

# 2018 PRESEASON GUIDE

# SOFTBALL



Plate umpire Jack Floyd, Everett, Wash., watches as a team intentionally walks a batter. Under a new NFHS rule, the defense can intentionally walk a batter by the pitcher, catcher or coach making a request to the umpire.

## RULE CHANGE

# Intentional Walks are In, Equipment Checks by Umpires Are Out

The NFHS Softball Rules Committee approved a handful of rules changes for the 2017-18 school year, but two in particular that many umpires will embrace. Those include allowing intentional walks and eliminating the pregame equipment check by umpires.

The committee made those changes and more at its June 12-14 meeting in Indianapolis. All recommended changes were subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors.

### Intentional Walk (2-65-2)

With the rules change, a pitcher is no longer required to throw four pitches out of the strike zone to

SEE "RULES" P. 2



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**► Rules** CONT. FROM P.1

award the batter first base. The new rule states that a request for an intentional walk can now be made prior to or during the at-bat by the defensive coach, pitcher or catcher. This change aligns fast-pitch and slow-pitch rules to keep up with current trends of the sports and maximize the flow of the game.

“The Kentucky High School Athletic Association experimented with intentional walks for the 2017 season, and the response from coaches and umpires was overwhelmingly positive,” said Searcy. “The NFHS questionnaire response from constituents was also very favorable.”

**Play:** With two outs and R2 on second and R1 on third, the coach of

team B informs the plate umpire that he or she wants B5, with an 2-0 count, walked intentionally. **Ruling:** Intentional walks are allowed at any time during the at-bat.

**Play:** B1 is awarded an intentional base on balls. Immediately after the batter-runner has started to first base, the pitcher walks toward the catcher for a conference. B1 rounds first base and reaches second base. **Ruling:** The batter-runner must return to first base because the ball always becomes dead after an intentional base on balls is awarded.

**Play:** In (a) as B4 is approaching the plate, and in (b) after the batter has a 2-1 count, the defensive coach informs the plate umpire that he/she wants the batter walked intentionally. **Ruling:**

Legal in both (a) and (b).

**No Equipment Check**

Equipment no longer has to be inspected by the umpires or placed outside the dugout/bench prior to the start of the game by each team. The rules committee agreed that the responsibility for ensuring that players are legally and properly equipped rests with the head coach and school administration.

“Umpires must remain vigilant in identifying illegal or altered equipment throughout the course of the game, and equipment violation penalties will continue to be assessed when discovered,” Searcy said. “However, it is the head coach’s responsibility to verify that his or her players’ equipment is legal.” □

## RULE CHANGE

# Replacement Pitcher’s Warmup Time Noted

In Rule 3-7-1, a new note was added to clarify that extra pitches are permitted for an incoming pitcher that has not previously pitched in the game when the outgoing pitcher is removed by rule. There already is an exception allowing additional pitches if a pitcher is replaced for injury. This rule change adds an allowance when a pitcher is removed by rule. The change was made in order to minimize risk for the incoming pitcher.

The default number of pitches allowed by rule is five. Only allowing five pitches to a player that is cold could become a risk minimization issue, and the umpire is now authorized to allow more than five pitches in those situations.

**Play:** Team B’s coach has used her three charged conferences. In the seventh inning, the coach (a) stops play to confer with her infielders about a bunt situation or (b) checks with F1 who has just been hit by a batted ball. **Ruling:** In (a), the pitcher must be removed as pitcher for the remainder of the game. This is a charged conference. In (b), this is not a charged conference. The umpire should accompany the coach to check on the injured player and make sure coaching does not take place. The umpire may allow more than five warmup pitches for the substitute pitcher. □



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# Eight Ways to Improve Teamwork

Players and coaches look at the two umpires on the field as a team, just as umpires look into the dugout or bench area as a team. They must play together to accomplish their goal and umpires must work together to accomplish their goals.

As umpires, we get several opportunities during each game to determine if they are playing as a “team.” That shows itself in how the players and coaches talk to each other, how they support each other and how they make their plays. Umpires can usually tell when a team’s confidence in a player is low, on offense or defense.

So how do the players decide if we are truly a “team” on the field or if we are just two or three umpires — one calling balls and strikes and one or two calling the bases?

Following are the types of things that should indicate the umpires are truly working together and are, in fact, a team.

## 1. Taking the field together.

It might seem like a minor thing, but seeing the two or three umpires come onto the field together is a visual cue of a team. It’s the first impression onlookers get that the people adjudicating the game are on the same page and are ready to work together.

## 2. Stand together at the plate.

During the pre-game conference at the plate, as is required in NFHS softball, the base umpires should be in attendance with his or her partner. An additional advantage is the base umpire(s) can be aware of any situations or warnings that the plate umpire has given to the coaches. Then, if he/she has to enforce something, he/she can remind the coach or player it was discussed before the game.

## 3. Covering the second throw.

Letting your partner know verbally that you are going down the third-base line on a base hit and are ready to make the call at third if there is a second throw in a multiple-runner situation is teamwork. An additional advantage is your partner can release and get to second base ready to make the call on the approaching batter-runner if he or she decides to go.

## 4. Vocalizing.

Letting your partner know you have got the tag of the runner(s) on a fly ball to the outfield sends the message you are a team. Letting your partner(s) know that you are in a two-umpire system when the third umpire goes out on a fly ball is teamwork.

## 5. Awarding bases.

Getting together to discuss the proper base awards on certain plays demonstrates working together as a team. Some base awards almost take care of themselves.

When the throw to first goes out of play and the batter-runner heads to second base and you call “Dead ball” and you look up and the batter-runner is standing on second; no big deal. Both umpires look at the situation and know everything is right.

However, when the ball has been thrown from the outfield and the runners

have been sprinting around the bases and the ball dribbles out of play, then there is a lot more that has to be considered. When that happens, the first thing that should occur (after declaring the ball dead of course) is for the umpires to get together and talk it through. Listen to each other and decide what the awards are and where the runners need to be placed. If you need to convince each other that your way is correct, do that before the runners are moved.

