

BASEBALL

2022 PRESEASON GUIDE

Here's Your Sign

New Language Addresses Start of Pitcher's Delivery

During its annual June meeting, held virtually for the second consecutive year due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the NFHS Baseball Rules Committee voted to approve one rule change and also crafted its points of emphasis for the 2022 season.

The rule change, which deals with how a pitcher handles taking a sign from a catcher, and the POEs were subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors in July.

The POEs are all considered to be of equal importance and appear in no particular order.

Referee thanks Elliot Hopkins, NFHS director of sports, sanctioning and student services, for reviewing this information.

Pitching (6-1-1)

A pitcher taking a sign from the catcher is one of the fundamental rules of baseball, allowing both the offensive and defensive teams to understand that playing action is about to take place. That basic act has become much more complex in recent years due to the proliferation of signals being relayed directly from the dugout to the pitcher and catcher either verbally or through the use of posters, signs or wristbands. However, such activity was not supported by an accompanying rule to ►

After plate umpire Steve Baker, New Castle, Ind., puts the ball in play, there are specific procedures a pitcher must follow in high school baseball before delivering a pitch. A rule change approved for the 2022 season requires the pitcher to either take or simulate taking a sign from the catcher before beginning the delivery.



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- ▶ allow the offensive team to be prepared for the start of action.

Therefore, rule 6-1-1 has been changed to include wording that, while defensive teams are legally allowed to relay signs in this newly accepted manner, the pitcher must still “take or simulate taking his sign from the catcher with his pivot foot in contact with the pitcher’s plate.” This requirement is in place whether the pitcher is working out of the windup or the set position, as established in 6-1-2 and 6-1-3.

By simulating taking a sign (PlayPics A and B), the playing action is allowed to start in the same fashion as it always has, eliminating the possibility of a pitcher illegally delivering a quick pitch to an unsuspecting hitter or a baserunner having the opportunity to lead off from a base.

POINTS OF EMPHASIS

Excessive Celebration

Spontaneous, in-the-moment celebrations of good plays have now evolved into more choreographed celebrations that include props and

players being assigned specific roles, leading to activity that can best be described as “one-upmanship” or “showboating.” Coaches should be the first line in preventing this type of behavior from occurring. However, if they are unwilling or unable to manage the emotions of their players or the celebrations, umpires have existing rules that provide warnings, possible restrictions and ejections, and should be willing to use them as necessary.

Proper Use of Equipment

Players should not be modifying or misusing equipment in a way it was not meant to be used as designed by equipment manufacturers. Doing so created questions about how the equipment will perform and also creates liability issues.

Sitting on Buckets (Coaches)

Coaches, players, substitutes and other bench personnel are not allowed, by rule, to leave the dugout during a live ball for any unauthorized purpose. This includes sitting outside the dugout on a

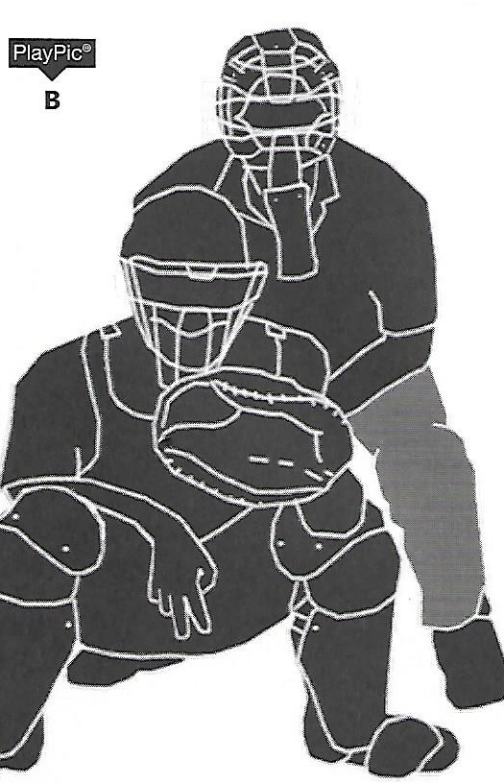
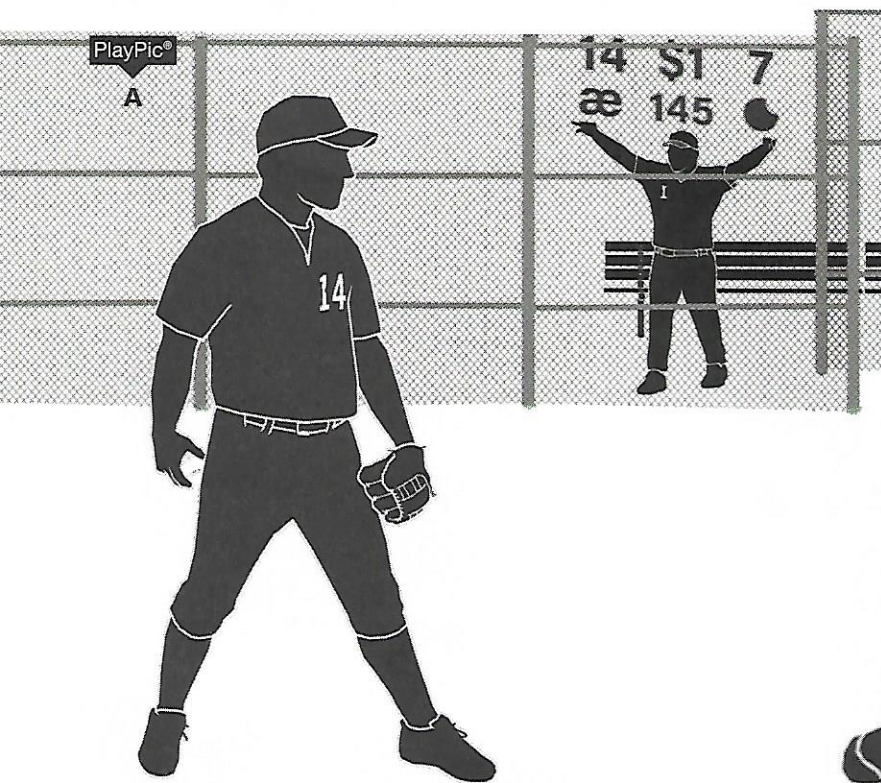
bucket or stool.

Lodged Ball Procedure

A baseball that remains on the playing field but has become wedged, stuck, lost or unreachable is defined to be a lodged ball. If the ball impacts something, stops abruptly and does not fall back or roll immediately, it is considered lodged. There are existing NFHS rules to deal with a batted, thrown or pitched ball that enters a player’s uniform, catcher’s equipment or umpire’s equipment. However, if a ball becomes stuck in a player’s glove, it remains in play, with the glove/ball combination being treated as a live ball.

Sportsmanship

Chants/intentional distractions and loud noises (natural or artificial) directed at the opponent prior to pitching, hitting or fielding is not good sportsmanship and should not be accepted. As with excessive celebrations, coaches should be the first line in curbing this behavior, and if they are unable to do so, the umpires have tools spelled out in the rulebook to address these actions. □



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Flashback: Dig Into a New DH

NFHS Rule Change Expands Designated Hitter Options

The NFHS Baseball Rules Committee opted for just one rule change during its June 2020 meeting in Indianapolis. The rule change, related to the use of the designated hitter, was subsequently approved by the NFHS board of directors and made public later that month.

