

## ***Softball: Pitchers take a step back !***

*By Kevin Mills, Staff Writer*

When Laura Getchell made the transition from high school softball to her summer team, she had to take a few steps back.

That's because, last year, the Gray-New Gloucester pitcher was throwing from a pitcher's mound 40 feet from the plate and her **ASA** team was using a mound three feet further away.

"In my first game, I got rocked," Getchell said. "I was like 'All right, this is good. We're off to a great start.' But I've kind of adjusted and it's good because I won't have to transition to 43 back to 40 and then 43 again."

***All high school pitchers made that adjustment this season. A mound of 43 feet has become the norm in the state, and thus far, the change has been rather seamless.***

"For such a major change, I've heard almost nothing," said Jeff Sturgis, an assistant executive director of the Maine Principals' Association. "That's usually good. If there's any big problems we'll hear about it."

It is hard to gauge just what kind of impact the change has had, but it has potentially been a good move for pitchers, hitters and fielders.

"It is a difference, but it's not huge," Getchell said. "It's not like it's an extra 10 feet."

The national federation passed the rule change last July. It is the same distance used in college and in **Amateur Softball Association of America (ASA)** under-18 play.

"Softball is the only sport where high school kids don't use the college distances," Sturgis said. "In baseball, from the age of 13 and up, it is consistent. So it only made sense that we'd standardize softball to be compatible, too."

The federation mandated the change be made by the **2011** season, but left it up to individual states to determine how soon to enact the change.

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Telstar's Kayla Merrill knew the change was coming and worked hard to prepare for it. She hasn't missed a beat as she's pitched her Western C champs from Telstar to an unbeaten record. She struck out 61 and walked just five in her first seven games.

"It wasn't too bad," she said. "I've been throwing all winter and getting ready. I played indoor at Frozen Ropes. So it wasn't that hard of an adjustment, but I still had to work hard at it to keep my strength up."

The change in distance was expected to have an impact in a variety of ways. It was hoped to benefit pitchers by giving them a little more space to throw more pitches. Merrill said the challenge was to maintain her arm strength to keep up the speed on her fastball, but it also has helped her throw other pitches as well.

"The 43 feet helps some of her pitches," said Telstar coach Jim Lunney. "She throws a curve that does move a little bit. She throws the drop that moves a little more."

Lauren Hall of Oak Hill says she likes the impact it has had on her pitches. Hall started the year 8-1 and has hurled her Raiders to one of the top spots in the Western B standings.

"My pitches break more," Hall said. "They do more of what they're supposed to do."

Another benefit for pitchers is the three feet puts them further away from the plate and provides more space to handle any balls hit directly back at them. There are some pitchers who even have a lengthy hop or two after they pitch that puts them closer to harm if a line drive comes back up the middle.

"There's a lot of reaction time," Hall said. "I love it. I almost got a line drive to the face. I thought the extra three feet helped."

While some of the top flight pitchers were expected to handle the change, one concern was that teams with less experienced pitchers or programs with less depth might struggle. The extra few feet might lead to even more wildness and walks, especially for pitchers with limited repertoires. Scores have been high in some of the Class C and D games this season, but how big a role the mound change has had is hard to determine.

Vinalhaven coach Jess McGreevy, a Buckfield native and former assistant at Jay, said she hasn't seen much different with her club. The Vikings have gone from a club team to a varsity sport this year and have fared well in the early season.

"For our pitchers, it hasn't made any difference that I have noticed," McGreevy said. "We are still in the developmental process with our pitchers, and they are still working on the fundamentals. They had not had the opportunity to get really attached to the closer depth."



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One of the other benefits for the change was the impact it might have on hitting. Softball has often been a sport in which a team could possess a dominant pitcher and that would be enough to take them far. Opponents would have little opportunity to hit against an overpowering ace. In addition, that pitcher's own fielders would have little chance to see action in the field. It was hoped that the distance would allow for hitters to execute a little better.

One problem that has arisen is how middle schools handle the change. The MPA doesn't oversee that level. So it was up to various leagues to determine whether to change to 43 feet or stick with 40. Some have changed this season while others waited. The problem is that some middle schools use high school fields.

"I heard in one place where they played a middle school game and the mound was at 43 feet instead of 40 and they couldn't figure out what was wrong with the pitches," Sturgis said.

"When you're kind of far back in the box, I've been seeing the ball a lot better this year," Hall said. "My hitting average has definitely changed. I definitely like the whole extra three feet."

McGreevy's team has scored nearly 60 runs in its first five games. She says she sees a difference in their ability at the plate.

"I think that I do see my hitters making contact against the stronger pitchers we see," McGreevy said. "I wonder if they would have made as much contact if we were at 40 feet?"

States that already moved the mound back saw an increase in offense. With more balls being put in play, that has put the onus on defense. One informal study using college numbers from one year to another showed an increase in offense but a decline in errors after changing the mound distance. With dominant pitchers, fielders would have to make minimal plays and their fielding skills wouldn't develop. With more action in the field, the defenses get more action and opportunity. As a result, an improvement in defensive play followed.

"I think it affects the pitchers more than it helps the hitters," said EL coach Elaine Derosby. "If they don't have junk pitches that can break, they say it gives the hitters a little more time to see it, but I think it affects the pitching and then in turn the hitters."