In essence, be on the same page. The opposite of that scenario is for one umpire to move runners, and then the other umpire move them again. Obviously, that sends the message that one of us is “right” and one of us is “wrong.” In conclusion: Kill the play; talk it over; make the awards.

SEE “TEAMWORK” P. 4

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► **Teamwork** CONT. FROM P.3

**6. Asking for help.**

Going to your partner for help before you are asked or asking for help from your partner after you are asked is a strong indication of teamwork. It may be the most tangible example that the players readily see and recognize. It also demonstrates trust in your partner.

When the coaches ask, "Will you check with your partner?" go to your partner and

do it in conference, not from a distance. There can be a time when the appeal is more obvious such as when the base coach at first yells, "She pulled her foot! Ask for help." That is probably the only time you can just verbalize the request from afar.

**7. Hustling.**

When both umpires hustle to cover plays and to return to their positions after plays, it shows they are interested in working

hard and putting forth the effort needed to work a good game.

**8. Leave the field together.**

Just as arriving on the field together shows teamwork and professionalism, leaving in the same manner is a simple optic and an effective one for all to see.

Do not begin discussing plays that occurred in the game until you are well out of earshot of fans, players and coaches. □

## RULE CHANGE

# Wrist Playcards Are Equipment

The rules committee approved an exception to Rule 3-2-7c which defines wristbands with a playbook/playcard attached as equipment. The wristband shall be a single solid color other than optic yellow. It does not have to match the color of the upper undergarment and it can only be worn on the non-pitching arm.

**Play:** (a) Team A is wearing black undergarments but the pitcher is wearing a solid red wristband on her non-pitching arm with a playbook/playcard attached to it. (b) Team B is wearing gray undergarments and an optic yellow wristband with a playbook/playcard attached to it. **Ruling:** Legal in (a) wristbands with a playbook/playcard are considered equipment not garments so they do not have to be the same color as the upper body undergarments. Illegal in (b) as the wristband with a playbook/playcard can be any solid color except optic yellow (3-2-7c Exception). □

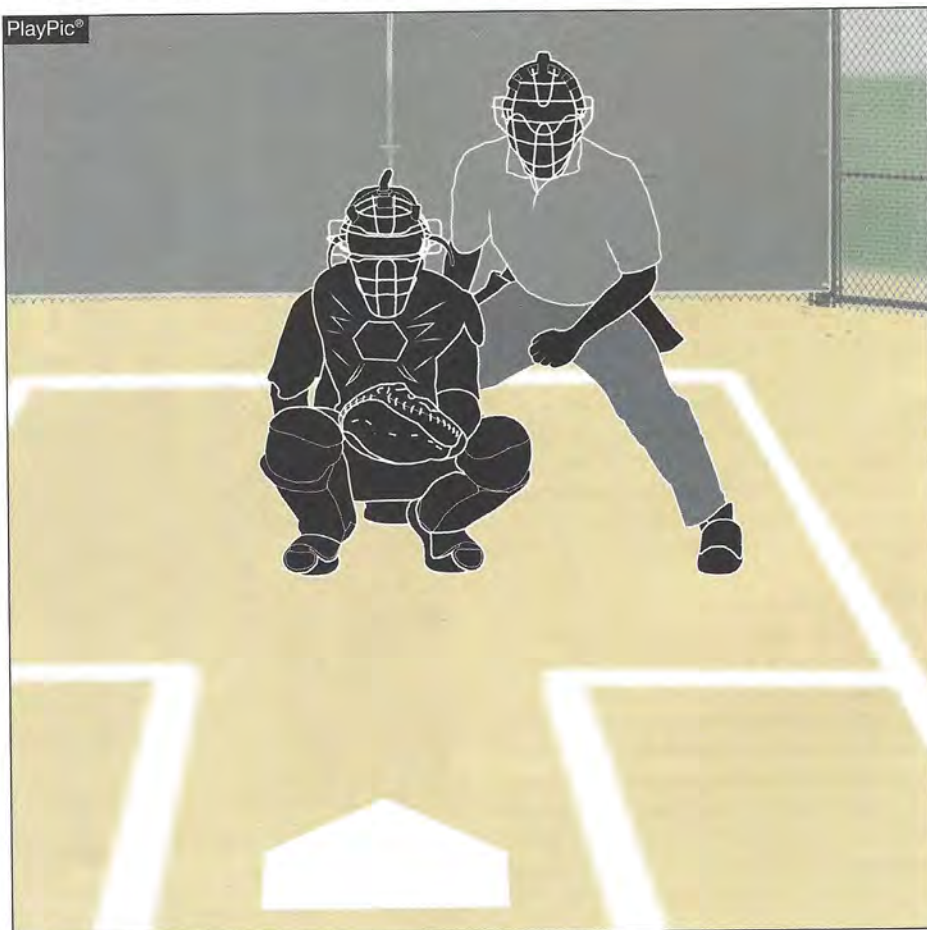


## Take a Few Warmups Before Game

It is good practice for plate umpires prior to the start of the game to watch a few warmup pitches, as shown in the PlayPic, to get a feel for the speed and movement of the pitcher's throws and how the catcher sets up behind the plate.

Allow the pitcher and catcher to

work together on the first pitch, then watch either or all of the second, third and fourth pitches before the catcher "throws it down" to second base. Do the same in the bottom of the first inning and for the home team's pitcher. □



## A-Plus Coverage Behind the Shortstop

The position behind the shortstop in a two-umpire system is perhaps the single most difficult position to work on a softball diamond. There are so many things to look for and so many situations can occur. How do you survive working a position that, in some games, you may spend more than 50 percent of the game in? Here is some guidance for success:

**Pre-pitch preparation.** As with working in any position on the diamond, pre-pitch preparation (PPP) is critical to successfully managing the multitude of situations that can present themselves at any time. When in the position between second base and typically to the shortstop's left, PPP is even more necessary. Here are questions to answer before every pitch when positioned behind the shortstop:

- **Outfield positioning.** Shallow, deep, straight-away? Shaded to either gap?
- **Expected play.** What type of runner(s) is on base (fast, slow)? What type of batter is at the plate (right/left, power/slapper/bunter)? Is the offensive team typically aggressive (short game)? Does the catcher like to pick off behind runners? Arm strength?
- **Game situation.** Ball, strike, out, score, inning. Will the runners tag on a fly ball to the right side? If so, what are the tag responsibilities? Chase responsibility? Will a base hit potentially score a run(s)? Can the batter attempt to reach on a dropped third strike? Checked swing? Slap or bunt?

