Amazing Show Of Stamina

Arizona’s 3 Starters Throw 5,675 Pitches, 16 Complete Games

Wildcat coaches Andy Lopez, Shaun Cole explain in detail the complete system Arizona uses that has allowed pitchers to stay injury free the last three seasons while gaining more velocity over time.

By LOU PAVLOVICH, JR.
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TUCSON, Ariz. — In one of the most staggering achievements in the history of college baseball, Arizona’s three starting pitchers threw 5,675 combined pitches last season enroute to the Wildcats’ fourth national title.

Arizona finished with 16 complete games, including eight over its final 19 contests.

It was the most complete games in a single season at the school in the last 23 years.

To put this in perspective, Arizona had the same amount of complete games as the entire Southeastern Conference made up of 12 teams.

How did the Wildcats do it without sustaining serious arm injuries?

This story answers the question that has been raised by hundreds of coaches throughout the nation since Arizona won the national title last June.

All 16 complete games were accomplished by a trio of pitchers, including ace Kurt Heyer (7 CG), Konner Wade (6 CG) and James Farris (3 CG).

In 36 games last season, this trio of pitchers worked into the seven inning at a minimum.

Heyer threw 153 innings, which led the nation, and had a 13-2 record, 2.24 ERA and struck out 113 batters with 28 walks. He worked at least 7 1/3 innings over 13 consecutive starts.

Wade threw 136 1/3 innings and posted an 11-3 record, 3.96 ERA while striking out 105 batters with 37 walks.

Farris pitched in 106 2/3 innings with a 7-3 record, 3.97 ERA and fanned 73 batters with 20 walks.

It is extremely rare to see three pitchers on the same college staff pitch over 100 innings in the same season.

Heyer threw 2,212 total pitches in games while Wade threw 1,851 and Farris 1,612, according to numbers supplied by Arizona pitching coach Shaun Cole.

In 10 regional, super regional and College World Series games last season, Arizona’s trio of starting pitchers averaged 8.48 innings per start — an incredibly rare achievement because so many starters experience dead arms late in the season.

In an exclusive interview with Collegiate Baseball, Arizona Head Coach Andy Lopez and Cole explain the remarkable system that the Wildcats have devised to train their starting pitchers physically and mentally so they don’t break down late in the season. Instead, they get stronger and stronger.

Over 50 years ago, it was common to see starting pitchers in pro and college baseball finish games or come close.

That philosophy changed over the years. To prevent dead arms late in a college season, starters now routinely go six or seven innings followed by a setup man and then a closer who are both fresh. Pro baseball has followed that formula for decades.

Then more pitchers are ready for the stretch run as starters still have plenty of gas in the tank to perform at playoff time.

Out of necessity, Arizona was forced to lean heavily on its starting pitchers...
Andy Lopez: Locating Fastballs Crucial

"The philosophy I have as a coach at Arizona, and previously at Florida, Pepperdine and Cal. St. Dominguez Hills, is that the best pitch in baseball is the located fastball. If you were to go through our pitching charts, you would see a great percentage of pitches are fastballs.

"Jim Wells, former Alabama head coach and a dear friend of mine, came to the College World Series to watch several games last June. We usually talk every week on the phone. He told me that after watching the regionals, super regionals and College World Series, he saw that our pitching staff was the best in the country because our pitchers pitch to the corners of the strike zone and then go back to the middle. The hitters are not used to seeing pitchers pitch to both corners of the strike zone.

"We really stress that our pitchers must locate the fastball. Our saying is if you can’t locate, then you must need to change speeds. If you can’t change speeds, then you must locate. If you can locate and change speeds, then you will have a complete game. We try to give them an easy plan to execute when they go out to the mound. The real essence of what we talk about day in and day out is that the best pitch in baseball is the located fastball.

"We spend enough time to be effective with our off-speed pitches. We probably spend 70 percent of our time in bullpens on fastball and fastball location. It is crucial to the success of our pitchers. From the moment they get loose, we are talking about hip to hip catch.

"We are talking about working the U concept in the bullpen. U strike, inside strike, pitch and gradually working down and then across the bottom of the strike zone and then up the other side of the strike zone (the outside corner).

"I look at what my Pepperdine baseball club did when we won the 1992 College World Series, and we had an ERA of 1.80 at the CW. We had an ERA of 1.80 at the CW.

"Our pitching staff at Arizona had an ERA of 1.12 during the College World Series. June.

