



Clayton Kershaw

ARM-AGEDDON?

Dodger pitchers weigh in on the growing concern over schoolkids throwing too much too soon **BY CHRIS GIGLEY**

Youth baseball has become a big deal in America, with more summer travel teams and showcase tournaments than ever before. If you're a pitcher with a possible future in the game, you're going to throw a lot of pitches over the course of the year.

There has been much hand-wringing over whether that has at least partly contributed to a rash of Tommy John surgeries in professional and amateur baseball. Author and national baseball writer Jeff Passan put an exclamation point on the issue with his new book, "The Arm."

Passan explored several possible underlying issues to the problem, and one is forcing kids to commit to only baseball — and pitching, in particular — as early as grade school. Dodger ace Clayton Kershaw said he doesn't like that trend.

"I played football and basketball up until my freshman year in high school," said Kershaw, whom the Dodgers drafted in 2006 out of Highland Park High School just outside Dallas. "I definitely think it's important to play other sports when you're young."

Dodger lefthander Scott Kazmir, drafted in 2003 by the Mets out of Cypress Falls High School near Houston, said he didn't focus on baseball until his last few years of high school.

"I'm from Texas, where it's almost mandatory to play football," he said. "I was playing football and baseball all the way until then — even basketball and soccer until high school started. I was doing everything I could. I was just active."

And yet, for serious youth players, there really is no season for baseball. It's year-round, a lot like it is for the pros. In between



Kenta Maeda

high school baseball and summer travel teams, the game's young elite seize opportunities to play fall and winter showcase tournaments. This is not a new phenomenon, either. Kazmir remembers playing year round in the early 2000s.

"There'd be a little gap between seasons, during football, maybe," he said. "But after that it was always back to baseball. I did all the tournaments, like the Area Code Games and Perfect Game. It was always the weekends when we'd just take off for one of those."

Kershaw said his baseball schedule wasn't quite as jam-packed.

"In the fall, I'd do maybe a couple of things, but not a ton," he said. "You definitely need to stop throwing when you're young."

Traditionally, that has not been an option for pitchers in Japan. Passan devoted an entire chapter to the subject in his book, highlighting the fact that teenage pitchers who throw upwards of 200 pitches per start are celebrated by fans, coaches and even parents for their grit.

Dodgers right-hander Kenta Maeda said it's changing, though.

"There's been a lot of conversation about elementary and middle-school kids," said Maeda through an interpreter. "Pitch limits are part of the routine now."

Unfortunately, this new mindset was too late for the 28-year-old Maeda, who said he started pitching seriously when he was 11 years old and proceeded to play five times a week year-round. His weekly routine was practice during the week and pitching games on the weekends.

"I was okay, but I did know pitchers who got hurt," he said. "I think in terms of throwing a lot of pitches, high school is where it gets pretty intense. There are no pitch limits. Some pitchers throw three or four days in a row."

Maeda did it.

"And I'd throw complete games," he added.

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Scott Kazmir

When asked whether he feels lucky to have survived that ordeal, his answer needs no translation.

“Yes,” he said in English with a laugh.

While the Dodger pitchers agree that throwing a lot of pitches as a youth isn’t a good thing, they don’t all agree on whether it’s okay in high school.

“I think it built me up for what I can handle today,” said Kazmir. “That’s kind of the problem right now. Guys don’t build up throughout their careers in the minor leagues. They get here, and they’re expected to do something they’ve never done before. It’s tough for anyone to make that adjustment.”

To his point, Kazmir breezed through the minors in just two years before making his big-league debut with Tampa Bay

on August 23, 2004. Pitchers and position players drafted out of high school typically need at least four to five years to develop.

Kershaw, however, urges caution, even for high school pitchers.

“Pitch once a week, and that’s it,” he said. “Don’t come back in the middle of the week and close games. Don’t sit out there for 140 pitches in a seven-inning game. It’s just common-sense stuff.”

Kershaw added that young pitchers should also take a more holistic approach, placing as much importance on proper weight training and recovery as they do on throwing. Oh, and he has one more reminder.

“Play as many sports as you want to for sure,” he said.

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