Those are a lot of items to cover in the 10 seconds between pitches, but if you train yourself to go through the same PPP on every pitch, it becomes second nature.

**Pickoffs, steals, etc.** The level of play you are working will go a long way toward dictating how much of that you will see in the position behind the shortstop. High-level catchers are notorious for trying to pick off unsuspecting runners at second base, or even throwing behind both runners and attempting the pickoff at first base. How do you cover that play? Angles, angles, angles.

While achieving a 90-degree angle to the runner or tag is optimal, the chances that you are going to get that

perfect angle are slim. Work hard to get that "90," but understand that the most important aspect is to be set to make the call.

On the pickoff at second base, you have the advantage of working outside the diamond. Get the proper tag depth, 10-12 feet, and work to the 90-degree angle (which should put you very near the face of the bag being threatened).

The pickoff at first base is harder. From your starting position (15-30 feet from second and third base), move two to three steps toward the midpoint and closer to the baseline to get the best look at the entire play. Generally speaking, the runner will be diving to the back side of the base, so you'll be able to get a

wide open look at the runner, base, first baseman and the tag. Remember to see the whole play, making sure that the first baseman doesn't obstruct, and make the call. If you are unsure about whether or not the first baseman possesses the ball, ask to see it by yelling, "Show me the ball."

**Infield hit.** Pause. Read. React. With less than two outs, and a ground ball to the left of F6, the throw likely will be for a force out at third base (when runners are on first and second). Single runner on second? Be prepared for a possible tag attempt if R1 decides to go to third, or a possible throw back to second to catch her off-balance.

SEE "A-PLUS COVERAGE" P. 6

### RULE CHANGE

\* NOT IN FLA. BOTH FEET MUST BE IN CONTACT WITH THE RUBBER

## Pitching Rule Expanded

Rule 6-1-2b permits the pitcher to step backward with the non-pivot foot at any time prior to the start of the pitch. This change is less restrictive than the previous rule, and allows for a more fluid sequence of motion and will aid the development of pitchers.

The previous wording in the rule stated that any step backward shall begin before the hands come together. Now it can begin after the hands come together as well.

**Play:** F1 brings her hands together and are in motion. She then takes one step backward before separating her hands and making a forward motion toward the batter. **Ruling:** That is a legal delivery.

**Play:** F1 has taken a legal position on the pitching plate and then (a) steps backward then brings her hands together; (b) starts bringing her hands together as she is stepping backward; (c) brings her hands together then steps backward; in all cases the step backward is completed prior to F1 separating her hands. **Ruling:** Legal in all cases. As long as the step backward begins prior to the start of the pitch it is legal (6-1-2b). □



With the rule change, the pitcher is allowed to step backward either before or after her hands come together, prior to the start of the pitch.

## ▶ A-Plus Coverage CONT. FROM P.5

But what if the ball is hit to F1? The game situation and runners on base make a big difference where F1 will likely throw the ball. Is the defensive team ahead and needing outs? Chances are the throw will go to first base. Slow runner on first? Prepare for a possible double play attempt. Runner on second only? Some pitchers will look that runner back and throw to first. Others will possibly get R1 in a rundown.

Calling a play at first base? Work as far inside the diamond, as close to first base as possible. Get the best angle, then

close the distance as much as you can.

**To chase or not to chase?** One of the biggest myths of working the two-umpire system is that the field umpire should not chase with runners on. That philosophy will come back to haunt the crew. If multiple fielders are converging on a ball, or it looks to be a trouble ball, chase! As the field umpire, you are responsible for the "V" (straight away left field to straight away right field). Prioritize that possible catch/no catch against staying in just to keep two umpires covering the runner(s). If you

choose not to chase, proceed to your prescribed position to see the batter-runner touch first base and prepare to call on any play involving the trail runner(s). Make sure that is covered thoroughly in your pregame.

**Moral of the story.** If you use PPP on every pitch and the "pause, read and react" philosophy for each play, you will give yourself a better opportunity to be in a credible position (even if it's farther away) to sell that tough call consistently and accurately. Follow those guidelines, trust the system and become a stronger umpire. □

# NFHS Makes Editorial Changes

In addition to the rule changes, there were a few editorial changes made by the committee.

**Bench conduct, Umpiring (3-6-12, 10-1-6).** The rules committee expanded on both rules for participants and umpires to include e-cigarettes or similar items. In both rules, any participant, coach, or administrator, or umpire shall not use alcohol or any form of tobacco product (e-cigarette or similar items) beginning with arrival at the competition site until departure following the completion of the contest.

The language provides further clarity and consistency for restriction of alcohol and tobacco use by participants and umpires. □



# Recap of 2017 NFHS Changes

While studying the rules book and points of emphasis for the 2017-18 season, softball umpires should look back on the changes approved by the NFHS Softball Rules Committee for the 2016-17 season.

Last year the committee approved four additions to Rule 3 regarding uniforms, equipment and substitutions, though, the rules change requiring teams to place their bats and helmets outside of the dugout/bench area is no longer a rule because of this season's

subsequent and related rules change.

The committee added inclement weather as an exception to the uniform rule for state associations. With state association approval, it is permissible for a batter to go to the plate with a sweatshirt or jacket over her uniform.

The committee also approved new language in Rule 3-2-7 to reinforce the solid color undergarments requirements.

The rule established solid-color requirements for undergarments that are similar to other NFHS sport

rules.

