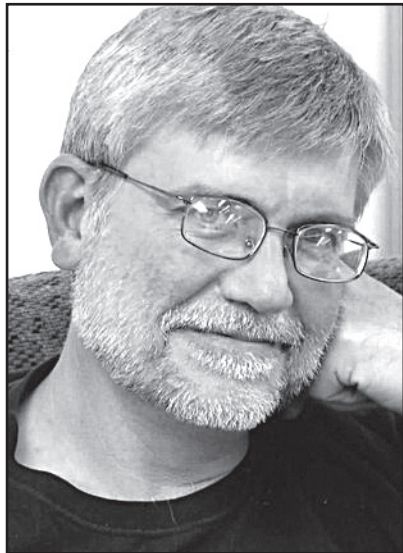


Pitch count 411: New rule presents challenge for baseball coaches, players, programs



By Mike Gilmore

Baseball enthusiasts tally them; coaches (and players) dread them; parents worry about them.

Pitch counts.

The Kansas State High School Activities Association, acting on an edict from the National High School Federation, has announced that it will be switching from a long-implemented inning limit for high school baseball pitchers to a sliding-scale pitch count system coupled with days of rest, in an effort to reduce risk of injury.

The state's rule ranges from a maximum of 105 competitive pitches thrown requiring four calendar days of rest, to 30 pitches thrown with no required days of rest. Pitching benchmarks are 75 requiring three days; 60 pitches requiring two days; and 45 pitches requiring one day. A pitcher reaching the 105-pitch maximum in the middle of an at-bat will be allowed to finish with that batter.

Pitch counts will be recorded by the home team scorekeeper as the official scorebook and reported to the KSHSAA within 24 hours of game's end, for all pitchers at all levels of play in varsity, junior varsity and sub-level competition.

A violation of the maximum pitch count or required days of rest that follows will result in immediate ineligibility by both player and coach; the game in which the violation occurred will be forfeited.

After years of a lax inning rule, it appears that Kansas is serious about this. While moving toward NHFS compliance (which, in itself is a pretty broad edict), some are more strict, others less.

According to BaseballAmerica, all but two states that sanction baseball (there are four that don't) will have some sort of pitch-count rule for the 2017 season. Massachusetts doesn't follow NHFS rules and Connecticut has days of rest restrictions, but no pitch limits. Arizona, Maryland and Florida go so far as to mandate stricter limits for younger players (Arizona juniors and seniors have a limit of 105 pitches with four days rest; freshmen and sophomores are held to 95).

In Oklahoma, meanwhile, pitchers can't start an inning after reaching 120 pitches. If they're close, though, they can finish the inning they're on, so they could throw more than 140 before they're done; four-day rest kicks in on the 101st pitch. New York has separate rules for regular season and the playoffs (125 in a playoff game and two days' rest after 95 in regular season).

A 110-pitch limit with four days off seems to satisfy most everyone else.

Back in the Sunflower State, baseball coaches will be scrambling to beef up their bullpens; a crew of five (two starters, a couple middle relievers and a closer) might not get teams through the regular schedule (doubleheaders on Wednesday and Saturday). Tournaments will be pitching-by-committee (they mostly are that already). The days of the high school complete-game winner are definitely numbered. And teams with short rosters will need double- and triple-duty players even more, to cover the mid-game lineup shifts.

Larned High School veteran head baseball coach Chad Erway put practically his whole roster on the mound during the days of practice preliminary to the 2017 season, just to see what they could do. Last year, the Indians traveled to Manhattan for the Class 3A state tournament on the backs of three senior hurlers – one of whom considered a 90-pitch day on the mound an average outing throughout Larned's 19-4 season. In the Indians' regional championship opener against Lakin, ace Isiah Perez threw 92 pitches for an 8-1 complete-game win, with two third going for strikes and nine strikeouts through seven innings. That was while battling his Lakin opposition through three scoreless frames.

"It's going to be interesting to see the cause-and-effect," noted Erway. "I think it's going to be huge, not just during the season, but also the integrity of offensive state records. Those are all probably going to be broken. We've already put practically everybody on the mound in practice, because this year we'll be looking at a throwing-by-committee scenario.

"I'm predicting that success is going to derive from good starting pitching with not having an elevated pitch count," Erway noted. "You'll rely more on your starter and not go to a middle reliever before you have a closer at the end. Otherwise, you're just chewing up your pen and chewing up your infield."

The state's pitch-count edict comes on the heels of a whopping case of overage during last year's Class 6A regional tournament, in which Wichita West coach Jeff Hoover was suspended for running afoul of the state's nine-inning rule in a 16-inning marathon championship game.

Junior pitcher Colby Pechin was suspended, too, for throwing 157 pitches in 10 innings. Going by this season's rule, Pechin would have been done before the ninth. (As a sidenote, no major league pitcher threw more than 125 pitches per outing in 2016.)

Why now? -- The pitch-count debate isn't new; in the past 10 years a forestful of studies have been published on the link between

Talent

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The Sterling softball team should again be powerful. The Lady Black Bears ran into a tough Lyons team last year or would have made it to state. Four-year pitcher Emma Horsch returns to the circle, and her bat is just as impressive as her arm. Senior Lindsay Gilmore is another big hitter for new coach Dean Mantz.

On the links, Central Plains sophomore placed seventh at state a year ago. Two of the golfers who finished above him have graduated, giving a little room for movement. The top-10 places at last year's state meet were decided by just six strokes. Senior Bryce Miller, a 22nd-place finisher last year, is another medal candidate for the Oilers this spring.

My expectations for track athletes in the area are always high. There's always someone out there doing something special. This year, I will again be doing statewide rankings for Catch it Kansas, as well as area rankings for the Central Kansas Rocket.

Lyons senior Samantha Trejo and Ellinwood senior Joanna Strecker immediately stick out. Both have represented their schools at state cross country all four years, and both have been great runners on the track. I hope each of those runners finish out strong careers.

Ellinwood senior Maddie Hayes is a prime candidate for a state medal in the javelin. Trejo is joined by Oscar Jaime, who finished last spring strong and carried some momentum into the wrestling season, and Tyler Edwards, a senior with state hurdle experience.

Otis-Bison senior Taylor Regan continues to impress. She put up 40 points in a basketball game this season and helped the Lady Cougars to a third-place finish at state.

Regan returns this spring as a state champion in the long jump with the next three finishers in that event back for another go. Regan had to contend with Flint Hills senior Lauren Doll in the triple jump. Doll dominated the field but graduated last May, making the race for gold in that event much more exciting this spring.

Hoisington is loaded with track talent. The Ball brothers - Jonathan and Christopher - are coming off state wrestling titles and either could pick up a gold or two at the state track meet. Cameron Davis and Brenner Donovan are great athletes with much potential this spring.

The Central Plains track team is on the ups. Cassidy Crites, Jacob McAtee, and Alex Barton did big things last year. The Oiler relays could be tough this spring, and few freshman have impressed like Emily Ryan has through two seasons.

Sterling is another loaded track team. The Lady Black Bears lost Sydney Wilson, who now competes for Wichita State, but Taya Wilson is perennially-ranked in multiple events and Ashlyn Kelley has plenty of speed.

The season is off to a quick but cold start. Several teams were scheduled to be in action Tuesday, March 28, but cold rain either postponed or hampered times. The area athletes will be ready to shine when the sun is.

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