



BEYOND THE COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE

with Claire Reitmann-Grout

Secrets of a Pitcher's Dad

Guest Author • Bill Grout

Growing up, I would have told you I came from a softball family. My dad and I spent countless hours together at softball fields all over the country. I was a successful pitcher because of his support and willingness to sit on a bucket to catch for me. I love my dad and our softball memories together.

I also have to tell you that I come from a family of writers. Whenever I feel like I have something to say, softball related or not, I write it down. I learned to write from my dad.

The other day my dad sent me a reflection of his experiences as a "pitcher's dad." This is what he had to say.

Some yip and hoot. Others sit stern with the piercing stares of submarine captains. Others pace and can't look. Some watch wide-eyed with joy. While a sad few even roll around in the dirt in fistfights. If you've ever been to a fast-pitch softball game, you've probably seen one: the pitcher's dad.

I know, I've seen quite a few. I am one. And for me it was a proud journey that I want to talk about. In case you're a pitcher's dad just starting out. So maybe you can get the good stuff without the hard lessons. Well, at least a few less of the hard lessons.

I first learned what a pitcher's dad was early in recreational league, when fathers who often didn't know anything about softball tried to help their daughter's first train as a pitcher. Like many, my daughter and I just imitated what we saw without understanding. Other pitchers' dads were kind and gave us tips. We also saw classic pitchers' dads, haughty or annoying. One dad taught his daughter to use the modified mechanics of a hardball pitch, even though he was as wrong as fathers starting at zero. But if your daughter likes

pitching and survives your first stumbling teaching and support, eventually the ones who'll stick with it get a pitching coach. Then they learn the real mechanics and the real progress begins. They've survived the first obstacle, having you as a pitching coach.

So now, Dad, you need to choose a role. What will you be to your daughter as she trains as an athlete?

I've seen a lot of masks that pitchers' dads put on. There's the military mask that's harsh and demanding, asking perfection. There's the cajoling cynic mask that has high expectations and casually denigrates by calling his daughter "a knucklehead" when she makes an error. But the mask I came to admire was the mask of a man who sees his daughter doing a difficult thing, understands and supports her, is determined to help her face it together. The mask of a man (or mom) standing behind his pitcher.

So here are a few secrets I learned as a dreaded pitcher's dad.

#1 Pitching Dad's Secret: Practice. It's simple numbers. The girl who has thrown ten thousand pitches is more likely to throw a good pitch than the girl who has thrown five hundred. The pitcher who practices once a week will pitch okay. The pitcher who pitches three times a week will be a good pitcher. The pitcher who prac-



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tices four and five days a week will be great. The pitcher who throws six or seven days a week will be prone to shin splints or tendonitis. So now, Dad, realize that your pitcher will spend more time throwing to you on a bucket than she'll ever spend pitching in games. Your role is to support that long practice. It's one of things she'll remember when she's all done playing, long hours of throwing to you on a bucket.

#2 Pitching Dad's Secret: Practice must be fun. She has to want to practice. You don't get to decide how often she wants to practice, she does. If a pitching dad is critical, pushy, over-expectant, there's no fun in that for a pitcher. You're going to spend many hours catching her, those hours must be worth it. Encourage her. Admire her for doing a very difficult thing, where all eyes will be on her to see if she can succeed.

Practice will be your main relationship with your pitcher, make it a fine experience. I learned to pour on the encouragement when my daughter was little and had least control. If the pitch was offline, I found something good in it, I said, "nice speed." (She could see where it went.) If it was an average pitch, I said, "Nice one." If it was a good pitch, I said, "Perfect!" I didn't say much more. Though if I could guess at what was causing problems, I tried to help. So that's a big part of the job: cheerleader. Because it can be tough being a pitcher, and she has to want it.

#3 Pitching Dad's Secret: Practice makes confident, not perfect. You've seen professional hardball pitchers hit batters, have four-pitch walks, walk in the final winning run. And those are professionals. Pitching is hard, stressful, and pressure filled. If your daughter has practiced a little during the week,

she'll have seen she can do it, throw that winning pitch. If she's practiced three or four days that week before the game, she'll feel that she can do it. She'll know she's ready, the outcome she wants is likely. And you'll see the strike and get to yell, "Ya!"

#4 Pitching Dad's Secret: Practice is a process. If she had a break from pitching for a while, say she went on a vacation and she couldn't throw, have realistic expectations. The first practice back things may not go well. The second day of practice, she'll see her pitches are a little better. And the third day of practice, most of her good pitches will be back. So accept that it's at least a three-day process of getting her pitches back. Don't worry about the first disheartening day, just wait for the third and fourth day, when it's bound to be better. Practice is just a known process and a bad day is nothing to worry about.

#5 Pitching Dad's Secret: Sit on the bucket and shut up. Yes, this may be a hard one, but sooner or later, your daughter and her pitching coach will know more than you'll ever know. As you sit on the bucket, you need to learn as much as you can about what the coach is teaching her, so that you can support it. But at some point, your job is to just catch that fastball as it smacks and hurts your hand, smile and throw it back, and not get in between the pitcher and her coach. This transition point of being a pitcher's dad may happen when she's in high school or pitching for a Division I college team. But your job is reduced to sitting on a bucket and admiring.

And that's not so hard. I met a number of pitchers' dads when my daughter was playing in college. And in general I admired them for their stable supportive relationships with their daughters. And then we sat in the stands together watching our daughters do unforgettable things.