Subsection C addresses garments other than team uniforms such as arm sleeves, leg sleeves and tights. The sleeves/tights shall be a solid color: black, white, gray or a solid school color.

If there is a stripe or other design on the undergarment, the player shall remove it or correct it in a reasonable amount of time as determined by the umpire. If the player has to change or remove an undergarment, she should do so in a designated area or in the school. □

## 12 Keys to Successful Plate Umpiring

- 1** Always hustle to the right position for every call.
- 2** Communicate with other umpires whenever necessary to clarify play responsibilities.
- 3** Tell your partners what you are doing such as, "I've got third." Do not tell them what they should do.
- 4** Never "guess" a player out. If you are not sure, the player is safe. Use your umpiring partners for help if you could not or did not see something clearly – never guess.
- 5** Use an indicator to keep track of balls and strikes, and keep home plate clean so everyone can see it clearly. Carry a pencil and paper to record substitutions and charged conferences.
- 6** Use a signal and voice that reflect the importance, difficulty or closeness of a play. "Selling" your call is important to show confidence in your decision.
- 7** When calling pitches, do not describe the location of the pitch unless asked. If asked, tell the catcher and allow her to relay the message. A simple "Ball!" or "Strike!" will suffice, or if appropriate, "Ball four" or "Strike three!" with emphasis.  
A called third strike is always emphasized to show confidence in your call, but do so in a reasonable manner that does not intimidate or embarrass the batter. If the batter swings and misses for the third strike, give a nonverbal, routine hammer signal for strike three (in that case, it is obvious to everyone that the batter is out, so there is no point in emphasizing the call).
- 8** Always use NFHS-approved and precise hand signals.
- 9** Always exit home plate by moving around the catcher and batter to the left side of the plate.
- 10** Make any dead-ball call immediately to halt game action, thereby avoiding confusion caused by unnecessary continuation of play.
- 11** When you go to the backstop with the catcher on a fly ball behind the plate, watch out for the catcher's flying mask.
- 12** If the catcher is stung by a foul ball, give her a chance to recover by dusting off the plate or walking the ball out to the pitcher. □

## Plate Umpire Assists on Double-Play Attempt

The action around second base on a potential double play can be fast and furious with significant responsibilities for the base umpire (U1) in a two-person crew.

When the defense is attempting a double play, as shown in the MechaniGram, with the shortstop F6 fielding a grounder and tossing the ball to the second baseman F4, it is important for the plate umpire (P) to observe the action at second base. P should exit to the left of F2 as shown and move as quickly as possible just inside the foul line about a third of the way to first base to position A. That allows P to observe any interference at second and then focus for a swipe tag or pulled foot at first.

The possible interference call at second primarily belongs to U1, but P should be prepared to provide additional information as needed. □



# NFHS Points of Emphasis

In addition to rules changes, the NFHS Softball Rules Committee approved the following Points of Emphasis for the 2018 season.

## Coaches' Responsibility Pregame Conference-Equipment

Rule 3-2-15 has been removed. Per Rule 4-1-2d, coaches are responsible for verifying at the pregame conference that all their players are legally and properly equipped. Coaches should review the following rules: 1-4 Gloves/Mitts, 1-5 Bats, 1-6 Batting Helmets, 1-7 Catchers Equipment and 3-2 Uniforms and Player Equipment. Penalties for illegal equipment range from correcting the problem if possible or having the equipment removed. Possible restriction to the dugout

or ejection for the player and coach depending on the severity of the infraction could occur.

## Other Equipment

Coaches should also review Rule 1-8 Other Equipment. To be familiar with what other equipment is permitted for players and coaches. (infielders facemask)

## Hit By Pitch

8-1-2c describes a situation in which the ball is not in the strike zone (this is a dead ball strike) and is not completely in the batter's box (hit by pitch and awarded first base). In the area between the strike zone and completely in the batter's box, it was intended that the batter still had to make an effort to avoid being hit.

## Courtesy Runner for the Pitcher and/or Catcher

8-9-2 has a unique exception: When an injury or disqualification occurs in the top of the first inning to the pitcher and/or catcher identified on the lineup card that utilized a courtesy runner, and she is unable to face the first batter in the bottom of the first inning, the player who ran for her is retroactively her substitute, and no longer a courtesy runner. All substitution rules apply and the pitcher and/or catcher has left the game. If the pitcher and/or catcher is able to play another position on the field, the player who ran for her is still retroactively her substitute and is no longer a courtesy runner. All substitution rules apply and the pitcher or catcher would have to re-enter the game in order to occupy another defensive position. □

# Clear Up Conference Confusion

One of the plate umpire's lineup card duties is to record charged offensive and defensive conferences during a game. In an attempt to save time, it is tempting to postpone recording the conference on the card until the half inning is over. But since each team is only allowed one offensive conference per inning and a limited number of defensive conferences, it is an important task that should not be overlooked or put off.

A conference should be documented whenever a coach or bench personnel requests time to meet with a defensive or offensive player. A conference requested to attend to an injured player does not count as long as there is no coaching while attending to the injured player. Also, it is not a charged conference if the defense changes pitchers prior to resuming a play. Charged conference rules apply once the ball becomes live to start an inning.

How many defensive charged conferences may be used by a coach to confer with his or her pitcher in a game? Each team, when on defense, may be granted not more than three charged conferences without penalty in a seven-inning game to confer with a defensive

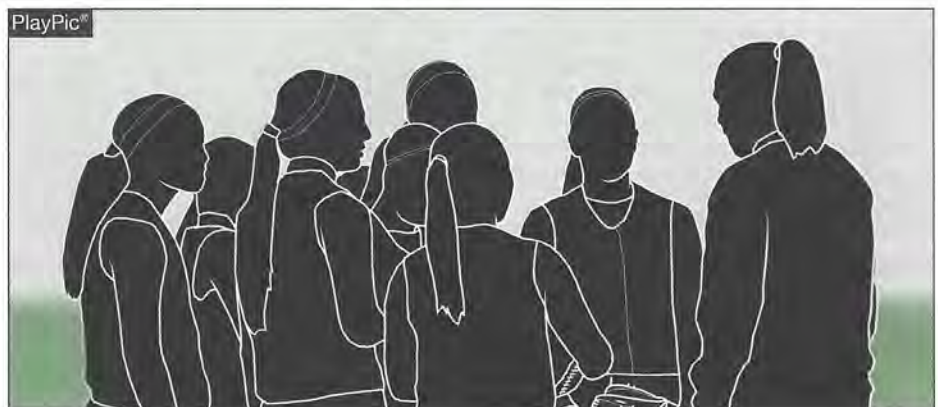
player or players, as shown in the PlayPic. In any extra-inning game, each team is allowed one charged conference each inning without penalty while on defense. In the first seven innings a coach is permitted to conduct a second charged defensive conference with the same pitcher in the same inning, even with the same batter at bat, providing the coach does not violate the number of permissible defensive charged conferences.

