



2020 PRESEASON GUIDE SOFTBALL

RIGHT OFF THE BAT

Damaged Bats Now Different from Illegal Bats

The NFHS Softball Rules Committee passed a major rule change at its meeting June 10-12 in Indianapolis regarding bats. A damaged bat is no longer considered the same as an illegal bat and there is no penalty.

A damaged bat is defined as a bat that was once legal, but is broken, cracked, dented, rattles or has sharp edges that might deface the ball. In the past, a damaged bat was considered an illegal bat and batters were penalized as if they had used an illegal bat. The new definition allows umpires to simply remove the damaged bat without penalty.

The committee felt the penalty for using a damaged bat was too severe, which prompted the rule change. The rationale is that a batter should not be penalized for using a bat that was legal but simply deteriorated because of usage. By distinguishing damaged bats from non-approved and altered bats, the rule change puts the NFHS rule in line with other codes.

SEE "DAMAGED BAT" P. 2

If that bat is broken, cracked, dented, rattles or has sharp edges that might deface the ball, umpire Valerie Ottman, Valencia, Calif., will no longer consider it illegal. A new definition — a damaged bat — was created by the NFHS Softball Rules Committee. The rule will be in place for the 2020 season.

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► **DAMAGED BAT** CONT. FROM P.1

The new definition also changes a couple of other rules to update the penalties associated with bats, and changes the definitions and specifications of the bat. The committee updated rule 1-5-1c, which states bats must be free of rattles, dents, burrs, cracks and sharp edges that might deface the ball. Those bats are considered damaged bats and are removed from the game without penalty. By changing this rule, the committee then shifted the portion of the rule dealing with altered bats to rule 1-5-1e to separate damaged bats from altered bats.

Play 1: B1 steps to the plate with a bat that (a) has no ASA/USA Softball certification mark, (b) has exposed rivets at the top of the barrel, (c) has visible cracks, or (d) is severely dented from

previous use. **Ruling 1:** In (a), the bat is illegal and non-approved. The penalty is the batter is out and both the batter and head coach are ejected. In (b), (c) and (d), the bat is considered damaged and removed from the game without penalty (1-5-1, 2-4-2, 2-4-3, 7-4-2).

Play 2: B1 steps to the plate with a bat that was removed due to dents (a) from a previous game, or (b) earlier in the game.

Ruling 2: In (a), the bat is removed from the game without penalty. In (b), if the bat re-entered that game, the player would be assessed an unsporting behavior penalty. Using a bat has been removed from the game is an unsporting act, and penalized (Rule 3-6-13c).

Play 3: B1 steps to the plate with a bat that has a (a) 2000 ASA certification mark, (b) 2004 ASA certification mark, (c) USA Softball All Games certification mark, or

(d) a composite bat with no certification mark. **Ruling 3:** In (a), (b) and (c), the bat is legal provided it does not appear on USA Softball's Non-Approved Bats with Certification Marks list. In (d), the bat is illegal and non-approved. The batter is out and both the batter and head coach are ejected (1-5-1d, 2-4-2, 7-4-2).

Damaged bat vs. illegal bat penalty

As a Point of Emphasis, clarification was needed to delineate the difference between a player using a bat that is damaged versus a bat that is illegal for high school play. By definition, a bat that is damaged (Rule 2-4-3c) is removed from the game without penalty (Rule 7-4-2 Note). An illegal bat that is non-approved or altered will continue to result in the head coach and the batter being ejected. □

DETACHED EQUIPMENT RULE CLARIFIED

Language was clarified in Rule 8-4-3d regarding F2 using detached player equipment to stop a pitch. When F2 stops a wild pitch or passed ball with detached equipment, the batter is not awarded bases. However, if that pitch completed the batter's turn at bat, she has become a batter-runner and is awarded a base.

Play: With R1 at first and no outs, B2 is at bat with a count of (a) no balls, one strike, or (b) three balls, two strikes. B1 swings and misses at the next pitch, which gets by F2. F2 stops the ball using her detached helmet. **Ruling:** In both cases, the ball is dead. In (a), B2 remains at bat with a count of no balls, two strikes and R1 is awarded second base. In (b), since B2 has completed her time at bat, R1 is awarded second base and B2 is awarded first base. □

QUICK TIP

Keep the look-back rule in mind when the ball is live, the batter-runner has touched first, there are one or more runners and the pitcher has possession of the ball within the circle. Plate umpires should allow the base umpire(s) time to get into position, make eye contact and then return to position behind the catcher. With at least one pair of eyes on the runner(s), it prevents the crew from missing any look-back rule violations.



