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**Umpires Are Putting Their Foot Down on Crow Hopping - Softball: Game officials are trying to eliminate the extra steps and leaps taken by high school pitchers.**

By DONNA CARTER, TIMES STAFF WRITER | April 18, 1990

Like the Lindy Hop and the Bunny Hop before it, the crow hop is becoming a fad. The only difference is, the crow hop is not a dance. It is some fancy, against-the-rules footwork used by some softball pitchers to make their pitches dance.

This high school softball season, the National Federation of High School Assns.--which governs high school sports--has emphasized to umpires that the crow hop must be eliminated.

The crow hop always has been against federation rules for high school softball, but enforcement in California has been haphazard.

Compounding the problem was the fact that many of the better high school pitchers played--and some umpires worked--summer fast-pitch softball, which is governed by the Amateur Softball Assn. Under ASA rules, a similar technique called the leap, is legal.

During the summer competition, umpires rarely, if ever, called the crow hop, which resembles the leap.

Because it's difficult for many coaches, umpires, pitchers and fans to distinguish between the crow hop and the leap, the crow hop--though against the rules--has maintained a foothold on many high school pitching mounds.

But this season, in an effort to eliminate the leap, the ASA changed its rules.

"The (old) rule would have been OK as written before if umpires would have called the illegal pitch (the leap), but they wouldn't," ASA's Southern California Commissioner Bobby Jordan said. "Now all of a sudden you had people flying at you and by the time they got through, they were outside the (pitching) circle and on top of the batters. Someone got upset and decided we had to do something about it."

Hence, the ASA rule change. Now it doesn't matter if umpires can distinguish between the leap and the crow hop. Both are illegal in ASA and national federation softball.

And umpires are cracking down on both illegal techniques, though they are not doing so uniformly.

In the quarterfinals of the Orange Glen Tournament in Escondido, Willa Parchen, who pitches for the county's third-ranked team, Marina, was called 16 times.

In the championship of the Cypress Tournament last month, Terri Kobata, a sophomore who pitches for top-ranked Mater Dei, was called 11 times.

In fourth-ranked Kennedy's season-opener against Cypress, umpires called Cheryl Longeway numerous times. But in the championship of the Woodbridge tournament, Longeway was not called once for an illegal pitch.

"Through the years you just kind of get out in front and (the crow hop) just happens," said Longeway, who has been working on changing her style. "It is a bad habit, but the umpires don't call it, so you just go ahead and do it, and it's no big deal."

Frank Wilhem, the national federation's softball rules interpreter for California, says he has been trying to get California umpires to conform for the past two years.

"You have a lot of different rules interpreters within the Southern Section. I think they all instructed their umpires to call it. Whether the umpires called it or not, I don't know. I know it wasn't called as much as it should have been. And I know it wasn't called as much as it has been this year.

"The only reason we have finally gotten through to the umpires is that ASA made a major change so everybody has to do it the same way."

Just what are the crow hop and the leap? Because they are sometimes hard to identify and distinguish, the national federation produced a tape--"The 1990 National Federation Pitching Film." For \$24.95, coaches, players and umpires can get a slow-motion lesson in the do's and don'ts of softball pitching.

Crow hopping occurs when a pitcher uses her power leg to push off the mound, then replants that leg to push forward again before releasing the ball.

Leaping occurs when a pitcher jumps up or forward in the air without driving a second time.

Basically the pitchers must make sure their back foot keeps in contact with, or drags, the ground after it leaves the pitching rubber.

The penalty is similar to a balk in baseball. In baseball, the pitch is ruled a no-pitch and the runners advance a base. In softball, the pitch is ruled a ball and runners advance.

The hop and the leap have been illegal since softball became a national federation high school sport in 1976, but they didn't appear in the rule book by name until 1988, said Brad Rumble, editor of the national federation softball rules book.

As the schools developed programs and pitchers went on to play summer ball, the techniques crept into high school softball and developed names of their own, he said.

"We addressed (illegal pitches) in our first videotape in 1984," Rumble said. "In 1988 we decided to go ahead and list those techniques in the book just to make sure everybody knew they were illegal, so there wouldn't be any confusion whatsoever."

It is hard to pin down why a technique that has been illegal since the national federation sanctioned softball in 1976 is still around.

Especially since most pitching coaches say they don't teach it; many players say they didn't study it, they just picked it up like a bad habit; and many pitchers don't believe it gives them any special advantage.

Ron LeFebvre says the crow hop does give a pitcher a definite advantage, but he is not an advocate of the technique.

He heads Ron LeFebvre's Schools of Baseball and Softball in Orange and Laguna Hills, the largest pitching school in the world.