A team is only allotted one offensive conference per half inning including extra innings. A conference begins when the game is delayed or suspended to deliver a message to the offensive player

or coach and ends when the coach returns to the coach's box or dugout/bench area.

An offensive or defensive conference is not charged when there is a suspension of play caused by an injury and the other team is ready to play when the injured team is ready.

When either team has a charged conference, the other team may also have a conference which is not charged, provided the non-charged conference concludes when the opposing team's charged conference concludes, thus not delaying the game. □





## Click in on the Count

The batter takes a big cut at a changeup but misses the pitch, making the count 1-1. She sets herself for the next pitch and watches it zing over the plate, thigh high and into the catcher's mitt. The umpire calls, "Strike three" and she's out.

Impossible? Not at all. The above scenario actually happened in a high school varsity game in my part of the planet last season. The two umpires huddled and discussed the issue, but in the end the call stood; the batter was retired on two strikes, short-circuiting a rally by the offensive team and possibly costing them the game; the offended team wound up losing by one run.

Most umpires have found themselves in situations where they've lost track of the count. It's always embarrassing and can cause big problems.

So how can you reduce the likelihood of that happening to you or your crew?

- If you are the plate umpire, verbalize the count just loud enough that the batter and catcher can hear you after each pitch early in the count. Apart from keeping the players informed, you'll keep yourself in the game.

- Take a discreet peek at your indicator. Some clinicians and umpires-in-chief will say the plate umpire should never look at his or her indicator. For most, that doesn't make a lot of sense. We're not suggesting you need to look after every pitch. But even when you're sure of the count, a quick glance now and again might ward off a potential problem.

- Give the count to the pitcher on deciding pitches, like 0-2, 1-2, 3-1, 3-0. Wait until she is facing you before signaling and verbalizing the count. That way the pitcher, catcher and the batter will be getting the information simultaneously. And they are the three people in the ballpark to whom the count is most important.

- Always give the count after a play on the bases, such as a stolen-base attempt or pickoff play. Your partner will likely be focused on the play and may not know whether a pitch was called

SEE "CLICK IN ON THE COUNT" P. 10

## Face the Call

Umpires of all levels should understand that immediately turning away after significant play is a dangerous habit. A strikeout, for example, can represent an emotional moment for players of both teams and the possibility of misconduct between those players is often matched by the possibility of disputes within the team that just made the out.

Other flash points can occur in different situations on the softball diamond, such as a safe/out call on a pickoff attempt or while ejecting a coach or player. Taking your focus off of the situation immediately in front of you may cause you to miss any misconduct, interference or obstruction between players or by a coach.

Most plate umpires enjoy calling strike three. But when their strike three mechanic takes them out of the action they will miss any subsequent action.

A plate umpire should be careful not to turn away from the playing action

with runners on base. If the batter interferes with the catcher on a stolen base attempt, the plate umpire must see that.

There are times when it is OK to turn away from a player or coach slightly. When ejecting a participant or coach, if you feel the need to signal, turn 90 degrees away from the person and give a moderately assertive pointing signal away from the field. Your right shoulder should be facing the ejectee when making the signal. If you turn away from the ejected person, they can't contend you tried to punch them. Invariably, several participants a year claim the umpire tried to strike them.

Some umpires use a more laid-back method when ejecting someone from the game. Their intention is to make the incident as calm and unobtrusive as possible. But in a contentious situation with unacceptable behavior, make it clear that an ejection has occurred. □



Sean Wells, Kent, Wash., keeps his eyes straight ahead after a called third strike. By doing so, he can see any post-play action such as a snap throw to pick off a runner or a possible sportsmanship issue involving the batter who was called out.

## ▶ Click In On the Count CONT. FROM P.9

a ball or a strike. Take that extra few seconds to give him or her the count.

- Always carry an indicator, regardless of what position you're working or how many umpires are on the crew. Keeping track of the count, regardless of how many others are doing so, will help you to concentrate.

- It doesn't hurt to have a second indicator in your pocket. It's rare when an indicator breaks or cracks, but it's best to have a spare on hand.

And what if you lose the count?

Occasionally that will happen to a base umpire who has to move to cover a stolen-base attempt and isn't cognizant of whether the pitch was called a ball or a strike.

The NFHS does not have an approved signal for that situation. That way the plate umpire won't call undue attention to the situation and will give the count the same way he or she would in any other circumstance.

Official scorekeepers are not

responsible for keeping track of balls and strikes, but do keep track of outs. However, relying on the scorekeeper can

be risky because the information they give may not be correct. □



Plate umpire Bryan Moore of Chatsworth, Calif., gives the count to the pitcher on a deciding pitch.

## Confine Those Creeping Coaches

Only the batter, runner(s), on-deck batter and coaches in the coach's box are permitted to be outside the bench area when the ball is live. All other team personnel and players must be in the dugout/bench area, or designated warm-up area during that time. It's a rule across all of the major codes, yet coaches will often bend or clearly break that rule without any pushback from the game umpires.

In most cases, it takes a simple reminder to get coaches and players to cooperate. Safety is the main reason for the rule, especially with the dugout/bench area in such close proximity to the diamond.

