

In the Circle with Michele Smith

Get a Grip...On the 'Junk' Pitches



It isn't enough that the best softball pitchers in the world fire the ball at least 65 mph from a circle 43 feet from home plate, they also make the ball move. Rise—Drop—Curve—Change of speeds. The ball spins in, out, and around the strike zone, forcing the batter to react not only to the ball's blazing speed, but its sharp movement as well... all in less than a second. The best pitchers in the world make batters think quickly. The less time to think and react, the harder it is to hit the ball.

Late and sharp, that's always the type of movement you want as

a pitcher. You want the ball to move just in front of the plate, because the later the ball breaks, the less time the batter has to adjust. I always tell my student pitchers, if you can see the ball break, the batter can see the ball break. If the batter can see the ball break, they can adjust to the movement and hit the ball. Our goal as a pitcher is to get the pitch in and out of the strike zone as quickly as possible. Better yet, it is to make the batter swing at 'balls.' When you find a pitcher who gets batters to swing at 'balls' that look like 'strikes,' you will find a pitcher who is at the top of her game.

To make the ball move, you must spin the ball in the correct direction at release. A forward spin causes the ball to drop. A backward spin makes it rise. A ball that spins like a top will curve in the direction the ball is spinning. When learning to throw pitches that move, it all starts with the grip. Few pitchers grip the ball the same way, so I will show you my grips and how I get great movement on the ball. Here are some of my secrets...

and jump up through the zone. If you too want to be an effective rise ball pitcher, you should work on getting your ball to make that late jumping movement.

The picture below is my rise ball grip. You should put your middle finger on the top seam, your ring finger on the bottom seam, and tuck your index finger. Your thumb should be opposite

The Rise Ball

The rise ball is a pitch that is going to spin backward and have a tendency to rise up through the strike zone. Some science gurus like to say a rise simply 'drops or falls less' than a normal pitch that loses trajectory as it moves toward home plate. That may be the case if you look at the scientific numbers simply using physics calculations, but I doubt those gurus have ever actually thrown a rise ball themselves. I am known as one of the best rise ball pitchers in the world, and I can assure you that my rise ball does, in fact, move



your middle finger. Keep the area of skin between your thumb and index finger close to the ball; this will keep the ball resting at the base of your index finger. At release, the wrist snap is from 'palm down to palm up.' Therefore, the spin is going to be from underneath, meaning the ball will spin backward. The rise must be snapped as quickly as possible so as to make the ball spin very tight and fast. As the pitch is moving forward toward home plate, it must have good velocity and a tight fast spin. A loose and lazy spin will inhibit the ball from rising or breaking.



The Peel Drop Ball

The opposite of the rise is the drop ball. The drop is a pitch that is going to spin over the top—or spin forward. A sharp drop will move down in the zone and look as though it is 'falling off a table.' The movement on a good drop will be from high to low. If we throw a drop from low to lower, it will be a ball, and disciplined hitters will not swing at drops in the dirt. Move the pitch up in the zone to make it look like a strike, so when it breaks and falls, it will more than likely be swung at and swung through.

For the drop ball grip, put your middle three fingers over the top of the seams, with your thumb opposite the middle finger. During release, work on snapping the ball so you get a downward rotation and, therefore, get the ball to move down through the zone. I think about keeping my thumb over the ball as I snap the ball. This will ensure that the ball leaves my hand with the correct downward rotation.

The Curve Ball

The next pitch you should learn is the curve. I grip my curve ball exactly like my rise, but I rotate the ball just a little bit so that I'm sliding my middle finger up on the top seam or 'the smile of the ball.' My ring finger is on the bottom seam, and my index finger is tucked—just like on the rise ball grip.



When I release my curve, I am pulling the ball across my body as I am snapping the ball. By pulling the snap across my hips, I get the ball to spin like a top. When the ball spins like a top, it will cut or curve through the zone. The curve should move in to or away from the batter. As a left-handed pitcher, my curve is going to move into a right-handed batter. For a right-handed pitcher, the curve is going to move away from a right-handed batter.

The Change Up

Lastly, there is the change up or off-speed pitch. When throwing the change up, you want to look explosive when driving off the mound—just like when you are throwing any regular speed pitch. By being explosive off the rubber, you will 'sell' the pitch to the batter. This will fool her no matter where the pitch is

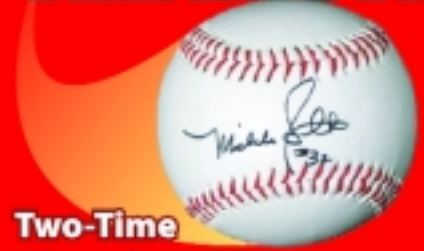


located. The best change ups are low in the zone or in the dirt. The speed of a good change up pitch is going to be about 25% slower than your hardest pitches.

You can throw a change up pitch with a lot of different grips. I throw my change up off of my rise ball grip so that opposing coaches and batters can't pick it up. Many good teams will try to 'pick' your grips. If they see a finger tucked, they will think that you are planning to throw a rise. Therefore, if I can throw my change up off of my rise grip, they won't know what's coming—even if they see my grip. Also, I like to hold my change up just a little bit deeper in the palm of my hand; this will help to slow the speed of the pitch. A change up that is too fast or too high in the zone will be easier for the batter to see and hit.

I hope this helps you to perfect the way you handle the ball. Some pitchers make the mistake of thinking that it's all about how you release the ball; when, in fact, it all begins with the way you grip the ball. Good Luck with your pitches and remember to grip and spin the ball correctly, after that... let the ball do the work! If you do your part correctly, I promise you, the ball will do its part!

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