"The hop increases the arm speed of a pitcher," said LeFebvre, who has a degree in kinesiology--the study of motion. "The average arm speed of a pitcher is about 120 miles per hour and the crow hop can increase it to 220 m.p.h. The arm speed is faster. The landing is closer. It is like taking a (baseball) pitcher and saying, 'All right. We are going to throw all the guys from the Dodgers at 54 feet instead of 60 feet.' "

LeFebvre says students have left him for other pitching coaches because he refuses to teach the crow hop. He refuses because he believes its benefits are short-lived and its detrimental effects can last a lifetime.

"The thing I have noticed throughout the last three years is that, because of the crow hop, there has been at least 100% more injury to female ballplayers," he said. "There is probably not a sound crow hop pitcher around by the time they get to be a senior. They have an injury of some kind--from shoulder to back to knee,

to lower back to a growth plate injury in younger pitchers, to a wrist injury-- because of the explosiveness the crow hop area increases."

LeFebvre says uninformed parents and unscrupulous, unlicensed pitching coaches are the cause for the proliferation of the hop.

"If you want to win this year and you don't have any desire to worry about the kids next year, what difference does it make?" he said. "(The crow hop) is like taking a shot in the arm. The pitcher will be good maybe for a year at most and then they come down."

Ernie Parker, another Orange County pitching coach, said he has not seen those injuries. "I don't think it is going to get you hurt," Parker said. "I don't teach the crow hop. I would like for all of my pitchers to stop it, but I don't insist that they do as long as they are effective and are legal, as long as they aren't getting called too much."

Many coaches see the rule change as one more attempt to reduce the dominance of the pitchers and make the game more exciting at the collegiate level. The first attempt was in 1988 when four-year colleges moved outfield fences in and moved the pitchers to 43 feet from 40, ASA commissioner Jordan said.

"Some coaches are saying we need more excitement in the game, the pitchers are dominating," Parker said. He has even heard of an umpire who narrows his strike zone with a good pitcher to give the batter a better opportunity to hit the ball.

"But pitchers take lessons year-round and practice year-round," Parker said. "The hitters don't. What they are doing is anything they can to help the pitchers. They are handicapping the pitchers."

But not enforcing rules against the crow hop and leap could be even more of a handicap for players who plan to pitch in college.

Collegiate freshman pitchers already have to adjust to throwing from 43 feet instead of 40 feet. They also have to have both feet on the rubber at the start of their pitch, which differs from high school.

"I won't let my girls crow hop because they'll go to college and get their heads knocked off," said Robert Melendrez, who coaches the Southern California Blasters, the Laguna Hills-based 16-and-under ASA team.

Lisa Wehren, a Woodbridge graduate who starts for San Jose State, trains with LeFebvre. She had little trouble making the transition in college because she did

not crow hop in high school. She said the little extra speed a pitcher gets from crow hopping is not of much use in college.

"Speed is not really effective at this level unless you're Michele Granger or somebody like that. It is more spin and stuff like that. I personally get more leg power from leaving my feet on the rubber, just staying right there and driving my leg off the rubber."

Wehren has not been called for the crow hop nor has she seen another college pitcher called for it.

The willy-nilly enforcement of the rule has upset some coaches. "I think it is like traffic cops," Mater Dei Coach Cathy Quesnell said. "They go in and have a meeting and say, we've got to crack down on something to get these drivers. And some are going to do it and just be real forceful about it, some will only do it if it is really obvious, and some just aren't going to do it, and that is basically how the umpires have done it."

Said Canyon Coach Lance Eddy: "Either get the rule out of there or if they are going to have the rule, call it."

As instructional chairman for the Orange County Softball Umpires Assn., John Hill tells his umpires to call the leap and crow hop. "I tell them that they have to use their judgment, and if they don't call it, that is their problem," Hill said. "But the rule is there and it needs to be called."

Hill says there is a parallel between the enforcement of the illegal pitch rule and the enforcement of the basketball coaching box rule.

The coaching box rule states that when not seated, coaches can only stand within a certain box, and then only to instruct the team or cheer spontaneously, but not to harass the officials.

"There were some officials who were looking for it, and then other officials who would not call it," Hill said. "Some umpires won't call it if both pitchers are doing it because they figure what's the advantage? Unless the other coach complains or brings it to their attention, they won't call it."

Rumble said he has not yet received any telephone calls or complaints about spotty enforcement in California.

But if there are problems, it will appear on questionnaires that representatives fill out at the federation's June rules meeting and they would be addressed then, he said.

"Coaches have a responsibility in this whole thing, too," Rumble said. "If they know the rules, they should be teaching the kids to pitch according to the rules, too. If umpires called it like they were supposed to be calling it, that would help

eliminate the problem also. It is a team effort so to speak. But you have to recognize the problem first. We have take some measure to recognize and correct the problem and that is what it will take."