The decision was made not to vote on nor implement any rule changes for the 2021 season due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Designated Hitter (3-1-4b)

The change to rule 3-1-4 provides an extra scenario in which a designated hitter may be used. The starting designated hitter may now also be a starting defensive player.

Teams that utilize this option will have one player in the lineup listed with two positions: one of the nine defensive positions and designated hitter. This may include any of the nine defensive positions on the field and is not confined to just the pitcher. Teams using this scenario would begin the game with a lineup featuring nine starters — nine defensive players, one of whom is also the designated hitter.

The role of the defensive player in this dual role may be substituted for by any legal substitute. Once that occurs, the original player/designated hitter may re-enter as a defensive player one time.

The newer of the two DH options differs from the traditional use of the designated hitter at the NFHS level. In that scenario, which remains an option, the designated hitter is listed as a 10th starter who hits for any one of the nine starting defensive players.

Teams also still have the option of not using a designated hitter and batting a straight lineup of nine players.

Play 1: Team A lists Daniels as the starting designated hitter and the starting first baseman in the No. 4 position in the lineup. **Ruling 1:** This is legal, as a player can now be listed on the starting lineup as one of the nine defensive positions and a designated hitter.



When high school coaches submit their lineups, they will have a new option for the designated hitter under an NFHS rule change made prior to the 2020 season. Dominic Machado, Los Angeles.

Play 2: Team A lists Daniels as the starting designated hitter and the starting first baseman in the No. 4 position in the lineup. In the fourth inning, Jackson substitutes as the first baseman. In the fifth inning, Daniels comes to bat in the No. 4 position. In the sixth inning, Daniels re-enters defensively as the first baseman. **Ruling 2:** This is legal, as the role of the defensive player has been substituted by a legal substitute, while the designated hitter role remains intact. The original defensive player/designated hitter is also allowed one re-entry on defense.

Play 3: Team A lists Daniels as

the starting designated hitter and the starting first baseman in the No. 4 position in the lineup. In the fourth inning, Jackson substitutes as the first baseman. In the fifth inning, Jackson comes to bat in the No. 4 position.

Ruling 3: This is legal, and the role of the designated hitter is terminated for the remainder of the game. However, Daniels still has re-entry rights, may re-enter at any defensive position and may replace Jackson as the No. 4 hitter in the lineup.

Play 4: Team A lists Daniels as the starting designated hitter and the starting first baseman in the No. 4 position in the lineup. In the top of the ►

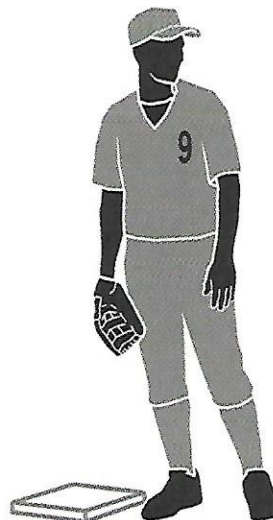
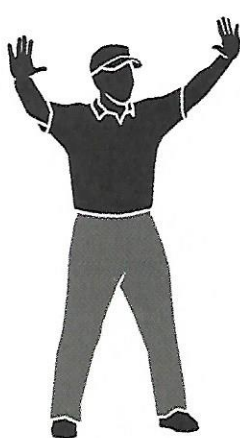
► fifth inning, Daniels hits a single, and Jackson substitutes for him as a pinch-runner. In the bottom of the fifth inning, Daniels continues to play first base on defense. In the sixth inning, Daniels comes to bat again in the No. 4 position. **Ruling 4:** This is legal. Once Jackson entered as an offensive substitute for Daniels, the role of the designated hitter is terminated. However, Daniels still has re-entry rights, may re-enter at any defensive position and may replace Jackson as the No. 4 hitter in the lineup.

Play 5: Team A lists Daniels as the starting designated hitter in the No. 4 position in the lineup, and Jackson as the starting first baseman in the No. 10 position. **Ruling 5:** This is legal, as the designated hitter may still be a 10th starter hitting for any one of the nine starting defensive players.

Play 6: Team A lists Daniels as the starting designated hitter in the No. 4 position in the lineup, and Jackson as the starting first baseman in the No. 10 position. In the fifth inning, Jackson comes to bat in the No. 4 position.

Ruling 6: This is legal. Jackson is allowed to pinch-hit, and the role of the designated hitter is terminated for the remainder of the game.

Play 7: Team A lists Daniels as the starting designated hitter in the No. 4 position in the lineup, and Jackson



PlayPic®



If the DH is batting for another player, when he bats, he is a DH. As a result, if a runner comes in for him when he gets on base, it is a substitution, and that player is now the DH. If the DH is a player/DH, he is batting as the DH. A substitution by an offensive player would eliminate the role of the DH.

as the starting first baseman in the No. 10 position. In the fifth inning, Daniels replaces Jackson as the first baseman. **Ruling 7:** This is legal. Daniels is allowed to play a defensive position, and the role of the designated

hitter is terminated for the remainder of the game. However, Jackson still has re-entry rights as a starter and may either pinch-hit or pinch-run for Daniels, and may also re-enter on defense. □

It's High Time to Talk Timing

Umpires always stress the importance of good timing behind the plate (and on the bases, but that's a topic for another day). But to talk about good timing begs the question: What does it mean? And how do we make it happen?

We can be too quick and, for example, ball a pitch that looked like it would be a high fastball because we didn't give ourselves enough time to see it break down into the strike zone.

Conversely, our timing can be too slow. Then we can second-guess ourselves, with bad results. For example, we see a pitch and instinctively know it caught the corner of the plate — was in our "window" — but because we're so deliberate we talk ourselves into believing it was out of

the zone, so we call it a ball. Analyzing things to the nth degree may be required for someone in law school, but it can be counterproductive on the ball field.

If we're quicker to call obvious pitches — balls or strikes — than close ones, people may infer we're unsure of ourselves on the latter ones. Projecting uncertainty is a bad deal. So strive to pause for the same amount of time on each pitch, regardless of where it is. A two-count pause after it hits the mitt is just right — not so quick that you can't register where a close pitch is, and not so slow that we second-guess ourselves. If we keep the same rhythm on every pitch, we buy time to take a second look at close ones before calling them without anyone being the wiser.

Also, try to use the same volume whether or not it's a close call — not so loud that we're virtually screaming, which isn't as convincing as some folks think, but not so soft that we're barely heard, which doesn't project confidence. Back in the day umpires poured it on if they had a close "decision" pitch — strike three or ball four — but we sell ourselves better if we look like it isn't our first rodeo and we're in command. The same forceful-but-not-over-the-top volume on each pitch is part of that sales effort. Keeping the same volume also makes it easier to keep our timing consistent.

Our strike signal can affect our timing. An exuberant signal — like the "punch" or arm jerked skyward that were once in vogue — can make us



Proper timing allows umpires to see a play start, develop and finish before rendering a decision. On this play, Derek Clair, Yorba Linda, Calif., does a good job of seeing the entire play, including the baseball loose on the ground, before making his ruling.

