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News

PROTECTING YOUNG ARMS

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It's the universal dilemma among Little League baseball managers: Do you leave the arm-weary star pitcher in and win the game, or take him out and preserve his future?

This year, the decision is made for them. Little League Baseball International is imposing pitch-count limits, citing data that there is an epidemic of arm injuries caused by overuse.

The rule replaces former innings-per-week limits, which some baseball followers say were unreliable, because, say, a 40-pitch, six-walk inning carried the same weight as a three-pitch inning.

Said Terrence Thomas, who coaches the age 11-12 Delray Beach American team: "It's a good rule. Now, taking out a kid won't be on me."

Too often, the managers -- unpaid volunteers -- have left pitchers in when they were tired, and their mechanics faltered and young muscles succumbed to the motion of throwing a baseball.

"Now they don't have to make that decision," Little League spokesman Chris Downs said.

Each local chapter decides whether the coaches, umpires or official scorers are the monitors.

Little League created a chart of maximum pitch counts and a scale for how much rest is required afterward. A 12-year-old, for example, can throw 85 pitches, but then must rest three full days. But if he throws fewer than 40, he can come back after only one full day off. An 18-year-old can throw as many as 105 in a day and must rest three full days if he throws 76 or more.

"Before, they could throw, like, 120 in a six-inning game, then could come back the next week and throw another 120," Downs said. The organization also is studying how to eliminate curveballs by children younger than 14 because of the stress they put on their arms.

About 500 of the 7,400 U.S. Little League chapters tested the pitch-count program in 2005-06, and the organization is in the midst of a five-year study with the University of North Carolina to learn how much throwing is too much for a young arm.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission says youth sports injuries have doubled during the past 10 years, and the medical journal *The Physician and Sportsmedicine* said about half of them have come from overuse because kids start younger and play year-round.

The American Sports Medicine Institute in Birmingham, Ala., and surgeon James R. Andrews have pitching-specific data: Their research indicated pitchers who stayed in the game beyond fatigue were 36 times as likely to end up needing surgery.

But it's not only about surgery, said Dr. Len Remia, head of sports medicine at Cleveland Clinic Florida in Weston. Too many minor overuse injuries are growing into major ones, he said. His read: If a child's arm hurts for more than 30 minutes after pitching, you need rest and a doctor's eyes.

"A young kid shouldn't have constant pain," he said.

There are 24 Little League chapters in South Florida, according to Southern Region Director Jen Colvin.

The alternatives to Little League, Pony League (six chapters here) and Babe Ruth Baseball (four chapters) will stick to limits based on innings, their officials said.

The pitch count rule already has affected the Mets in the Weston Area Little League. Earlier this year, Daniel Gelman threw 67 pitches as his team won in five innings via the 10-run rule. Under the old rule, he could have pitched one inning the next day -- enough to close out another victory -- but instead the Mets used less experienced pitchers and lost, said his father, David Gelman. "Even though it cost us a game, I still think it's a good rule," Gelman said.

Managers say they are preparing more children to pitch. A 13-to-14-year-old team used to need about six pitchers, said Jim Dunmire of the Fort Lauderdale Federal Little League program.

"Now, eight is a better number," he said. He'll also ask umpires to widen their strike zones, especially early in the season.

Because dominating pitchers will be on the mound less, the teams might be more balanced, surmised left-hander Dennis Castellanos, 16, who also hopes the rule will get him a little more time on the mound.

"Last year with some teams we saw the same two guys all season long," he said.

The Fort Lauderdale team's two main pitchers, Nick Landis and Ron Jones, said they'll be happy to share the ball more.

"I like when they keep my pitch count low," Landis said.

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