

LEARNING TO MAKE THE FASTBALL DANCE



standard four-seam grip

Every season I watch young pitchers take their game out to the mound to face game competition. If I've worked with them, there's an added excitement. If they have a four-seam fastball with velocity, they tend to do okay at the younger levels, at least until the summer when they face all-star lineups. Then they need location, need to keep the ball off the fat part of the plate. Even that isn't always enough to get the best hitters out. Enter the two-seam fastball, the one that sinks and tails, the crooked pitch, the one that dances, the one that surprises hitters.

We've covered the basics of the four-seam fastball. It's the one gripped across the horseshoe seams, the one where four seams cut the air with every rotation of the baseball. It's the power pitch.

The four-seam pitch is the fastest (least drag of air upon the ball), the straightest (the four seams spinning produce true flight), and the smallest (the four seams keep interrupting the hitter's view of the white part of the ball, making the ball look smaller, blurrier). The four-seam is the easiest to control and locate. It's often used to get ahead in the count, and it's the pitch used when throwing to the inside corner and to the top of the strike zone, even up and out of the strike zone ahead in the count to make hitters chase. But what about those counts where you need a strike (2-0, 3-1, especially), and the hitter is expecting a fastball, where he's visualizing and salivating?

The 2-0 and 3-1 counts are where hitters look for a "cripple pitch," a fastball they can crush.

The straighter four-seam isn't the pitch to throw on these counts when you're facing better hitters, unless you have outstanding heat. Most pitchers need a two-seam (untrue flight) fastball on these cripple counts.

TWO-SEAM GRIPS

The two-seam fastball travels 2-4 mph slower than the four-seam. The drag of the air on the ball is greater because more of the white part of the ball interacts with the air during the ball's flight. It's physics. The two-seam fastball appears larger to the hitter's eye because only two seams interrupt his view of the white. The main attraction of the two-seam fastball is that it veers from true flight, meaning that it doesn't travel straight. It sinks or it tails, or both, depending on your arm angle, imparted rotation, and the length and pressure of your fingers on top of the ball. With the two-seamer, movement trumps velocity.

The two-seam fastball grip has many variations in finger and thumb position, and also in finger pressure. You can place two fingers along the narrow seams (what I call the *train tracks*), or two fingers across the (tracks) narrow seams. Going across the narrow seams gets you some sinking action, but very little tailing action. Going along the seams often gets you both sinking and tailing action on the pitch. Also, it's easier to achieve grip variations using the with-the-seams (along the seams) two-seam grip, and you can place the baseball in your glove in the same position each time. This helps a pitcher refrain from telegraphing what he's going to throw, as he can achieve his grip with minimal hand movement inside the glove.

I stress that it's fine to play with grips, but don't mess with your delivery once you've developed its flow and rhythm properly. Some of my pitchers use four or five kinds of fastballs, of different velocity and action. The delivery remains the same. The grip does 100% of the work.



standard two-seam fastball grip

To begin learning to throw the two-seam fastball, I recommend that young pitchers practice the with-the-seams grip. The first two fingers of your pitching hand are placed on the train tracks (see photo above). The thumb may be placed directly under the ball, or you can try sliding it up the side of the ball a little toward the pointer finger. Keep the ball off the palm. The idea is to find out which finger positions and pressure variations get you the most movement on your pitch. Your catcher provides feedback on this.

Further variations include placing greater pressure on the ball with one of the fingers atop the ball. Putting greater pressure on the pointer finger usually gets you more tailing action (the ball tails away toward the throwing arm side). Greater pressure with the middle finger often produces a cutting action (the ball moves or cuts away from the throwing arm side). The cutter is what has made Mariano Rivera millions of dollars, and broken a lot of left-handed hitters' bats.

Have pitchers play with pressure variations. Have your receiver inform them which grip is getting the most action on the pitch. Yet another variation is to turn the ball in your hand so that the middle finger hooks the outside of the seam; this can produce some wicked tailing action for some pitchers if thrown with a firmed-up wrist.

Further variations are achieved by moving the thumb up the side of the ball. Typical thumb position is at *six o'clock* (directly under the ball). Sliding the thumb up to *eight o'clock* may produce different movement. I've had a few pitchers use this two-seam grip with their thumb up around *ten o'clock* to produce a

change-up with tailing, sinking action. They throw this pitch with a firm wrist.

I demand consistent mechanics, timing and arm speed for every pitch, but I do invite pitchers to *play around with grips* until they find the ones that work most effectively and consistently for their hand size and arm angle. I continue to be amazed at the cunning of young pitchers once given instruction and permission to find and develop the necessary weapons to compete with. The two-seam fastball can mean more outs on fewer pitches, and contribute to fresher arms.

DL dalang@telus.net