"Both of those pitching staffs didn’t have pitchers who threw 94-95 mph. We might have had one starter who touched 90 early in games and the others were 87-88 mph pitchers.

"Shaun (Cole) did a marvelous job working with our pitchers to locate their fastball, change speeds and have an off-speed pitch they could throw behind in the count. Shaun also worked hard at having our pitchers develop an out pitch. But the most important thing was to locate that fastball.

PITCHERS BECOME STRONGER

With that being said, Lopez said strength takes its natural course over time.

"The more you throw a fastball, the better you get at precision throws, and you gradually get stronger as well. We’ve lived it with pitching staffs for last 30 years. Our pitching staff wasn’t overpowering last season. But as the season unfolded, they became stronger and stronger and stronger.

"The first week of practice in the fall, Arizona pitchers normally throw 25-30 pitches in bullpens and increase the work load by 5 pitches each week as they ultimately finish with 45-50 pitches a week prior to throwing intersquad games.

"For young pitchers who come in how hard they have to throw, and have fastball command. We tell them that to be allowed to throw breaking pitches, they must locate fastballs first.

"We call off-speed pitches ‘power pitches.’ I hate it when our pitchers throw soft off-speed pitches. The reason is that if a pitcher is going to throw 90-95 mph, he has his arm slotted down, dropped his elbow and guided the ball up to the plate. We emphasize to young pitchers that they must put their power pitch, power pitch, power, then they understand and have the proper arm speed which is close to a fastball. And it makes it difficult for the batter to react to pitches when this

Wildcats Focus On 4 Critical Areas With Pitchers

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pitchers last season since the relief pitchers were inconsistent. Lopez has coached many teams over the years with lock down closers and has suffered an elbow or shoulder injury the last three years at Arizona which shows their system is working.

In fact, they all thrived on more throwing as the season unfolded as they were at their best during the NCAA playoffs.

The reason can be traced to a 4 area conditioning program presented by the Wildcats, including:

- A unique long toss, bullpen and bullpen workout session led by Cole with guidance from Lopez.

- Strength and conditioning program orchestrated by Neil Willey. Willey is one of the most respected strength and conditioning coaches in the nation who has worked with six national title teams at Arizona in the last 4 years with the Wildcats (2 softball, 1 baseball, 1 women’s golf, 1 men’s swimming and 1 women’s swimming).

- Post-practice and game care of pitching shoulders and arms by athletic trainer Leanna Olliver.

- Mental conditioning program by Wildcat skipper Lopez.

Cole said one of the greatest examples for throwing complete games for his pitching staff was Hall of Fame St. Louis Cardinals’ pitcher Bob Gibson who put up stunning numbers from 1959-1975.

Gibson threw 28 complete games during the 1608 season in 34 starts and 28 complete baseball games in 35 starts in 1969. He also recorded 20 complete games in five other seasons.

Overall, Gibson had 255 complete games in 482 starts during his 17-year career.

"Bob Gibson was absolutely ruthless when he pitched," said Cole.

"One of the greatest lines I read on him was that Gibson didn’t just dominate at his peak. He made hitters pray for a swift, easy death.

"Another great example was Juan Marichal. At the height of his career in 1968, he went 26-9 over 328 innings in 28 complete games with nearly five strikeouts for every walk issued. He recorded 22 complete games over his four seasons during his 16 year career.

Possibly the most amazing example was Hall of Famers Young who pitched from 1890-1911 and recorded 40 or more complete games one different seasons. He owns the Major League record for most complete games with 749 in 810 starts up a 25-year career.

Throwing Loads Of Fastballs

Lopez said the core of what his pitchers learn from day one is locating fastballs throughout the strike zone which ultimately helps with strength and endurance over time.

On the cover of today's newspaper, there will be a headline extolling the virtues of a new baseball player. It will read something like, “A dynamic new player joins our team and will bring a winning attitude.” But few realize that behind the scenes, the strength and conditioning coach and the baseball trainer are working tirelessly to ensure that the player is ready to perform at his peak level. It’s a process that involves much more than just physical preparation.

**Strength and Conditioning**

The strength and conditioning coach and the baseball trainer work together to develop a comprehensive plan for each player. They consider factors such as the player’s position, his past injuries, his strengths and weaknesses, and his overall fitness level. The goal is to build strength and endurance while minimizing the risk of injury.