INDECISION EQUALS COLLISION

Two infielders and the catcher all vying for the same pop fly raise lots of possibilities.

If the infield fly rule was in effect, would this qualify as "ordinary effort"?



F3 appears most likely to make contact with the catcher, which could cause the ball to pop out of the catcher's mitt. That would create a catch/no catch challenge for the umpires. Remember that a fielder who collides with another player and fails to maintain possession of the ball has not made a catch.

Even if the ball drops, it is a fair ball. The ball has been touched inside the first-base line, thus any runners may advance without tagging up. An uncaught fly could also lead to late-breaking runners and close plays on the bases.

With the corner infielders converging on the pop up, two bases are potentially uncovered. Umpires should be ready for runners trying to advance while other fielders scramble to cover those bases.

PITCHER'S PIVOT PLACEMENT PASSED

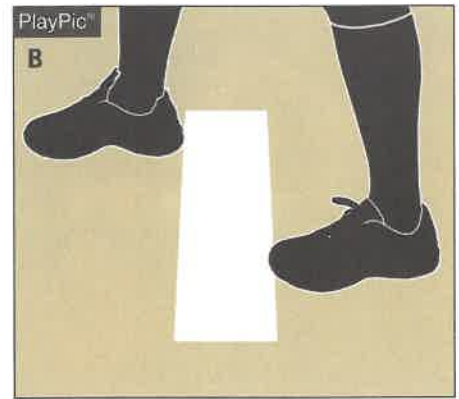
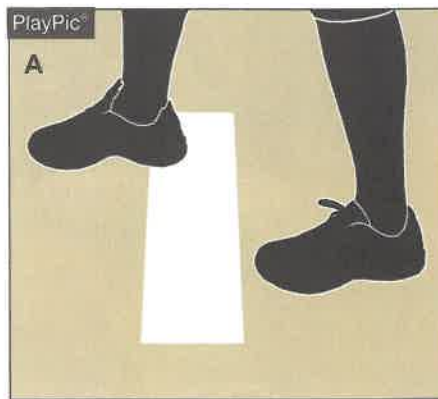
A rule change has been made regarding the position of the pitcher's pivot foot as it contacts the pitcher's plate. Previously, pitchers were required to have the pivot foot on or partially on top of the surface of the pitcher's plate. The change to Rule 6-1-1 allows pitchers to either toe up or heel up to the pitcher's plate, allowing more freedom.

The rule change aligns the NFHS with other codes. It clarifies that only a part of the foot must be in contact with the pitcher's plate and being on top of the pitcher's plate is no longer necessary.

Play: Prior to starting the delivery, F1 takes a position on the pitcher's plate with her pivot foot (a) on top of the pitcher's plate, (b) in contact with the backside of the pitcher's plate, (c) in contact with the front side of the pitcher's plate, or (d) behind the pitcher's plate. **Ruling:** Legal in (a), (b) and (c). In (d), this is an illegal starting position and is an illegal pitch.

Point of Emphasis

Position of the pitcher's feet is a



Because the pivot foot in PlayPic (A) and (B) is in contact with the pitcher's plate, this is legal. Previously, it was required that the pivot foot be on top of the pitcher's plate. The rule change allows it to be on top or in contact with the plate.

2020 Point of Emphasis. Due to the varying levels of play and levels of skill in pitching development, prior to the start of the pitch, NFHS rules allow the pitcher to choose foot placement. The pitcher may choose to take a position with the pivot foot in contact with the plate and the non-pivot foot behind the pitcher's plate or both feet in contact

with the pitcher's plate. Prior to the start of delivery, both feet must be on the ground within or partially within the 24-inch length of the pitcher's plate. This allows for personal preference and developing pitchers to work through levels of progression. □

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 the 14th year of sports exposure and injury data.

High School RIO™ data shows that girls' softball has the second lowest injury rate of the 9 original sports under surveillance, higher only than boys' baseball. Softball injury rates



have remained relatively stable over the past 13 years. During the 2017/18 academic year, sprains/strains (45.2%) and concussions (18.5%) were the most common types of injuries sustained by softball players. The body parts most commonly injured were the head/face (16.6%), ankle (13.9%), knee (13.2%), and hand/wrist (13.2%). The most common mechanisms resulting in injury were contact with thrown ball (non-pitch) (11.8%), rotation around a planted foot/inversion (11.1%), contact with bases (10.4%), and contact with

another player (9.7%). Of the 9 sports included in the original sample of High School RIO™, girls' softball had the 3rd lowest concussion rate in 2017/18, with only boys' basketball and boys' baseball having lower concussion rates. Understanding such patterns of injury is one important tool when keeping risk minimization as a priority in the efforts to keep softball players as safe as possible.