► speed up our call. Many umpires favor signaling to the side in a deliberate, crisp, controlled manner. (Too lackadaisical and we won't convince our mother we know what we're doing.) This relaxed motion makes it easier to slow down timing and keep it the same throughout the game.

A good rule of thumb is to check with a partner about the end of the second inning to see if your timing is consistent and not too fast or slow. We can work for ages and not recognize when our tempo is off a bit, and an outsider — at least one who will be honest with us — can tell us if things are amiss. Just as something a bit out of kilter can make a huge difference in our

golf swing, it can matter in pitch-calling.

Try not to deviate from your normal routine, cadence and volume when the game gets in later, or extra, innings and heated up. It's OK for the troops to get excited, but for us to appear to be may send the message we're in over our heads. And if we get caught up in the hoopla it's more likely our timing will speed up, which increases the odds of missing a pitch (or more) when things really count.

Finally, try not to anticipate what pitch may be thrown. Most of us have a pretty good sense of what to expect in particular situations, but it's better to take each pitch as it comes without guessing what it will be. □

QUICK TIP

While it is always a good idea to communicate with a host school before an assignment regarding accommodations at the field, it's even more crucial this season as teams continue to decide how to return to play amid ongoing COVID-19 protocols. Many schools are still limiting access to locker rooms, and the last thing you want to have happen is to show up at a game site and get caught with your pants down — both figuratively and literally.

Anything But (Base)ic

Know How to Stay Engaged and Accurate During Basework

Just as we can have rough days on the plate, we can have base games where it seems we'd be better off to flip a coin. We're all going to have bang-bang plays where we do everything right but freeze-frame video shows we kicked the call; that's part of being human. But how do we account for misses that are obvious or happen too often?

Timing

Good timing is as essential on the bases as it is on the plate. No matter how experienced we are or how sound our judgment may be, our mind has to have a chance to process what our eyes see. Let the play complete itself and then pause before ruling. When we're too quick we may, for example, call a runner out because the throw is good when, in fact, he did a hook slide and avoided the tag.

Positioning

Getting a good angle on a play is important. This is one area in which the thinking has evolved over the years. In the old days, for example, umpires from the big leagues on down called plays at the plate from up the third-base line. This left them looking at the runner's backside, sometimes with disastrous results.

At some point, plate umpires shifted and began calling tag plays at the plate from the ball-strike position. This caught on as umpires realized they had a better view with the ball and runner coming into them. Now, umpires start on the third-base line extended and adjust depending on how the throw comes in and how the runner slides.

The same thinking applies to tag plays on the bases. In crews of fewer than four umpires we don't always have the luxury of making the ball and runner come into us, but if we can, we should.

The smaller our crew, angles become especially important. In two- and three-umpire crews, there's no way to get on top of every play,

particularly when a play at one base is quickly followed by one at another base. We must accept the fact we're going to end up some distance away from some plays and try to position ourselves to maximize the chances of seeing all of their pertinent ingredients.

A few words about being on top of plays. People applaud this, but we can get so close that we lose sight of the forest for the trees. Even in four-umpire crews try to stay some distance away. A good rule of thumb is to set up about 15 feet from the bag, which collapses your field of vision and gives you a better perspective on the ball and runner's foot, especially if the fielder had to scoop the ball off the ground. Also, stay back on tag plays unless the runner slides away from the bag and you have to follow the tag.

Be Still

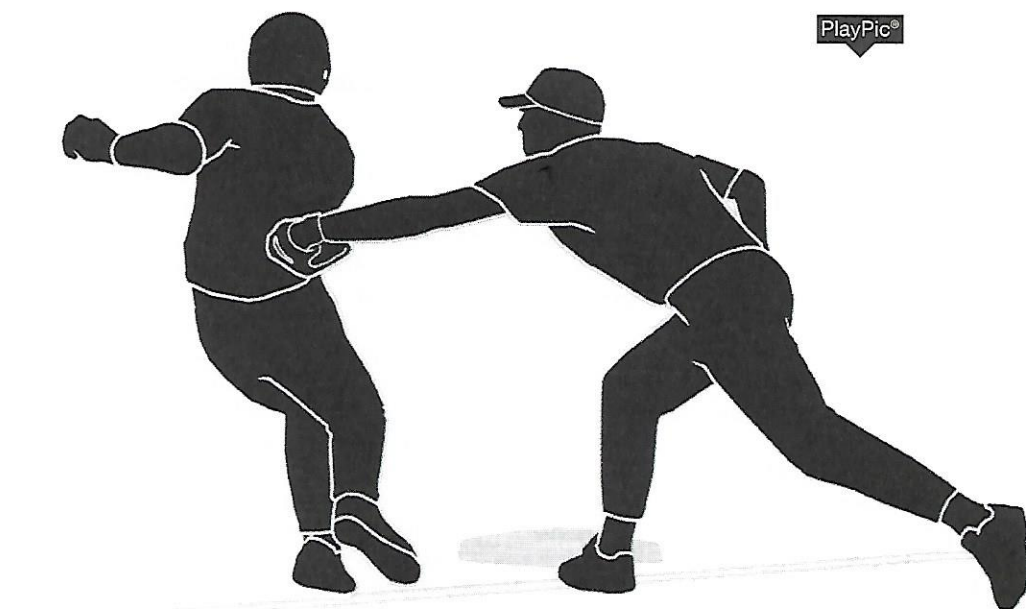
Come to a stop as the crucial part of the play unfolds. Watch video of major league games decades ago and you'll see umpires calling plays on the run, but now we know we can't see, and properly register, all of the detail of a play if our eyes are bouncing up

and down. Sometimes it's hard to force yourself to stop when you're pretty far away from a play, as in a two-umpire crew where you have back-to-back plays at different bases, but you're better off to get the best angle possible and then stop wherever you are.

Don't Anticipate

We set ourselves up to fail if we anticipate how a play will develop, even subconsciously and for a split second. If B1 hits a ground ball in the hole so F6 has to backhand it, we can't let our first thought be that there's no way F6 can make the play. That plants a seed in our mind that's hard to overcome if we suddenly have a whacker because B1 tripped coming out of the box or is just slow. Same thing if B2 hits a ground-ball bullet to F5 so that our mind instantly registers out, but the runner is especially fast and beats the throw by an eyelash.

Keeping these items in mind should help you to be a good base umpire. And if you boot a call, you'll be better able to assess why so that you don't screw up the next one. □



Save the Big Show for the Big Play

It used to be that in many instances, instead of staying set, plate umpires moved around as pitches came in. Base umpires called plays on the run and their timing was quick.

Also, their signals were flamboyant. That is the topic of this column.

One umpire called strike three by taking two steps to the side and using a huge, over-the-top punch that left him facing the dugout. Another gave it the “big sell” when the batter swung and missed for strike three — not a checked swing that may have warranted an emphatic call, but a 360-degree number. One jumped off the ground and shot his arm skyward on a routine front end of a double play. A first-base umpire used a rat-tat-tat punch signal on close out calls. I counted eight jabs on one.

It used to be that we were encouraged to “pour it on” to sell calls. The thinking was people will climb all over us if we don’t project confidence and being demonstrative was the only way to do so.