Coaches and players will often sit outside the dugouts, sometimes on buckets (see PlayPic). That is not permitted. All equipment and players must be inside the dugout/bench area. Since the plate umpire has many other tasks to deal with and simply may not see a coach or player creeping out of the dugout/bench area, the base umpire(s) can take the lead on enforcing the rules. In three-umpire mechanics, U1 or U3

can communicate with the base coach to address the issue with his or her team. In two-umpire mechanics, the base umpire will likely have to communicate with the first-base coach and third-base coach either between innings, with runners on base or during a dead ball.

The NFHS rule is a warning to the coach of the team involved. The next offender on the team shall be restricted to the dugout/bench area for the remainder of the game (3-6-6 Pen.).

If you do eject a coach or player, be sure to contact your assigner and/or conference commissioner immediately after the game to let him or her know about the situation. That helps to prevent the assigner and/or conference commissioner from getting blindsided with a call/email/text from an angry coach or athletic director. Immediately after that, the report must be filed to the proper authorities.

With those situations, remain calm and professional throughout.

If umpires allow coaches and/or players to creep outside of the dugout/bench area when the ball is live and

neglect to take the necessary steps to get the offender(s) inside the dugout, the problem will only get worse. That causes problems for the umpires who do enforce the rules. □



## On the Ready With Pre-Pitch Planning

It is a sunny, warm afternoon and your game between two disciplined, competitive teams is clicking right along. Life is good. A few innings have passed and you and your partner are on the way to that elusive perfectly called game. Not so fast. You start thinking of other things on your personal agenda for the day and before you know it, you are drifting off, losing focus.

That, of course, can get you in trouble while working the bases or the plate, and the game that had a good flow will suddenly get messed up fast while a coach is in your face or loudly questioning your call from the bench area, wondering about your eyesight and sanity.

It is very tempting, at times, to let your mind drift over the course of a game. It might be from lack of interest or possibly thinking about a call on the previous play. The best way to keep your head in the game no matter the situation is through pre-pitch preparation. Before every pitch, mentally go through your responsibilities as well as your partner(s) and possible situations that could occur.

If you are the base umpire in a two-person system and no runners are on, remind yourself before each pitch of your basic responsibilities, like observing the pitcher from the time she has the ball in the circle until she releases the ball. The base umpire also should be watching for a checked swing and/or a dropped third strike and be prepared for any play at first base. The base umpire also should know that he or she has

chase responsibilities on fly balls hit between the right-field foul line and the center fielder and that his or her partner will cover the bases if he or she chases. Be concise when progressing through the pre-pitch steps, such as: "pitcher, checked swing/dropped third, first base, chase, batter-runner to third."

With a runner on first base, the base umpire should include determining if the runner leaves the base early in the pre-pitch sequence as well as tag-up responsibilities, possible interference, obstruction or nothing, and be ready for a bunt or steal attempt.

The sequence of concise reminders changes slightly with additional runners and number of outs, but that is why it is even more important to follow through on pre-pitch planning.

Aside from calling balls and strikes, the plate umpire also should be pre-pitch planning as well. Scan the infield to know where the runners are and if your partner(s) are in the correct starting position. Next double-check on number of outs and any umpire-to-umpire signal to initiate. Know where you have to go if the ball is hit to the outfield or infield; who to go to on a checked swing (three-person crew), the potential for a steal or pickoff; and observe the pitcher for a possible illegal pitch.

By reviewing responsibilities and potential plays prior to the pitch, you not only help maintain your focus strictly on the game and current situation, but also increase your ability to recognize and respond to the action without hesitation. □

### QUICKTIP

There are a few times to **be in a set position with eyes on the pitcher for plate and base umpires**. The plate umpire should be set by the time the pitcher releases the ball to the catcher. A base umpire responsible for a runner(s) should remain set and then raise as the catcher receives the pitch and the read the play until it is apparent that no play will be made on a runner.

National Federation of State High School Associations



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# OBSTRUCTION EXPLAINED



One of the more challenging judgments for a base umpire is determining if a fielder is committing obstruction on a runner. Here's how to handle it in a game using NFHS rules.

**(Photo A)**

The umpire must determine if the fielder is impeding the progress of a runner who is legally running the bases. Obstruction is the act of a fielder not in possession of the ball, or making an initial play on a batted ball that impedes the progress of a runner who is legally running the bases.

It is obstruction if a defensive player is blocking the base or base path without the ball AND the runner is impeded from her chosen path.

Obstruction may be intentional or unintentional and applies to live-ball action only.



**(Photo B)**

Defenders must catch the ball first, block the base and then make the tag to insure they are not guilty of obstruction. If the fielder is not in possession of the ball and impedes the progress of the runner, it is obstruction.

**UMPIRE:**

*Francisco Villega, Renton, Wash.*

# Seven Pre-Pitch Situational Points to Know Before They Throw

With each batter and before every pitch, umpires must prepare for a list of responsibilities. Where do I go on a hit to the outfield? A hit to the infield? What if my partner chases a ball to the outfield? Who will I go to on a checked swing?

It is also good to know or sniff out strategy by the offense and defense. Umpires should know the game situation as much as the players.

Be sure to review the following list of points to be focused, alert and ready for each play before it occurs.

**1. Number of outs.** There are different situations for the number of outs. Each field doesn't always have a scoreboard, so it is important that you and your partner(s) stay on the same page. If there are two outs, all play after the third out is dead. If it's the third out of an inning, you may want to put more emphasis on the call, especially if it's a close play. With fewer than two outs there could be a tag-up or infield fly situation compared to a timing play with two outs.

**3. Who's on first?** Know which baserunners you need to watch and where the next play will likely take place. If a runner is on third late in a close game, will the defense likely make a play on that runner instead of a force out at first?

**4. Batter's objective.** With a runner on first and less than two out, the batter may attempt a sacrifice bunt. A speedy slap hitter may try to do the same. A steal may be more likely, or the offense may try a hit-and-run. And if you sense that runner will attempt to steal or leave as part of a hit-and-run, it's possible that the runner may be more likely to leave the base before the pitch is released.