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

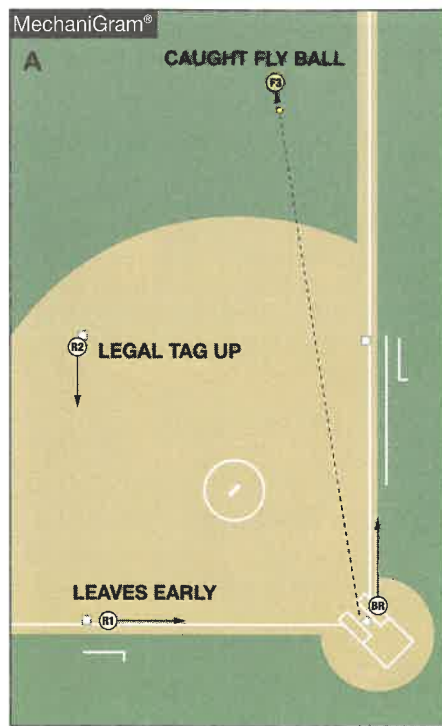
RULE REGARDING SCORING RUNS CLARIFIED

A clarification to Rule 9-1-1 Exc. c was adopted by the NFHS Softball Rules Committee. According to the change, a run is not scored when the third out is made on a preceding runner who is declared out on an appeal play.

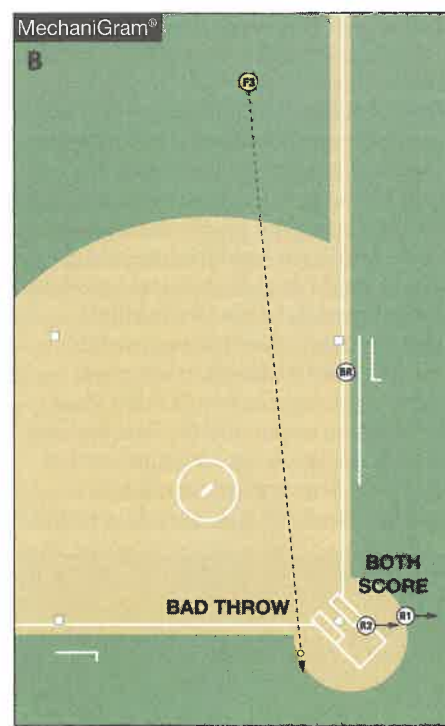
In the past, the rule only covered runners who were declared out for failing to touch one of the bases, but did not include runners who left a base too soon on a caught fly ball.

As seen in MechaniGram A, R1 is on third base, R2 is on second base with one out. The batter hits a fly ball to the outfield which is caught. Both runners tag. R1 leaves early and scores. R2 leaves legally to advance to third base. In MechaniGram B, the throw is over the defensive player's head and R2 scores. The defense then appeals that R1 left early. No runs score since R1 is declared out and no runner can score if the preceding runner is called out on appeal for the third out of the inning.

In the past, by rule, the run would count for the runner who started on second as the rule only pertained to



a runner missing a base, not a runner leaving too soon on a fly ball. The rule change now specifies both types of

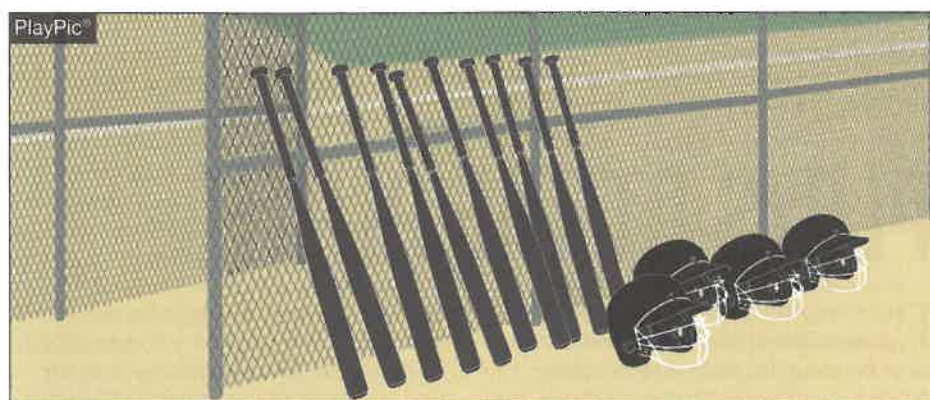


appeal plays that can be affected by Rule 9-1-1 Exc. c, clarifying no runs would count in that situation. □

COACH RESPONSIBLE FOR INSPECTION OF EQUIPMENT

The NFHS Softball Rules Committee reminds head coaches that it is their responsibility to make certain all players are legally and properly equipped, which includes checking bats, helmets and catcher's gear prior to every contest. Although umpires may inspect equipment, they are no longer required to do so.

