

Baseball Off Season – Now what?!

Now that baseball off-season is finally here, we can engage in intelligent conversation about topics that are important to the development of the game and our youth and varsity baseball programs.

Most baseball players around the world (except for the elite MLB teams that made the playoffs) are well into their off-season. Some of the boys on the high school team I coach just finished their last games of the year at a showcase in Florida.

Their season started in mid-February with the first day of practice and ended the second week of October.

That is an 8 month-long season, folks! And a long season requires planning and preparation for the next long season.

One thing I am adamantly against is year-round intensive throwing for baseball players. There must be some down-time in the year to help the arm recover.

Assuming an athlete has taken 2-4 weeks off from the end of the baseball season, mid-October to November will be a great time to start the off-season strength and conditioning program and throwing program for the upcoming season.

Let me clarify the “down-time”.

Above, I said an athlete could take 2-4 weeks off. By that, I mean the ball player should **completely cease** all throwing activity for that amount of time, and focus on something else that will make them better (ie, sleep, nutrition, or **strength and conditioning**).

I would err on the side of caution and take the **entire 4 weeks off**.

There is not much at the end of September/early October that will be more beneficial than recovery and rebuilding the arm for the next season. Furthermore, after those 4 weeks, athletes should not yet go back to intensive throwing. Obviously, they need to build up.

After those initial 4 weeks of rest, I would encourage **another 8 weeks of easy catch**. By “easy catch”, I mean nothing beyond 60 feet – low-intensity work. If anything beyond just having fun and breaking in a new glove, then it would be trying to hit targets consistently, feeling release point, and working the foot-work that happens before the release point.

For pitchers, low-level mechanical work with various tools to help with their delivery is a good place to start.

Let's talk about the weight room.

My goal here is to wrap the mind around what a ballplayer can do during the off-season and what off-season training will do for the ballplayer.

In the off-season, a baseball player of any age should be able to get in at least 4 months of off-season strength and conditioning before the next season. Whether it goes from October through January and then transitions to an in-season maintenance block, or if it goes from November through February, it doesn't matter.

The massive amount of record-breaking homeruns hit this year (2019) in big leagues is a clear indicator of the power needed to play baseball.

Of course, the finer, more finesse parts of the game are important, but when it comes to performing well in the sport, bigger-faster-stronger guys are going to be the guys that shine.

They are the guys that have most of the 5 tools coaches are looking for:

1. Hit for average
2. Hit for power
3. Running speed
4. Throwing velocity
5. Fielding ability

Outside of being weaker and smaller than others, one of the biggest hindrances to a baseball player's health, longevity, and potential in the game is a lack of anterior stability of the core and the glenohumeral joint. Because regardless of how strong you are; if you are hurt, you aren't very good.

Strength Training – Month 1

To let the arm recover and get it stronger for the next season, a ballplayer needs to **lose the coveted external rotation of the throwing arm to gain anterior stability** of the throwing arm.

The amount of "lay back" or external rotation of the throwing motion is highly correlated to throwing velocity, and it increases over the course of a season. Unfortunately, this increase is also correlated with increased injuries if there is not adequate rotator cuff control of the head of the humerus.

Rotator cuff control of the humerus is a top priority all year long, but especially in the early off-season. We can start doing this with **manual external rotation exercises, and thoracic mobility and scapular positioning and control exercises.**

Secondly, and more generally, we need to get them out of the rotational plane of motion the ballplayers have been in for 8 months to restore anterior core stability, and teach the athletes to manage it all year round.

To start, we can do this with various exercises such as front planks and **dead bugs**.

Beyond these things, we are still training the main exercises that build coordination and force output. Main exercises are going to be deadlifts, squats, push-ups, and rows for 2-4 sets of 8-10 slow reps – control and force development before more power-based movements.

Strength Training – Month 2

In the second month of off-season training, we will have the athlete increase their speed of movement for the main exercises mentioned above, and they will also start to do more sets and fewer reps (6-10 sets of 3 reps). This approach will help them **focus on technique** for only 3 reps – so quality stays really high – but the high amount of sets continues to build conditioning and enough volume to increase their strength and muscular levels.

Some athletes may progress their main exercise selections to more demanding variations as well.

In month 2, we will be adding some rotational power exercises with low-level medicine ball training.

From an arm-care standpoint, we can progress the athletes to more dynamic strength training such as **side-lying external rotation** and some **manual rhythmic stabilizations**.

Strength Training – Month 3

This month is all about dynamic force output. Those are some fancy words that mean get strong with **no restrictions outside of perfect technique**.

For the main exercises, the sets will decrease because the amount of weight the athlete is lifting should be near maximal for 3-5 reps.

In this phase, the ballplayer could do 3-5 sets of 3-5 near max reps. The reps will be slow because the weight is so high, but the athlete is trying to move the weight **as fast as possible**. This is what we call lifting with maximal intent.

Medicine ball training will increase intensity through an increase in the weight of the ball and increasing the amount of body movement before the throw. The goal will be to throw a heavy medicine ball as hard as possible with the intention of breaking it open on the wall it is hitting.

I tell the athletes it should sound like a shotgun is going off in the building!

Strength Training – Month 4

This is the money maker month! They have worked hard for about 12 weeks, and now it's time to put together all the core stability, arm-care, and total body strength they have been working on and turn it into **POWER**.

Power is what creates throwing velocity.

Power is what creates exit velocity from the barrel.

Without stability, mobility, coordination, strength, and the aggressiveness the weight room gives a ballplayer, power will be limited.

This month, the main exercises will increase in sets again, and the reps will decrease again – similar to month 2. Remember we want a HIGH-QUALITY rep. The weight will decrease, and athletes will move the weight **as fast as possible**.

Back in 9th-grade science class, we learned: Power is the multiplication of force and velocity, so there is a delicate balancing act to ensure maximal power is increased. They need to lift enough weight for them to create enough force AND create enough velocity at the same time to **maximize power output**.

Otherwise, they are training one at the expense of the other and limiting maximal power output.

The arm-care program would be fully dynamic now. Tossing small weighted balls off a wall and onto trampolines to dynamically train the rotator cuff muscles would have been in play for a few weeks now.

Furthermore, the long toss program is in full go mode. Pitchers, at this point, have been working off the mound and building up their pitch count. They are already in maintenance mode now, from an arm-care perspective.

The goal for the next 8 months will be three-fold:

- Maintain rotator cuff strength and dynamic stability
- Constantly restore internal rotation mobility of the throwing arm and front side hip (left hip for right-handers and right hip for left-handers)
- Maintain total body strength for the entire season – this means KEEP LIFTING!

I know this is barely scratching the surface, but if you are a parent reading this and you have some game in the weight room, you can at least use this template to help your son!

Contact us if you need some more help fleshing these ideas out!

Play hard this year,

Zack