**5. The score.** Is the score tied, lopsided or are both teams within a run or two of each other? The inning and score may determine if an offense will attempt to squeeze a runner from third across the plate or ask the batter to swing away. Is it 9-0 in a 10-run rule game that is in the fifth inning?

The team that is leading will often do everything possible to score a run to end the game.

**6. Batter history.** Is the batter a power hitter or contact hitter? Tracking batter tendencies will help you know what to expect. Is she a long-ball hitter or will she be lucky to hit it past the infielders?

**7. Position of defenders.** Take a peek at the infielders and outfielders with each batter. Where are they set up? Is the infield in, anticipating

a bunt? Are the outfielders also positioned closer to the infield? Has the defense shifted in a certain direction?

If you are on the plate or the bases, take a moment before each pitch to not only pre-pitch plan but also get a handle on the game situation to put yourself in the proper mind-set. You will be a step ahead mentally and likely be in a good position to make a call. □

## No-Elbow Zone

Should the batter in the PlayPic be awarded first base? Because the ball is over the plate and the batter is leaning her elbow over the plate, it is not a typical hit-by-pitch situation, but the plate umpire should call a dead ball.

Depending on its location over

the plate, the pitch is a ball or a dead-ball strike, and the batter remains at bat with a few exceptions. The batter is declared out if the pitch is the third strike and the batter is awarded first base if the pitch is ball four. Baserunners advance only if forced. □



## Three Umpires: Covering the Corners

In a three-umpire system, when a fly ball is hit to the outfield and one umpire goes out to rule on the play, the remaining two umpires should go into two-umpire mode immediately. With runners on first and third base, it is a much better scenario for the plate umpire when a base umpire chases.

In the MechaniGram, U1 turns and moves parallel to the flight of the ball to get a good angle. The moment that U3 sees U1 covering the fly ball, U3 should make a beeline across the diamond to between first and second base inside the diamond and a little closer to first base. That will allow U3 to see R2 tag up or, if the ball is not caught, allow U3 to be in position for a possible force play at second base. If the ball is caught by F9, U3 will be in position for a tag play at second base, or an appeal or tag play at first base.

When a base umpire chases a fly ball, the plate umpire should move to a holding position in foul territory between home and third base. P is responsible for any tagup at third base by R1, or a tag play at third involving a lead runner as well as any play at the



plate.

When U1 goes out to cover the fly ball to F9, it allows P to obtain a better position to see a tagup by R1.

When chasing, U1 should move parallel to the flight of the ball and

should come to a stop and signal an out or no catch while facing F9. Do not return to the infield until the play is completed, but allow the ball to turn you back to the infield and observe the rest of the play from there. □

## Softball Injury Surveillance Study

As high school sports participation continues to increase in the United States, the number of sports injuries will also likely increase unless effective injury prevention programs are implemented. The NFHS Sports Medicine Advisory Committee and the NFHS Sport Rules Committees use information from the National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study (High School RIO™) to monitor rates and patterns of sports injuries among high school athletes. High School RIO™ is currently collecting its 12th year of softball exposure and injury data.

High School RIO™ data shows that girls' softball has one of the lowest rates of injury among the girls' sports studied. Softball injury rates have remained stable over the past 11 years. During the 2015/16 academic year, sprains (19.9%) and concussions (16.9%) were the most common types of injuries sustained by



softball players, followed by contusion (16.5%). The body parts most commonly injured were the head/face (19.2%), ankle (15.1%) and shoulder (11.3%). Contact with bases (14.3%), contact with another player (13.5%) and fielding a thrown ball (12.4%) were the most common activities that athletes were engaged in at the time of injury. Of the 9 sports included in the original sample of High School RIO, girls' softball had the 2nd lowest concussion rate in 2015/16, with only boys' baseball having lower concussion rates.

Understanding such patterns of injury is one important tool when considering a new rule change and keeping risk minimization as a priority in the efforts to keep softball athletes as safe as possible.

If you are interested in more information on the High School RIO™ Study or interested in becoming a reporter for girls' softball, please visit <http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/PublicHealth/research/ResearchProjects/piper/projects/RIO/Pages/Study-Reports.aspx> for summary reports. □

## Pickoff Positioning: Take Your Pick

A pickoff play is one of many responsibilities of the base umpire, and a safe or out call can result in controversy. That can be avoided by obtaining a good calling position near the action while keeping the defender, runner, base and ball in front of you to get the call right.

Base umpires in a three-umpire crew have a far better chance to obtain an initial primary position before a runner approaches a base to ensure that all the aforementioned elements are in front of him or her. Often U1 or U3 in a three-umpire crew is only a few steps away from a primary position. He or she can read the play as it develops, determine if obstruction occurred and adjust as needed to see the application of a tag.

In a two-umpire crew, the base umpire (U1) has more of a challenge to obtain a good primary position, often arriving at that position about the same time as the throw to the defender and runner to the base. If the umpire is moving at that time, it will make seeing the play more of a challenge.

With a runner on first base in a two-umpire crew, U1 should start near the midpoint (30 feet) between first and second base. The starting depth may vary, depending on where the second baseman is playing, but U1 should set up a few steps to her left. When the pitch is delivered and caught by the catcher, U1 should move parallel to the baseline, or slightly diagonal depending on the starting position, and try to be close to tag-play

depth, which is 10 to 12 feet.

In a pickoff attempt, try to obtain a 90-degree angle to the throw and concentrate on whether the tag was made prior to the runner reaching the base or the runner beating the tag to the base, but come to a stop before making a safe or out signal.

After obtaining the initial primary position, it may be necessary to obtain a secondary calling position depending on the throw and any type of avoidance-type slide by the runner to reach the base. The secondary calling position may be a step or two from the primary position and the extended baseline.

Obstruction by the defender often is a factor and can easily be overlooked in a bang-bang pickoff play. A key word to remember regarding obstruction is "impede" by the defense. Keep the following points in mind when ruling on obstruction during a pickoff.