We’ve written before about the myriad ways in which ideas about mechanics, strike zones, appealing checked swings, positioning and the like have changed over time. This is also true of signals. The need to sell calls isn’t any less important today; what’s changed is the belief that overly animated gestures are the best way to do it. Frankly, things some umpires did back then that people found amusing and even admirable wouldn’t be tolerated for one second today.

Watch umpires at other levels and you’ll see styles that differ but are, across the board, firm but low-key and largely devoid of emotion. Crisp but unobtrusive strike calls, whether an in-the-air fist or to-the-side point. Third-strike signals that may have flair but aren’t over-the-top. Punchouts on plate and base plays that are decisive but controlled and don’t involve arms flailing about. Safe calls that may involve one repeat signal but not 10. A mere acknowledgement on routine outs and safes and swinging strikes.

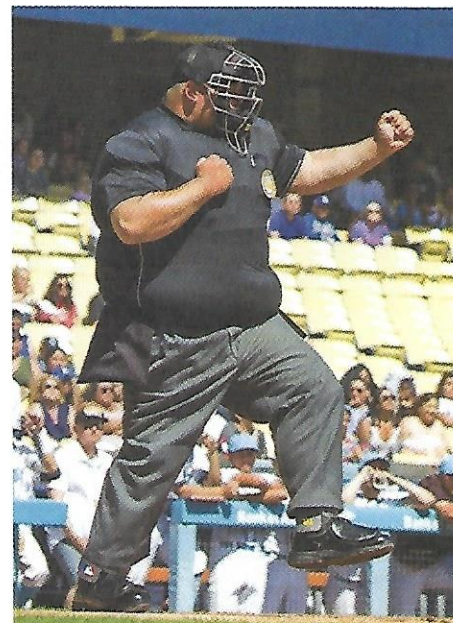
A quick word about acknowledgements. If all our signals are big, we won’t have anything powerful in our arsenal when there’s a close play we need to sell. How can an over-the-top punch carry any weight on a whacker if we use it when a runner is out by two steps? Save the big signal for the bang-bang play and just acknowledge swinging strikes and obvious safes and outs with a quick fist, point or palms-down gesture.

When it’s time to go big, keep things in check. If we get too exuberant, we risk sending a message opposite from the desired one. Our goal should be to come across as in command, but if we use overly dramatic signals we can look like we’re trying too hard and are as amped up as the participants. And if we go too far, we may seem comical, even buffoonish. None of this inspires confidence. Today’s low-key signals are effective because they say, “Don’t worry; I’ve got this.”

Another problem with animated signals is there can be an “in your face” quality to them; it’s almost as if we’re relishing the chance to ring someone up. This wasn’t a big deal in yesteryear when our relations with the participants were more confrontational, but it doesn’t sell well in today’s “kinder and gentler” era where we’re not supposed to seem to be the aggressor.

Flamboyant signals can negatively affect our timing. There’s often a correlation between how demonstrative our strike, safe or out signal is and how quick our timing is. It’s almost as if we can’t wait to get after it. The more controlled our signals are, the more likely it is we’ll stay set in our plate stance long enough to see the pitch into the mitt and wait a beat or two before calling it, and be able to carefully process what happened on a play on the bases before ringing up safe or out.

Dramatic signals can also take us out of the play. Watching the old strike-three signal that left the umpire facing away from the plate, one wonders



A controlled, decisive punchout, as shown here by Omar Astorga, Canoga Park, Calif., is all that’s necessary from a competent home-plate umpire. There is no need to be overly demonstrative.

what would happen if a runner was stealing and there was a batter-catcher collision? He would have had no clue about who did what to whom. Same thing if we get so animated on the bases that our head spins away and we don’t, for example, see a fielder drop the ball. It’s hard enough to call tight plays correctly without using signals that may prevent us from seeing everything that happens or being able to process it well.

If you’re already the low-key type, great. Just be sure your signals are crisp and firm, not limp, for the latter won’t convince your mother that you’re right. But if an objective assessment makes you think you’re in the over-the-top camp, tone it down. Being too demonstrative won’t project the authoritative, but relatively emotionless, image we want — indeed, quite the contrary — and may have other negative effects as well. □

Indicating What's on Your Indicator

Plate umpires need to develop consistent methods for announcing the ball-and-strike count correctly in the required game situations. Almost as important is developing an understanding of when a count call is not needed and should not be given.

Timing the Count

The game situation should dictate when the plate umpire signals the count. When the pitcher engages the pitcher's plate is a critical time to announce the count. This allows time for the catcher to receive signs from the bench and give them to the pitcher. Just before the batter steps in the batter's box and before the ball is put in play are also critical times.

Signaling the count too early in a batting sequence leads to requests to give it again. Signaling the count too late in game action disrupts the flow of the game. Not announcing it clearly impacts the flow of the game as batters request "Time" and step out of the batter's box to confirm the count.

It's recommended to announce the count after a foul ball and before putting the ball back in play.

Some umpires do not routinely announce the count. We have all observed umpires working games where players and coaches are constantly asking for the count. If batters or coaches routinely ask for the count multiple times, that is an indicator. If the pitcher asks you several times during a game for the count, this is not a good sign. If these are happening to you, it is an obvious clue you need to announce the count more frequently.

When to Announce the Count

One common-sense procedure should guide announcing the count as balls and strikes add up: It is "when the next pitch will likely result in a swing, game action, or a change in the batter's status." These situations are marked below by an asterisk.

Many veteran umpires announce the count, whatever it may be, on the third pitch of the at-bat, as in 1-2, 2-1 or 3-0. This allows a self-check on the plate umpire's



Plate umpires need to develop a consistent pattern for when to physically give the ball-and-strike count throughout a game. Problems may arise if you do it too often, and if you fail to do it frequently enough. Ben Gray, Highland Park, Ill.

count and both batter and catcher understanding of the correct count.

0-0: There is no need to announce an 0-0 count.

0-1: Announce only when there are baserunners and there is a foul on the preceding pitch or some action to take the ball out of play with a delayed re-start. Announce it just before you put the ball back in play. If it was a called or swinging strike, no announcement is necessary.

*0-2: The next pitch has a much higher chance of resulting in a swing, game action or a change in the batter's status.

*1-2: The next pitch has a much higher chance of resulting in a swing, game action or a change in the batter's status. Many umpires announce the 1-2 count because it is three pitches into the at-bat. However, the count including two strikes is the most critical thing to communicate here.

1-0: Signal this count only after the ball is dead, such as a pitching change or visit, and just before you put the ball back in play.

2-0: Signal this count only after the ball is dead, such as a pitching change or visit, and just before you put the ball back in play.

*3-0: The next pitch has a much higher chance of resulting in a swing, game action or a change in the batter's status.

