I often get asked whether I favor some sort of mandated pitching limits for youth and high school baseball players. If we lived in a perfect world, my opinion on that subject wouldn’t matter. But, since I get asked the question so often, I guess the world of amateur baseball isn’t perfect.

The easy answer to this question really is a cop out. Because the current structure of youth and high school baseball is so fragmented, there is no realistic way to develop and enforce a universal set of pitching limits. There are too many leagues and national baseball organizations playing under too many different sets of rules to be able to establish any kind of blanket regulations. Hopefully, at some point there will be a way to address important issues across all of amateur baseball, but as of right now that just isn’t the case.

So, what can we do? Well, right now the only steps that organizations such as Major League Baseball, USA Baseball, Ripken Baseball, Babe Ruth Baseball, etc. can take are to educate coaches everywhere as to the potential of overuse injuries among young baseball players and how to best prevent those injuries from occurring.

While many of us who are involved with youth baseball played the game and are aware of how much we could throw or pitch without hurting ourselves, very few of us possess the medical background, knowledge or resources to develop any types of appropriate limits. We need to rely on medical doctors and studies performed by them to educate the masses. Still, if you look at all of the information regarding this topic that is out there, you will find many differing plans and opinions.

Determining proper pitching limits is a very challenging task for a number of reasons. First of all, many local and national organizations have mandated how many innings a pitcher of a certain age is allowed to throw over a period of days or a week. How beneficial can this be when some innings can be completed with three or four pitches being thrown while others take 40 or 50? Also, does the week in question last from Sunday to Saturday, with the slate being cleared no matter what the following Sunday? Or does the week encompass any seven-day period that continues to roll over? Should the limits be expanded for postseason play and other tournaments?

Second, some organizations have attempted to deal with the potential discrepancy in the number of pitches it can take to complete an inning by limiting the number of pitches that can be thrown by one player during a fixed period of time. It already can be tough for a coach to find a parent or another volunteer who knows the game well enough to keep score. Under this scenario it would be necessary to find someone to keep track of the number of pitches thrown as well. And, if a team is fortunate to find someone who can do this competently, does each team supply someone to count both teams’ pitches? Do they count their own team’s pitches? Do they count the opposing team’s pitches? Who mediates disputed pitch counts? And if we really are interested in the physical well-being of young players, shouldn’t we limit the number of breaking balls that young pitchers are permitted to throw? None of these questions really has a clear-cut answer.

Third, and probably most important, whenever I am questioned about pitching limits, the questions usually is phrased this way: “I’m a coach of a 10-year-old team. We play two or three games a week. What is your opinion on limiting the number of innings or pitches a kid can throw over a given period of time, and what would the appropriate limit be for a 10-year-old?”
This question, like many questions about youth baseball, really cannot be given a blanket answer. It only can be answered appropriately by an individual coach, parent or player. Kids develop at different rates mentally and physically. What’s good for my 10-year-old might not be good for your 10-year-old. If my son is 5-foot-8, 150 lbs. and yours is 4-foot-11, 85 lbs., why should my kid be subjected the same limitations that your child is?

When you factor in all of those issues and questions, it really is miraculous that so many leagues have been able to come to some kind of consensus about pitching limitations. It’s also admirable that so many attempts have been made, but I have to wonder how effective these rules are in terms of actually preventing the abuse of young pitchers’ arms.

It really is a shame that we have to impose pitching limits of any kind. I know that I’m naïve and that I view the world through rose-colored glasses at times, but it seems to me that the vast majority of coaches are involved with the game because they love the game of baseball, enjoy working with kids and want to help young players develop into successful athletes who love, honor and respect the game the way that they do. If that’s the case, if the main objective of youth baseball is developmental, then we shouldn’t have to worry about imposing limits on coaches. Right?

The spirit behind any pitch limit is to protect the kids, but the ultimate protection should come from the common sense of the coach and the parents. If pitch counts or innings pitches are not regulated, the accountability goes back to the parents and coaches. I’d hate to think that a parent would allow a coach to abuse his or her child’s arm at a young age for the sake of winning a game or a tournament.

I’m not against pitch limits, because there is a certain amount of ignorance out there about how to properly utilize young pitchers. Suggested, as opposed to mandated, pitch limits do provide a guideline to help make coaches aware that they may be overusing one of their pitchers. Rules can be good in lieu of common sense, but ultimately common sense always should prevail. When there are no limits, it clearly is the responsibility of the parents and the coaches to monitor a young pitcher’s workload. When there is abuse, that’s where the blame must be placed.

Remember, whether you coach a “travel” team or a recreational team, youth baseball should not be all about winning. It should be about developing baseball players, teaching the game and having fun. While winning takes on greater importance at the high school level, high school coaches still should value the concept of developing good baseball players and good people over winning at all costs.

It is important for coaches at all levels to have a good rapport and open line of communication with the parents and the players. Taking a common sense approach by utilizing the information about pitching limits that already is available and relying on your instincts while also soliciting advice from the players and their parents is a great way to make decisions. Abuse of young pitchers only becomes an issue when an overemphasis is placed on winning. If this is the case, it is the parents’ responsibility to discuss the situation with the coach or find another place for their child to play.