1. A fielder not in possession of the ball while a baserunner attempts to return to a base during a pickoff attempt or throwback to a base is not allowed to impede the progress of that baserunner, unless the fielder is in possession of the ball.

2. Obstruction applies to live-ball play only. When obstruction occurs, a delayed-dead ball is ruled and obstruction is called. Allow the play to finish before calling time.

3. Unless the obstructed runner is put out prior to reaching the base that would have been reached had there not been obstruction, a dead ball is called

and the obstructed runner is awarded the base she would have reached, in the umpire's judgment, had there not been obstruction.

How do you know a team is planning a pickoff attempt? Sometimes it's obvious. If the leadoff batter reaches first and she is a good runner, she likely will try to steal second. But the defense can prepare for a pickoff attempt to first or second to combat a speedy runner. Catchers will sometimes rise a little out of their stance prior to the pitcher's delivery to adjust to a high pitch or position themselves for a quick throw. A second baseman may take a few steps closer to first base, with other infielders playing up for a bunt or slap-hit attempt, to take a throw from the catcher in a pickoff attempt.

Read the play and adjust as necessary to allow for accurate judgment on a pickoff attempt. □

### QUICK TIP

Being in the zone takes thought, preparation and discipline by the plate umpire. Establish a pregame routine that includes both physical and mental items, like wearing the same socks or putting on your equipment in the same order before every game. It helps to bring the game into focus from the beginning. Once you take the field, make routine a part of your game. Get set the same way, at the same time for every pitch. Work with the same timing every pitch.

## Read, Learn, Practice the Basics

Most top umpires use the "pause, read, react" technique. It is a key sequence to follow for umpires after the ball is put in play.

**Pause.** Some umpires will jump when a ball is batted, like when they once played softball or baseball. Remember to slow down because as an umpire you have to observe and be a decision-maker. So in the pause

mode, step up, turn and face the ball. Then take a second to observe the initial action. During the pause it may help to flash your eyes to a fielder as you keep the ball in your peripheral vision.

**Read.** The read quickly follows the pause. With the read you determine what type of play is developing and what adjustment in

field position you must make.

**React.** With react, move into a calling position for the anticipated play. In the react mode you will also "inform" your partner by verbally communicating your intentions to coordinate your coverage so you keep the field in proper officiating balance. That is especially important in the

● SEE "PRACTICE THE BASICS" P. 16

## ► Practice the Basics

CONT. FROM P.15

two-umpire system.

**Stop.** Simply stop at your calling position with the best possible angle to the play. Angle beats distance every time. A good angle to the play is more important than distance from the play.

**Set.** Drop to your calling position.

**Focus.** A good calling position loses value if you do not focus on the proper elements of the play. The

focus is looking in the right area from your calling position. With a good focus you can train yourself to “image” the play. Imaging allows you mentally to see an instant replay of the play. Professional baseball umpires are very good at imaging plays.

**Call.** The call is announced and signaled after your decision is reached. On a close play, a good overhand out signal moves you closer to the play and sells your

call. Stay focused on the play for any late developments unless you are responsible for another call. However, when the play is over, move to your next set-up position or between-innings position. Never hang around after a play is over. Of course, if a subsequent play follows, you must move into a new calling position.

Pause, read, react works well for both base umpires and plate umpires for all plays. □

## Is the Time Right for a Run?

Time plays can be tricky, but getting them right is crucial because they involve a team scoring or not scoring a run. Here’s a review of the signals:

**The Run Scores** — As seen in the PlayPic, the umpire stands at the plate and emphatically points down at the plate while saying, “The run scores! Score the run!” The umpire should establish eye contact with the scorer while signaling and make sure the run goes up on the scoreboard. If necessary, a deliberate pumping motion with the arm should be used while pointing at the plate and repeating, “The run scores.”

**The Run Does Not Score** — The umpire should stand at the plate and verbalize, “The run does not count.” Establish eye contact with the scorer while signaling. Watch the scoreboard to make sure a run is not recorded.

Here are some examples:

**Play 1:** R1 is on second and R2 on first with two outs when B5 hits safely to the outfield. R1 scores, but B5 is thrown out a second just before R2 touches the plate. **Ruling:** The plate umpire will call, “The first run scores! Score one run!”

Plate umpires must remember the third out on a time play occurs the instant the following runner is out and not when the out is actually called and signaled by the field umpire.

**Play 2:** R1 is on third and R2 on first with one out. B4 hits a fly ball that’s caught by F9. R1 legally tags but R2, who didn’t tag up, is thrown out returning to first base. **Ruling 2:**

### The Run Scores



Obviously R1’s run doesn’t count if the third out is made at first base on R2 before R1 touches the plate. However, R1’s run scores if she reaches home plate before the third out on R2. Though R2 was in jeopardy and required to return to first base following the catch, it is not a force out even though R2 need not be tagged providing a fielder in possession of the ball contacted first before R2 returned. Remember, a force out cannot occur on any play when a batter-runner is out on a caught fly ball. By definition, a force play results when a runner (or runners) is forced to advance because the batter becomes a batter-runner. □

## Use of Resin, Towel by Pitchers

Games hampered with light precipitation can often pose problems for pitchers, who are allowed to use a towel or approved drying agents to dry the pitching hand. An umpire’s judgment comes into play under a few wet-weather circumstances.

A pitcher is allowed to use a towel as long as, in the umpire’s judgment, it is not distracting to the batter.

A towel that is tucked in the pitcher’s waist in front facing the batter and flopping around is likely to be more distracting than if it is tucked in her back pocket or in her waist in back.

NFHS allows pitchers to use a powdered resin or any comparable drying agent to dry the hands. The resin applied to the pitcher’s hands and fingers does not have to be wiped off prior to throwing a pitch. □

### QUICKTIP

When chasing a fly ball to the outfield to make a ruling on a catch, no catch or ball over the fence, **face the action and give the appropriate signal.** Umpires sometimes will turn and face the infield prior to giving the signal, but there is no reason to do that. Be sure your signal is visible, distinct, informative, dignified and timed.