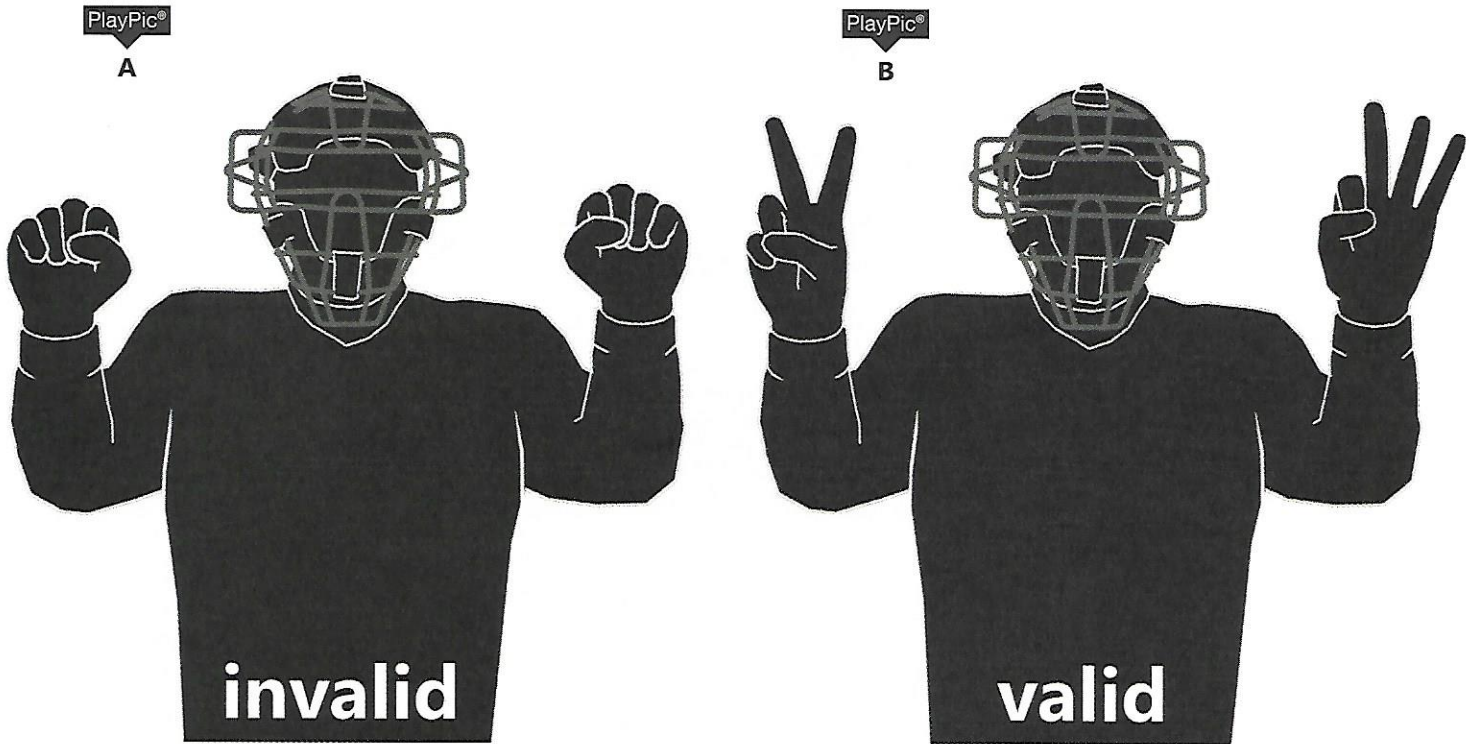
1-1: Signal this count only after the ball is dead, such as a pitching change or visit, and just before you put the ball back in play.

2-1: Many umpires announce the 2-1 count because it is three pitches into the at-bat. This allows a self-check on the plate umpire's count and ensures both batter and catcher understanding of the correct count.

*3-1: The next pitch could be ball four and therefore has a great chance of resulting in a change in the batter's status.

*2-2: The next pitch has a much higher chance of resulting in a swing, game action or a change in the batter's status.

*3-2: The next pitch has a much higher chance of resulting in a swing, game action or a change in the batter's status. This is a critical communication



- ▶ with two out and runners on base since they will likely be moving when the pitcher commits to the plate.

Avoid describing a 3-2 count as a full count. Avoid signaling a 3-2 count with closed fists. Announce the count with three fingers on your left hand and two fingers on your right hand along with the verbal phonetic mechanic of “Three-Two.”

No matter the count, it should always be announced following a change in the game situation regarding baserunners (a stolen base, runners advancing on a wild pitch, etc.). It should also be announced following any ruling on a check swing, so that everyone is aware whether the previous pitch was ruled a ball or strike.

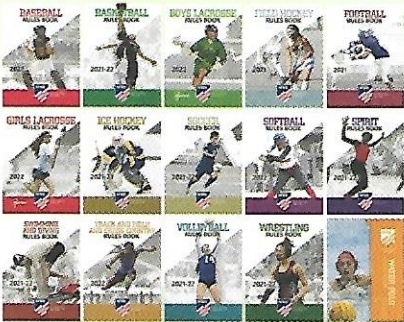
Counting On You

Announcing the ball and strike count is one of a hundred things plate umpires need to do well. When done smoothly, the game moves along with minimal interruptions. When the ball-and-strike count is done incorrectly, the game does not flow well and interruptions for count calls add up. Be sure you work on your count calls and make this area one of your platework strengths. You are responsible and everyone is counting on you. □

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Wheel It to Third

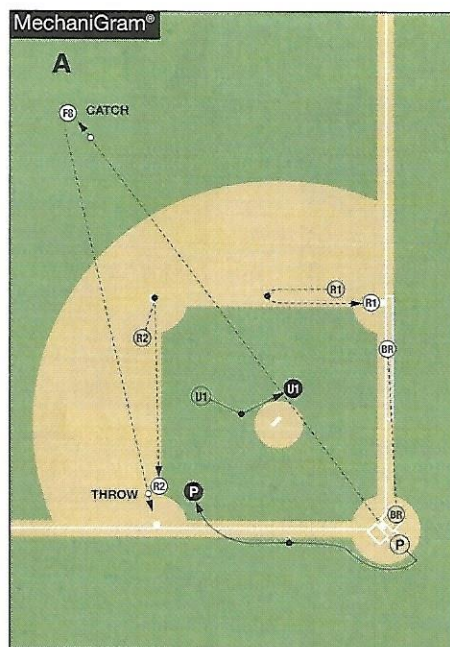
In the two-umpire system, plays at third base sometime become the responsibility of the plate umpire (P), as Jeff Williams of Lewis Center, Ohio, demonstrates.

Mechanics manuals typically call for P, when a play at third is imminent, to move into the third-base cutoff in fair territory. But depending on how the play unfolds, an umpire may have to shift into foul territory to get a good angle on the unfolding play.

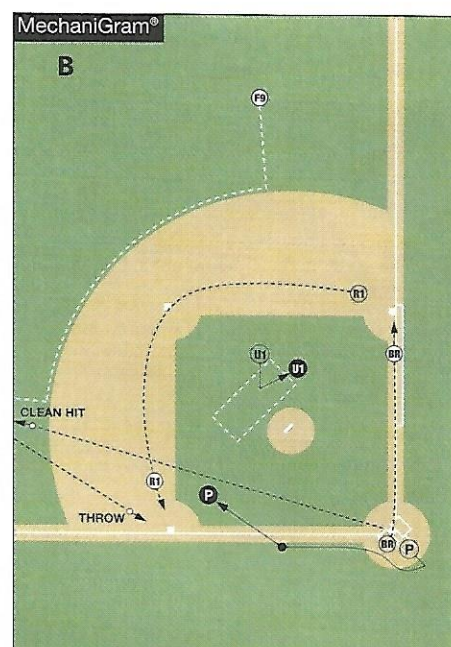
But depending on how the play unfolds, an umpire may have to shift into foul territory to get a good angle on the unfolding play.

