

PITCHING GRIPS 101: Fastball, Change Up & Curve Ball

Everyone wants to throw 10 different pitches to get batters out. It is the nature of a young player to want to learn and mess around with Knuckleballs, Curve Balls, Sliders, Cutters, Sinkers, and Slurves.

It always has been and it always will be. As coaches, we do not have a lot of control over what happens away from practice but we can certainly show kids the right way to grip and throw certain pitches.

- Try to install in them that the best way to get a batter out is with Movement, Change of Speed and Location.

To be successful at any level, you really only need mastery of 3 pitches.

- The key is that we are going to keep our Fastball Mechanics on all of these pitches but change the position of our wrist and forearm angles.
- In almost all cases, we want to keep the same arm speed as well - the grip and position of the wrist and forearm will give us the change in speeds.

4 Seam Fastball:

This pitch is often called the "Straight Pitch" because you tend to have less movement when thrown correctly.

When you throw this pitch, you will have 4 seams rotating.

Place your Index and Middle fingers across the seams on the horseshoe of the ball.

Thumb should be underneath the ball and positioned between your two fingers on top of ball. This is often difficult for younger players or players with small fingers. We often see side spin when the thumb is up on the side of the ball.

Pinky should not be in contact with the ball.

Ball should be held out toward the fingertips as much as possible as opposed to being back toward the palm.

During the Pitching deliver, when the hands separate out of the glove, the thumbs go down and then lift to an equal and opposite throwing position with the ball facing away from the pitcher (peace sign to SS or Second Base).



2 Seam Fastball:

This pitch is often called the "Movement Pitch" because it tends to "tail" to the right for RH pitchers or to the left for LH pitchers.

When you throw this pitch, you will have 2 seams rotating.

Place your index and middle finger parallel to the 2 seams located between the horseshoes, the logo is often in this area as well.

The fingers should be on the seams or inside the seams and close together, try to stay away from getting the fingers outside the seams as this is becoming more of a split finger change up grip.

You can also place the fingers across these two seams instead of parallel to - this is a matter of feel for the individual (it did not feel good to me, so I did not ever do it this way).

- With fastballs: Frequently change the grip from 4 seam to 2 seam during a game or an at bat. I liked throwing a 4 seam inside to a LH batter and then throwing a 2 seam away with some movement. Remember when pitching that Movement, Change of Speed and Location are our friend.
- Players with smaller hands may also like the feel of a 2 seam fastball better than the 4 seam (it tends to feel smaller in your hand). Make sure you introduce them to both and encourage them to throw both in practice to gain comfort.



Cut Fastball:

This pitch is often called the "Cutter" because it will cut to the left for a RH and to the right for a LH.

Start by taking your normal 4 seam Fastball grip and while keeping your thumb in the normal position under the ball, move your index and middle fingers together and move your index and middle finger over to the right for a RH pitcher or to the left for a LH pitcher.

You throw this pitch just like any other fastball, nothing changes.

- **CAUTION:** I have had pitchers try this pitch and when done correctly you can get the desired effect. However, I also see players try to twist their wrist with this pitch to get more movement - this is extremely bad and dangerous with any pitch.
- There should not be any twisting motion side to side with any pitch as this is one of the biggest risks with pitchers young and old.
- I have also seen pitchers drop their arm angle down on this pitch, avoid this as well. It is thrown exactly like a FASTBALL.
- If the pitcher cannot do this, he is not ready to learn how to or throw this pitch.



Split Finger Fastball:

This pitch can act as a change-up and when thrown correctly will tend to drop downward.

Start by taking your 2 seam grip (parallel to seams) and then move your index and middle finger outside the seams. The farther you move your fingers outside (or wider) the seams, the slower the velocity on the pitch.

- The difficult part is that you need to have your thumb underneath the ball and centered between your index and middle finger.