**Sprinting and Agility**

Sprinting and agility drills are a key component of the training program. These exercises help players improve their explosive power and quickness, which are essential for making quick decisions and getting to the ball quickly in the field. In addition, these exercises help reduce the risk of injury by improving muscle strength and stability.

**Weight Training**

Weight training is another important aspect of the program. It helps players build muscle mass and strength, which are vital for power hitting and driving the ball. The trainer will design a progressive weight training program that starts with lighter weights and gradually increases in intensity as the season progresses. The player will also be asked to work on specific exercises that target the muscles used in his position.

**Cardiovascular Training**

Cardiovascular training is another important component of the program. It helps players improve their endurance and stamina, which are vital for maintaining a high level of performance throughout the season. The trainer will design a cardiovascular training program that includes a variety of activities such as running, cycling, and swimming.

**Sport-Specific Training**

Sport-specific training is another important aspect of the program. It helps players improve their skills and performance in their specific position. The trainer will design a sport-specific training program that includes exercises and drills that are specific to the player’s position.

**Conclusion**

The strength and conditioning coach and the baseball trainer work together to develop a comprehensive plan for each player. They consider factors such as the player’s position, his past injuries, his strengths and weaknesses, and his overall fitness level. The goal is to build strength and endurance while minimizing the risk of injury. With the right training program, players will be ready to perform at their peak level throughout the season.
laetic acid flushed out. Then we will do some light lifting but nothing heavy to flush the system out.

"Even on the road, we have a pitcher who can cut the lights at the hotel they are staying at. Usually there is a room at a hotel which has a small treadmil and some weights. So that works very well.

The recovery phase is extremely important in our program."

"Our starting pitchers have stayed healthy not because of one or two things we do but because they go through. We try to keep their shoulders healthy as well as areas prone to injury and strive for good flexibility. On top of that, we want them to eat well with good nutrition and hydrate their body which is especially important in Tucson."

Walks Not Acceptable

Cole said that another factor for so many complete games by Arizona's starters last season was the remedy placed on the pitchers for walking batters.

"We had a heavy emphasis on not walking batters," said Cole. "If you walk into our locker room, you will know where the pitcher's locker is. In both the upper and lower area, each locker (for pitchers) has a piece of paper taped to it which says, 'Walks Are NOT Acceptable!' in addition to 'Pitch To Contact.'"

"They see it every day, and hopefully this gets engraved into their minds. Coach Lopez and I are constantly after our pitchers to not walk."

"I am fanatical about our pitchers getting into the mold that they have to pitch strike, and I chart that. I hammer on our pitchers on first pitch strikes because if you don't knock it out, you are not walking batters," said Cole.

"I am also adamant about our pitchers ending the inning quickly with two outs."

Last season over 586 innings, Arizona pitchers only walked 168 batters. Last season over 586 innings, Arizona's pitchers only walked 168 batters.

"No walking batters allowed. Our starting pitchers to go deeper into the game. It can be used as a way to emphasize fastball location, not walking batters and having a second chance. This was a perfect storm last season."

"As we coach our pitchers to attack, attack, attack. Coach Lopez brought in a great picture this year when we look at our dog picture, and I felt it was a great way to put it."

Mental Toughness

"Being mentally prepared to throw complete games is just as important as the physical side."

"Our starting pitchers were able to go deep into games and throw 16 complete games last season because of the mindset that they would go all the way," said Cole.

"Our pitchers set the tone for the Friday 3-game series as the Friday starter for our other two starters. He would go in with a mind he would go complete game with no walks."

In addition, he faced a huge challenge in his NCAA Division II league which routinely sent teams to the Division II World Series and captured national titles.

"If I do anything well as a coach now, it is because I coached at Cal. St. Dominguez Hills," said Lopez.

"At the time (from 1983-1988), I was a head coach with not one penny for assistant coaches. I had to dig in the dirt with my own car. If I wasn't there, the players had to prepare the field. In addition to the head baseball coach, I was teaching three lecture classes where I had to be in a coat and tie. I also taught two other classes which included tennis and a weight lifting.

"During my six years there, we played extensively against NCAA Division I teams during our first 2 seasons all on the road against such teams as USC, UCLA, Pepperdine, Arizona, Cal. St. Fullerton, Long Beach St., U.C. Santa Barbara and other great programs.

"I had to recruit a bunch of guys who nobody really wanted to be a part of my early teams at Dominguez Hills. You would go to the top of your class as coach, I was teaching three lecture classes where I had to be in a coat and tie. I also taught two other classes which included tennis and a weight lifting.

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