The one risk with making the call in foul territory involves an overthrow. Being inside the diamond allows P to return to home for a potential play without having to worry about getting in the way of the throw home. But that risk may be worth taking if it yields a better angle.

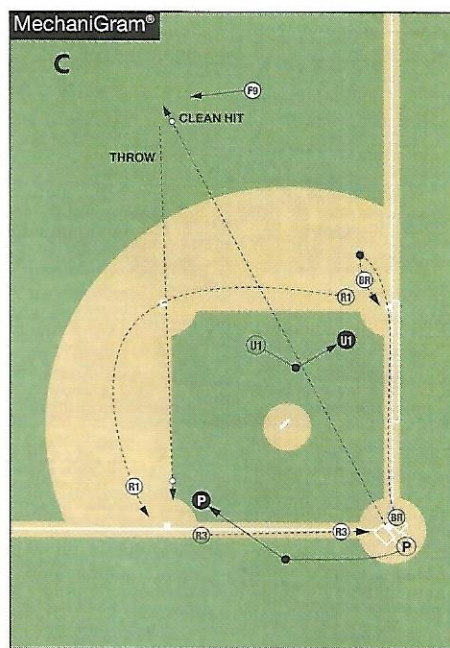
Included are MechaniGrams outlining situations where high school mechanics call for P to take third. □



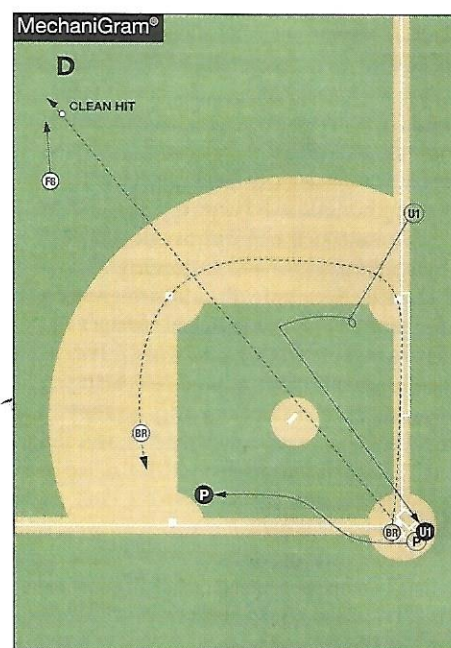
With runners on first and second, on a fly ball to the outfield that's caught.



With a runner on first, on a clean hit to the outfield (that's not on the right-field line).



With runners on first and third, on a clean hit to the outfield (that's not on the right-field line).



NFHS mechanics call for the plate umpire to take a call at third with no runners on and an extra-base hit to the outfield. The base umpire covers home.

You're the Umpire, Not ...

There are important matters of umpiring that you often won't find in the rulebook, casebook or officiating manuals — but are just as important to an umpire's work as mastering the key concepts from those aforementioned books.

Within every sport, there are nuances that top officials have learned — things that have polished the rough edges that might otherwise hold them back. For instance, you need to understand what you're not when you're the umpire:

Not a Catcher

During a long pause between innings, with a catcher who needs extra time to put on his gear, don't fill the void by grabbing a catcher's mitt and warming up the pitcher. That's not your job. Don't make yourself a part of the game. Allow the players and coaches to do their jobs, and you do yours.

Not a Shagger

If a ball gets away and rolls to the backstop, it's not your job to go retrieve it. No one wants to see the umpire chasing down baseballs. Sure, if it's two feet away and you can grab it quickly, go ahead. Otherwise, there are catchers, ballboys, on-deck hitters who can take care of this bit of housecleaning.

Not a Bat Boy

Inexperienced umpires often get distracted by things that shouldn't influence their work. A perfect example is trying to remove a bat from the plate area after a batter drops it. Again, that is not your job. If you can safely kick it out of the way so it does not impact play, fine. But your responsibilities are the ball, the players and the play. Don't neglect those because you are worried about a wayward bat.

Not a Friend

There is nothing wrong with being cordial on the baseball field as an umpire. It certainly beats being rude. However, do not engage in drawn-out conversations with them. Exchange pleasantries, answer questions and then move on and do your job.

Not a Coach

Be careful offering advice to players about the way they play the game on the field. That may be appropriate at the very

youngest of ages when kids are still being taught the game, but as they get older and more competitive, your "advice" will backfire with both teams — especially with a coach who knows his players don't need your help.

Not a Confidant

Don't say anything to a player you would not say to a coach. Because you can be sure everything you are saying to players is being said to a coach. And when said player gets upset and drives a proverbial bus right over you, you don't want to be in a position to have to defend what came out of your mouth.

Not an Announcer

You get paid to rule whether pitches are balls or strikes, batted balls are fair or foul, and players are safe or out. You don't need to provide flowery descriptions

alongside these decisions. Make your ruling and keep it simple. If a coach comes out to discuss it, that's when you can add some vocabulary, but only as needed.

Not a Maid

Yes, cleaning off the plate is part of the job. The pitching rubber and the bases? Not so much. This just in: Baseball fields include dirt (well, most of them, anyway). You don't need to be running to the mound and kicking dust off the rubber.

Not a Game Administrator

Know what is within your purview as an umpire, and what needs to be handled by someone at a different position on the game management food chain. If you have a problem with an unruly fan, it is not your job to remove the troublemaker — ask game administration to take care of it for you. □

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Double Tag Means Double Fists

One of the most misapplied mechanics in both two-person and three-person umpiring is coverage at third base when there are runners on second and first, less than two outs and a fly ball is hit to the outfield.

When the possibility of this situation presents itself, all umpires on the field should be communicating with one another to be prepared to rotate appropriately in the event of a double tag involving both baserunners.

The signal for a double-tag rotation is shown. All members of the crew should bump both fists on top of each other with the right index finger extended. This signals that the plate umpire will rotate to third base on a double-tag situation and be responsible for all plays involving R2 coming into

third base.

Not using this signal sets up a crew for failure. If a plate umpire does not use it, the base umpire(s) cannot be completely confident PU will rotate to third as is prescribed by two-person and three-person mechanics. This puts U1 (two-person) and both U1 and U3 (three-person) in uncomfortable positions having to possibly cover for a plate umpire who is out of position.

Conversely, if a base umpire does not use the signal properly, a situation is created where there may be multiple umpires attempting to take the play at third base, or, in the case of three-person mechanics, a situation where there is no umpire at home plate to rule on a baserunner advancing due to a possible overthrow. □

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Have a Mental Checklist

We must know all aspects of the game situation at all times. A good way of doing so is to develop a mental checklist that you continually run through to prevent getting caught off guard by something.

Here's an example:

- Who's the batter?
- Who and where are the runners?
- Number of outs.
- Count on the batter.
- Where are the fielders?
- What are my coverage duties?

Some umpires don't pay much attention to the batter, but knowing what you can about the player at the plate may help you know what pitches he likes to hit and take, how aggressive he is, etc.

Knowing where the runners are may seem elementary, but you should glance around to confirm this.