CAUTION: I have had success with a 12 year old with this pitch but the thumb underneath is really important. If the pitcher cannot get the thumb under far enough so it splits the index and middle finger (meaning the thumb will be up the side), this can lead to wrist turning and we do not want this twisting motion - dangerous to the arm.

- Most kids will not have hands big enough for this pitch until they are 11-12 or a teen.

This pitch is thrown with a FASTBALL MOTION.



Change Up (the Claw):

Start by putting your Middle Finger on the lace in the middle of the horseshoe, your Thumb will be underneath and directly below your middle finger (we have split the ball in half with these two fingers).

Your index and ring finger will then lay equal distance apart from the middle finger. You can experiment with the width but it will be a comfort thing for the most part. Probably closer together to start.

The Pinky Finger will be on the bottom seam underneath the ring finger. As fingers get longer, you can try to move the pinky next to the thumb.

- Throw this pitch just like a fastball but tell the pitcher you want him to think smooth delivery to make it a slower change of speed pitch.
- There is not a lot of movement on this pitch, it is a change of speed pitch. Perfect Change Up to start with young pitchers.



Change Up (Circle Change):

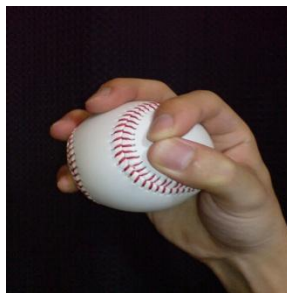
Start by taking a 4 seam grip on the ball, move your Middle Finger to the center of the ball.

Your Index Finger will then make a circle (an "OK" sign) with your Thumb. Try to have the tip of your Index finger meet the Thumb at the first knuckle.

This will allow your Thumb to get under the ball a little more and provide more control. If the circle is completely on the side of the ball with the thumb, it is going to feel like the pitcher has no control over the pitch - especially with small fingers.

Your Ring Finger and Pinky will lay comfortably and naturally on the ball with the Pinky to the side and the Ring finger more on top of the ball.

- The Pitcher wants to feel like the ball is rolling off the Middle and Ring finger.
- I like to teach my kids to have a very light grip on the ball with the Middle and Ring fingers, even having the tips of these fingers off the ball. Adjust the pressure as needed.
- The wrist should be turned outward slightly when throwing this pitch. For some pitchers, it may help to have them feel as if they are leading to the plate with the "circle" or "ok" toward home plate.
- It is very important that the pitcher gets good extension out over their front foot with this pitch. The ball will really want to move/slide inside (RH pitcher, RH batter), I have had success asking the pitcher to try and throw the pitch at the outside corner - helps with extension as well.
- This pitch takes a lot of practice but will have more down and in movement than the Claw Change Up. Be patient with your Pitcher as they figure this pitch out.
- If Pitchers are having trouble connecting the index and thumb, feel free to have the pitcher make more of a "C" with the index and thumb. This allows the thumb to get under the ball a little better with smaller hands and as long as the ball is rolling off the middle and ring fingers, this is perfectly fine.



Curve Ball:

How old should a kid be before he starts throwing a curve ball?

That is the age old question and one with many different answers. I have discovered that kids are going to throw it away from practice and then announce that they want to show me their curve ball - this usually happens when kids are 10-11.

I personally do not like to teach the curve ball until a kid is 11 years old. However, the curve ball that most kids come to me with puts chills down my back how bad it is and how dangerous it is to their arms. It usually has a lot of wrist twisting side to side and makes my arm hurt to watch it.

- I tell all my players that if their parents come to me and tell me that it is ok for me to teach them a proper curve ball, I will teach it to them. I would rather they learn correctly than learn terrible form on their own.
- I will not teach the Curve Ball to a kid unless they have good Fastball Mechanics.

Start by taking a 2 seam fastball grip (parallel to seams) and then roll the ball back until your middle finger is up against the right side lace of the horseshoe (RH pitcher).

