

# Playing Catch with a Purpose

Throwing Technique/ How the Upper and Lower half of the Body Work Together.

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You've probably heard the old adage pitching is just an extended form of playing catch. In reality, and in building proper throwing and pitching mechanics for any Little League player, it is a true statement. By playing catch correctly, a player's upper and lower body forms a synergy to produce an accurate and strong throw.

In discussing Proper Balance and Good Arm Action in our previous articles, we explained two key components that play a significant role in perfecting good and proper pitching mechanics. Both actions are derived from simply playing catch. Once the proper balance and foundation is built with the lower half of the body (balance), it places your upper half in an optimal position to begin your throw.

Throwing shouldn't just be a way to get loose or warm up, but should have a purpose behind it. Often times, Little League coaches give the responsibility of "warming up" to the players themselves. This is not a great approach unless there is a regiment that has been enforced and is supervised at each practice. When players become lazy or lack focus when playing catch, they create bad habits that could possibly lead to improper throwing habits. More often than not, these bad habits carry over into a game and the end result is rarely positive. A common habit we see with many young players is they tend to throw off their front foot (left foot for right hander's and right foot for left hander's) while keeping their weight back. In some instances, this habit becomes so bad that the back pivot foot slides underneath the player's body and remains in mid-air during the actual throw. While the ball may get to the desired destination, velocity is dismal and ball placement is inconsistent. By placing a majority of your weight and momentum opposite the direction of your target, a player tends to open up too much, steps off line with their lead foot, drops their arm more frequently and has trouble with aligning the hips and shoulders to the target, an important factor that determines the accuracy of the throw. Players that struggle to distribute their weight in a forward direction, nor place their lead leg in a proper manner, generally have problems on the pitching mound in relation to proper balance and forward momentum toward the plate. In most cases, they tend to fall off one way or the other and their release point will varies drastically from pitch to pitch. Again, this can be corrected by playing catch with a purpose.

Playing catch, and more importantly throwing the ball takes balance, leverage and forward momentum. While throwing a baseball seems like a relatively simple process, it is actually one of the most important skills in the game itself. Below, we have broken the throwing process down in 5 steps:



### Step 1) Foot Plant

Just as the ball reaches your hand (when playing catch), the first step will begin with the throwing side (right handers starting with their right foot, left handers with their left foot). Here, the pivot foot plants down at a 45-degree angle (remember a 90° angle is when you pitch). By placing your lead foot in this angle, it will enable one's front shoulder and hip to line up with the target.



### Step 2) Balance

When the lead leg foot (non-throwing side) is lifted into a balance position, both legs & feet should now be in a 45-degree angle (pointing in the same direction). During this phase, both hands should be below your chest and ideally at waist height.

### Step 3) Forward Motion

Once you begin your forward movement toward the target and just before your lead/front foot touches the ground, both hands will break from one another. Your throwing arm goes directly back to the throwing position (or a ready to feed the giant position-an analogy explained in our

previous arm action article.) while at the same time your lead glove hand points directly at your target.



### Step 4) Foot Strike

This next step is the most forceful motion of your throw. As your landing foot strikes, several things will occur:

- A majority of your weight is transferred to your landing foot.
- Your knee should absorb the weight and be bend between a 45- 90° angle
- As your hands split apart, your chest opens up toward the target.
- Your lead glove hand pulls your non-throwing shoulder down, thus creating your right/left-throwing elbow to lift to shoulder height. (Remember, when the glove is pulled down, it does not pass your waist)
- As your throwing elbow reaches shoulder height, it is now leading your ball hand toward the target.



### Step 5) Release, Follow through & Balance

As you release the ball, all of your weight should be now placed on your plant foot. This is why it is imperative to obtain good balance on the ball of your foot. After the ball has been released, your throwing hand should continue across the plane of your body and end either at your thigh or even better, below your knee. During this phase, your eyes should remain level as well as both shoulder blades. **Important Note:** The terminology, “stay squared after your throw” simply means that a player maintains equal balance between your legs after the throw. By doing so, you keep yourself from falling off to one side or the other.



### Final Note:

Education and the continued reinforcement of proper mechanics play a critical role in the development of young players. Despite the challenges a volunteer coach or manager has when dealing with such a broad range of skill levels in youth baseball, it should be noted that creating good fundamentals and building a solid base must be as equally as important to being a positive role model. We have seen all too often that if a player or pitcher can throw with relative accuracy, many younger level coaches and parents simply use the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix” rule and spend more time on those with lesser skills. We understand about the time constraints in practice, but do keep in mind that all players on the team must be evaluated on their individual skills rather than their ability compared to others. I have yet to see a young player with perfect arm mechanics, nor a player that doesn’t need to hone in on a certain skill or two to improve their throwing abilities. We, along with almost every upper level coach, sports trainers and top researchers, suggest it is best to attack a bad habit early on before a problem snowballs into a sore arm or injury.

If pitching is indeed an exaggerated form of playing catch, then initiating good throwing mechanics is essential to finding productivity on the mound or at any position. If young Little Leaguers play catch correctly and with a purpose, then getting the pitch over or around the plate (when given the opportunity) becomes relatively easy.

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