We always must have the number of outs in the conscious part of our mind because this will dictate whether the infield fly rule is in effect, there may be a tag-up after a catch, a double play, etc. How embarrassing it is, for example, to

Knowing where the runners are may seem elementary, but you should glance around to confirm this.

invoke the infield fly rule with two outs or one runner on, which we've all seen done.

We should signal each other in these situations to be sure we're on the same page. There are other signals for such things as how to rotate if someone goes out on a trouble ball. Use them.

Knowing the count will help to anticipate the play, e.g. bunt or steal. Both the plate umpire and base umpire(s) should carry indicators on the field.

Regularly glance at the fielders to see if they are playing a shift, are in close or deep, etc., since this could affect how a play develops.

Taking the above into account, think about your responsibilities depending on

whether the ball is hit here or there. And reminded yourself to peek over your shoulder if there is a rotation so that you can try to "fill the hole" — cover a base left uncovered — if someone who should be there had a brain cramp and isn't.

With runners on base, make a mental note to be sure the pitcher comes to a full stop before delivering. It's easy to sleep through a balk if we don't make this part of our routine.

The last thing we want is a surprise. Making sure we're always aware of all aspects of the game situation, instead of just standing around waiting for the next pitch or play, will lessen the chances of one being sprung on us. □

On Your Mark, Get Set ... Stay There

Stop Moving to Secure a Clear Picture of the Action

Check out old film clips of umpires from games played decades ago, and you're likely to see an umpire call a tag play at second base while running full tilt, or the plate umpire's head drop about three feet as the pitch arrives. Indeed, setting up at the last second and shifting one's body down on a low pitch and outside on pitches in that area was common back then. The thinking behind these "mechanics" was that we'd have a better look if we moved to where pitches went — an old descriptive term was "riding with the pitch" — and that to get base plays right we must be on top of them — even if this meant making calls on the run.

Eventually, the powers-that-be realized excessive movement is counterproductive, for when our body is moving our eyes are as well, and this makes it harder to properly focus on, and accurately process, what's in front of us. Now, the thinking is that to enhance our chances of making correct calls we need to get set and then stay still before the critical part of the play occurs. Obviously, there will be plays that require a lot of motion on the part of some or all members of the crew, especially the fewer umpires there are. But no matter what the situation is, the general "get set" principle applies.

When calling pitches, get set as the pitcher begins his delivery so you're still when the ball leaves his hand, and track the pitch into the catcher's mitt with your eyes without moving your head. Most of us have an imaginary "window" — if the pitch is there it's a strike and if not it's a ball. If our head is moving as the pitch arrives, the window will move, and this will make it harder to be accurate and consistent. Movement also increases the chances of the catcher obscuring our view of the pitch. If you don't have a locking mechanism to help you stay steady, such as putting your hands on your thighs, develop one.

On tag plays at the plate, umpires often dart here and there as the ball arrives and are moving when the catcher makes the tag. We can't plant ourselves

in one spot and stay rigid because adjustments may be needed depending on where the ball, catcher and runner go. But too often, we overreact and move too much and in too herky-jerky a way. If we make slight, controlled movements and then get set and stay still before the tag occurs, it's more likely we'll end up in a good position to see it and the baserunner's foot or hand in relation to the plate, and be able to properly process what happens.

At first base with an infield grounder, move into fair territory — how far and where is up to you — while the fielder fields the ball and then get set as he throws so you'll be still when it arrives. Then, listen for the sound of the ball hitting the glove while watching the runner's foot hit the bag. If you're moving, you decrease the chances of properly registering what happened first. Again, a locking mechanism, such as putting our hands on our thighs as we set up, will help us stay steady. (Old-time umpires grabbed the lapels of their coat.)

We may need to adjust if the throw is off-target and there's a swipe tag, etc., but again the key is not to overdo it and move too much or too abruptly. Most likely, a controlled step or two will get us where we need to be to see what happens.

As for other plays on the bases, getting close can be challenging, especially with fewer umpires (and it's possible to get so close that we lose sight of all of the play's ingredients). But experience has shown that getting a good angle on the play and being still as it happens are more important (within limits, of course) than how far we are from it. As a play starts, move in a controlled way to get that angle and then, no matter where you are, stop and get set just before the tag is applied or, on a force play, the ball hits the glove.

Base plays in a two-umpire crew can test us. On a pickoff, turn as the pitcher throws and plant your feet instead of running toward the play. You'll be farther away than if you did the latter,



When umpires must move to see a play, as Paul Cohen, Calabasas, Calif., does here, it is imperative they stop and come to a set position before making their final decision. This allows their eyes to also stop moving, giving them a clear look at the action.

but your eyes won't be jiggling when the tag occurs. On a steal of second, turn as the catcher's throw passes you and then stop, plant yourself and watch the action. On a steal of third, move toward the mound (not toward third) when you sense the runner breaking, turn as the catcher throws, stop and observe.

On trouble balls hit to the outfield when you must go out, don't keep running so you're moving when the ball hits near the foul line or pole or an outfielder makes a shoestring catch. You've got a better chance of getting the call right if you can sense when the ball is about to hit the ground or glove, and get set before it does. As is the case with base plays, you may not be as close as you'd like, but your eyes won't be bouncing up and down at the critical point in time. One additional note: On trap-catch plays, don't run toward the fielder because you'll lose the angle on the ball in relation to the glove; instead, run parallel to the ball's flight. □

Plate meeting protocols

Not all plate meetings are created equal. During a day of tournament games, or if you are hopping between games at different levels, it isn't necessarily a bad thing to verify everyone is on the same page about ground rules, game-ending procedures, or anything where there might be modifications from the usual rules of baseball.

But some umpires use these brief discussions to go into a rules clinic on each topic. What should be a minute or two exchange turns into a long rulebook lesson that nobody wants. Either the coaches' eyes glaze over or they started fidgeting, anxious to get the game underway. Nothing of what the umpire-in-chief is relaying is being heard.

Ask these umpire why they feel

the need to go into such detail, and they say they believe it helps avoid any problems later in the game. They see it as good game management, but it is instead the opposite. The games actually get off on the wrong foot with coaches who just want to get the basics out of the way and get to the game.

Ultimately, the best way to get the game off to a good start is a short, business-focused plate meeting. The plate umpire stands behind the plate and takes the lead on everything. The base umpire stands on opposite side. If there is more than one base umpire, stand in order of position on the bases.

1. Introduce yourselves. Get the names of the coaches — that could be a useful game management tool later.

2. Exchange lineups. Review them and make sure you understand how the

coaches have denoted things.

3. Have the home coach take everyone through the field's ground rules. Ask questions if something isn't clear. Bring up anything he didn't cover that might be an issue.

4. Ask coaches if players are legally and properly equipped — and get affirmative answers.

5. Ask if there were any remaining questions. If none, wish both teams well and send them on their way.

Keep it simple. Get the required duties out of the way. Get on with the game.

Anything else you say, even if you have good intentions of informing the coaches of rules they might not fully understand, won't get a listen anyway. Don't waste your time or ruin a good start to the game. □

The Way We'll Play Today

Each Field Comes With Its Own Set of Ground Rules

Baseball is unique in the fact its playing confines are not always specifically spelled out by the rulebook.

Yes, at the NFHS level, the distance between the bases is always 90 feet, and the pitching plate is 60 feet, 6 inches from home plate. However, each baseball field comes with its own wrinkles as far as how much foul territory is in play, where tarps and bullpens are located, the height of the outfield fences and much, much more.