Your middle finger will be the pressure point of the grip and your index finger is just along for the ride, many teach initially to raise the index finger off the ball to learn this aspect of the grip.

- Your thumb will be underneath and you want to envision splitting the ball in half with your Middle finger and thumb. This equates to the thumb being underneath on the seam opposite that of your Middle finger.
- Try not to have the ball sitting way back by your palm, a pitcher can normally get more spin on a curve ball if there is a gap between the back of the ball and the palm of the hand.
- A pitcher will want to keep his same arm speed (as a fastball) for a normal curve ball and then experiment with some slower variations to keep batters off balance.

How to Throw it Correctly:

The best way is to picture this is to take a baseball and hold it with your curve ball grip. Move your arm into a "Fastball throwing position" behind you, you will see your hand and the ball facing toward SS or Second Base.

- Now, from this same position, rotate the ball and your forearm so that the ball is now facing you. This is the position you want your hand, wrist and forearm in as you rotate around to deliver the pitch.
- For players just learning the Curve Ball, a good way to teach it is to have them pull the ball out of their gloves and into the throwing position with the ball facing the pitcher (this is opposite of a Fastball). This is a good way to teach initially and the player at a Little League level can, for the most part, get away with telegraphing a pitch this way.
- Be relaxed as you maintain this arm position as you come around to release, extend and follow through down to the opposite side of your body.
- There is no wrist snap, wrist twist or wrist coming around the side of the ball with the curve ball - this is a common misconception and dangerous practice. This develops inconsistent breaking balls and sore arms.
- As you rotate around to pitch release you are going to keep your same Fastball arm slot (side arm, 3/4, or over the top), this is true with all these pitches, the wrist and forearm angle will dictate the rotation on the ball - Do not change your arm angles for change ups and curve balls.
- We want to make sure that the pitcher is relaxed when throwing the curve ball, we do not want stiff arm at release and follow through.

- Often you will see a kid who keeps the proper angles for the curve ball but then stiffens at release and cuts short the follow through with a bent arm - keeping the same curve ball arm angle to follow through.
- Instead, you want the pitcher relaxed and as they come around to release, the arm will straighten out normally with extension and then down and across like a karate chop.

Eventually, better hitters will focus on the pitcher pulling the ball out of his glove and setting up the curve ball with the ball facing the pitcher and batter, they will be able to see it coming - it is then time to change how you throw it.

- ❖ Hopefully, the position of the wrist and forearm will be learned from this early learning and the pitcher can then take the ball out of his glove with a curve ball grip but get into a throwing position that looks like a fastball (ball facing away). Then as he rotates toward release he will adjust the angle of his forearm and wrist before release - into a curve ball position.
- ❖ This is better for concealing the pitch and will be needed as they get older, it is also a little harder to find that consistent wrist and forearm position. It is also easier to get on the side of the ball, wrap the ball or twist the wrist if the timing is off.

CAUTION: You want to watch out for and stay away from kids "wrapping" the wrist around a curve ball. The wrist should stay flat with the fingers slightly on top of the ball (longer the fingers, more on top of the ball). Because younger kids have smaller fingers, many will try to bend the wrist to incorporate more spin. If you take the ball back into throwing position with the ball facing the pitcher and then cup the wrist so the ball moves even closer to you - you have just wrapped the curve ball and we want kids to avoid this.

- ❖ A wrapped curve ball will break, it will be a big slow break but it is not a tight spinning curve ball (preferred). Wrapping causes tension in the arm (we want relaxed), less extension and a shortened follow through. Because of these factors, it is also bad for the arm over time.

In an earlier section we discussed the pulling of the arm to the armpit and some of the flaws associated with that as a pitcher. When throwing a Curve Ball, if a player pulls to the armpit and the timing is off, it can cause the ball to squirt out of hand, hang high or become flat with no down movement.

- ❖ This is where the "Squeeze and Swivel" technique comes into play in developing balance and consistency of release point.

