is a result of poor flexibility and *proprioception* (the brain's ability to know what body parts are moving and in what specific direction.)

Rocking is a common flaw. Arching your back in this way begins a logical sequence of events down the mound, none of which is good. In addition to your arching back, your head tilts away toward your glove side. Your eyes will not be horizontal to the plate and they will lose direct focus on the catcher's glove (see Figure #8). This can lead to depth perception problems. Poor depth perception hampers the brain's ability to calculate the exact distance to the catcher's glove.

### Beginning Balance is Critical!

As you can see, it is absolutely essential to establish and maintain balance at the very beginning of the delivery! Failure to do so leads to a boatload of confusing problems downstream. On the other hand, if you start at the beginning, identify the mechanical flaws that are throwing you off-balance, you take giant strides toward improving your all-round performance on the mound.

**Balance issues never correct themselves!** As they get worse, they can lead to an assortment of injuries for recreational players. Balance problems also intensify as you progress down the mound into your pitch delivery. Our next article will discuss what poor positions you can find yourself in when you land.

Baseball is the only game where the defense has the ball. The pitcher controls a game in which a talented opponent fails 70 percent of the time—but only if you throw the ball exactly where you want it to go!

### About Our Contributor

A regular contributor to Collegiate Baseball News, **John Pinkman** is a nationally recognized leader in the field of pitching instruction. His clear language and common-sense approach to pitching instruction have earned him the admiration of some of the best minds in baseball.

According to **Tom House**, "It's obvious that John has taught his students the pitching skills that we require in professional baseball. John is a dedicated student of the game as well as an excellent teacher."

John's instructional facility is located in the Washington, DC area. Designed for serious players, Battery Park™ is a bright, safe indoor environment that meets the demands of elite teams, professional instructors, or father-and-son workouts. The facility is available to rent seven days a week, from early morning to late at night.

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### Websites that Work

**League:** Terre Haute MSBL **President:** Darren Brucken  
**Webmaster:** John Wiggins **Statistician:** Jason DeSanto  
**Program(s) Used:** Website created in asp with an MS Access database on back end. Coded using Notepad, maintained using Dreamweaver. Managers log in and have administrative options such as adding players, schedules, box scores, and more.  
**URL:** [www.thmsbl.com](http://www.thmsbl.com)