As such, each baseball game starts with a pregame plate meeting where not only starting lineups are exchanged and made official, but where the two head coaches or managers and all members of the umpiring crew come to agreement on the ground rules that will be in place for that particular game.

The only restriction on ground rules is they cannot conflict with or supersede any printed rule. An example is the telephone cable that stretches between the plate and the backstop. Playing it off the wire makes sense as the wire is not

apt to materially change the path of the ball; however, the rules provide a foul ball is dead when it touches anything foreign to the ground.

Another idea with merit is a ground-rule triple because the fence the ball goes through is so distant any runner could easily make it to third. The problem is the rules state fair batted balls that go over or through a fence result in a two-base award.

The home coach is required to propose any ground rules at the pregame conference. If the visiting coach disagrees, the umpire-in-chief makes the final determination. The UIC may add any special ground rules, at his or her discretion (4-1-2, 10-2-3a). If something occurs that is not covered, the UIC has authority to rule (10-2-2).

In the vast majority of games, the review of ground rules is routine and the home coach spends most of the time explaining all the openings in the fences that the ball will never go through.

Coaches generally prefer to keep the

ball live in as many scenarios as possible and there is merit to that, but it is not always sensible. On one local field, there are three sheds immediately behind and higher than a chain-link fence beyond first base. The coach always proposes that if an overthrow (a somewhat possible scenario) goes over the fence and bounds back off a shed, the ball remains live.

On another field, the chain-link fence is open (no gate) to a shed about a foot beyond the fence line. It is possible for a ball to go through the space between the shed and the fence and that would clearly be a dead ball, but the coach wants a ball that hits the shed and returns to the playing field to remain live.

In both cases above, the ball would leave the field and should become dead.

Other examples of situations or field characteristics that may require ground rules include, but are not limited to: dugout facing and openings; scoreboards; open bullpens; batting ▶



During the plate meeting, the umpires and head coaches must discuss the ground rules that will govern that day's contest. From left, Mike Cafaro, Lillington, N.C.; Greg Stanley, Raleigh, N.C.; and Warren Knapp, Durham, N.C.

► cages, fences or tarps in which the ball may lodge; sloped areas; unusual or temporary ground conditions; overhanging tree limbs; cables; power lines; poles; bunting; parked cars or other manmade devices within the playing field; or an overflow of spectators onto the playing field.

In formulating or approving ground rules, safety should be foremost. Players should not be allowed to chase balls into open creek beds, rocky slopes, open pits, large puddles or muddy areas. Jumping on tarps or ledges should also be forbidden.

Simplicity, for both players and umpires, is also a consideration. The umpires are the ones who have to figure out what the ball actually hit. Ground rules that create great difficulty are those that seek to keep live a ball that hits off a specified portion of a dead-ball area. Examples are dugout facades that are

set back from the dead-ball line or posts inside the dugout. The problem with the latter is it may be difficult to discern whether the ball hit the post, the helmet lying next to it or the back wall.

Another aspect of dugouts that may require attention is the dugout extension, a somewhat common modification in amateur games because many fields have small dugouts. The home team may ask for a certain area adjacent to the dugout to be considered part of the dugout so that equipment may be stored there. The umpires must ensure the limits of the extension are clearly defined and that it complies with the requirement it be on the outfield side and no closer to the foul line than the dugout itself. The extension must be the same for both teams (1-2-4).

NFHS rules provide for a designated media area. In most prep games, there isn't any value in having such a

dead-ball area but it could be needed.. An umpire's first responsibility is to ascertain the media area is placed in an innocuous location. Obviously it is going to be against a fence, but any spot in a direct line with a throw from the third baseman around to a throw from the second baseman is not a good idea.

A ball is immediately dead if it hits someone within or partially within a designated media area (1-2-8). If the person is totally outside the marked area when contacted, it is treated as spectator interference.

Throws from dead-ball territory require special mention. Such a throw can never be made and no ground rule can change that. The ball is always dead when carried into a dead-ball area (5-1-1i).

Above all, umpires must keep in mind that ground rules must be safe and simple. □

Fair or Foul?

With regard to whether a ball is fair or foul, NFHS rules contain a subtle difference from NCAA and pro rules. The codes generally agree on what constitutes a fair ball, but NFHS specifies a ball is fair if it “contacts fair ground on or beyond an imaginary line between first and third base” (2-5-1b). The equivalent provision in the other two codes is “first touches fair territory beyond first or third base” (NCAA 2-27c; pro Fair Ball Definition).

The MechaniGram illustrates a ball contacting the ground beyond the imaginary line between first and third base (illustrated by the dotted line) but not beyond first base. Such a ball that spins back untouched over the first-base foul line in front of the base is a fair ball in NFHS and a foul ball elsewhere. The

farther from the foul line the ball lands, the more difficult it is to determine the spot with respect to the applicable rule.

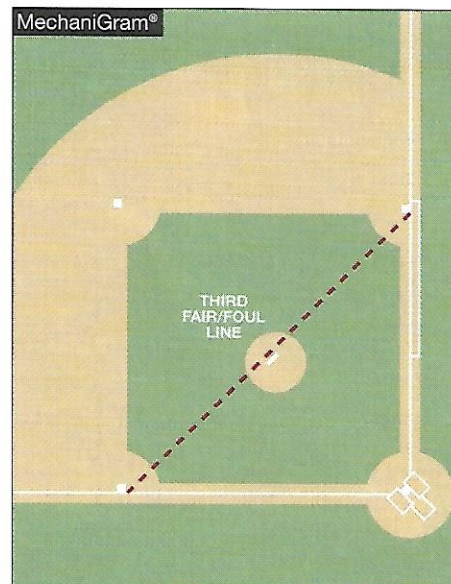
Here are some other unusual paths a batted ball may take to challenge the umpire’s rules knowledge.

A ball that sticks on home plate? That’s a fair ball (NFHS 2-5-1a).

A ball hit with backspin under the catcher in foul territory and then rolls fair untouched? That’s a fair ball (NFHS 2-5-1a).

A ball that hits the batter in the batter’s box? That’s a foul ball (NFHS 2-16-1f).

A batted ball that hits the dirt or home plate and then hits the bat, which is in the hand or hands of the batter, while in the batter’s box? That’s a foul ball (NFHS 2-16-1g). □



Out of the Basepath?

When a runner tries to evade a tag, the judgment for the umpire quickly grows more complex than simply whether the tag was applied or avoided. There’s a separate judgment of whether the runner’s evasion brought him out of the basepath.

A runner is out if he runs more than three feet away from a direct line between bases to avoid being tagged (8-4-2a).

The basepath is established when a play is being made on a runner, and it is directly between the runner’s position and the base toward which the runner is moving.

The basepath is dynamic as opposed to static. It can shift as a runner moves and changes direction.

Since you can’t stop play to measure, umpires will often use a “step-and-a-reach” by the fielder to give a good approximation of the three-foot distance.

Even that can be challenging depending on where the tag attempt begins and the view afforded the umpire. □



On rundown plays, umpire Eric Jensen, Sammamish, Wash., must understand what the runner can and cannot do to be considered legally running in the basepath.