What is important to remember is equipment wears during use. Bats can become damaged, or a player may purchase a new bat that does not meet NFHS requirements. Both catchers' helmets as well as batters' helmets have screws that hold face guards in place. Those screws loosen and will eventually fall out rendering the equipment illegal for use and potentially causing a safety risk to the player if not detected.



It is critical that coaches remain vigilant in inspecting equipment before every contest to ensure no damage has occurred or new noncompliant equipment has been

purchased since their last inspection.

Proper inspection of equipment by head coaches is a 2020 Point of Emphasis. □

BAT CERTIFICATION MARKS A POINT OF EMPHASIS

Bat certification marks and USA Softball Non-Approved Bats with Certification Marks are a 2020 Point of Emphasis as identified by the NFHS Softball Rules Committee.

The committee determined that clarification was needed to ensure each batter comes to the plate with a bat displaying the proper certification mark, making it legal for use in high school play. Bat manufacturers produce several models of bats for multiple organizations. The different models are often custom designed to meet the specific organization's individual certification requirements. Bats that are custom designed for one organization may only bear that organization's certification mark. Conversely, a large

number of bats are designed to meet several organizations requirements and will bear multiple organizations' certification marks, making them legal to use in multiple codes.

What is important to know is that NFHS softball recognizes and utilizes USA Softball's certification process. In order for a bat to be legal for use in NFHS Softball it must be marked with the ASA 2000, 2004 or the USA Softball All-Games Certification Mark. Additionally, any bat with one of those certification marks must not appear on the list of the USA Softball Non-Approved Bats with Certification Marks. That list was created as a way to alert players and coaches that a bat that was once approved for use has now been

deemed no longer approved for use. All bats that are approved by USA Softball, formally ASA, for use in fast-pitch play shall bear one of those markings. Once those bats have entered the market and possible issues arise there is a process for revoking the approval of those bats. When it has been determined that a bat should have its approval revoked, either through the re-testing process or for a voluntary removal from the manufacturer, the bat is added to the Non-Approved Bats list with Certification Marks. Those bats were approved when originally manufactured and were legal for play at that time, but due to some unforeseen issues no longer pass the approval requirements. □



Bats must bear either the 2000, 2004, or the USA Softball All Games certification mark. Additionally, the bat must not appear on USA Softball's Non-Approved Bats with Certification Marks (www.usasoftball.com). Bat barrels made entirely of wood are permitted and need not bear a certification mark but shall not exceed 2-1/4 inches in diameter.

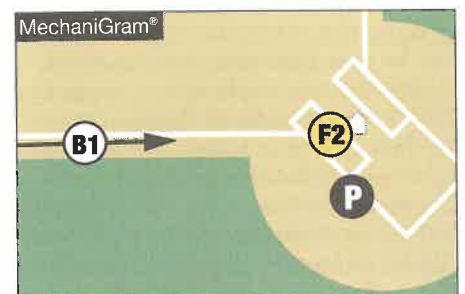
PLAYS AT THE PLATE

Plate umpires are invariably too close to the play on plays at the plate because the plate umpire often doesn't move to a calling position for the impending force play.

The NFHS calling position for the plate umpire on a play at the plate when the throw is coming from fair territory calls for the umpire to step out from behind home plate to just outside the

deepest corner of the right-hand batter's box. The umpire should strive to get a 90-degree angle. Move in closer as the play develops maintaining 10-12 feet from the play.

It is crucial to find the ball. Don't make an out call unless you're positive the catcher has it. If need be, ask the catcher to show you the ball, then make the appropriate call. □



HERE'S THE DISH ON WORKING THE PLATE

Calling the pitch is where a plate umpire puts the stance and set position to work. Good timing is crucial when calling the pitch. After the ball is in the glove or hits the ground make sure you pause, and then call the pitch. To call the pitch, the plate umpire should follow these guidelines:

- To start the game or any time after preventing a pitch from being delivered, direct the pitcher to play ball. When holding up play, simply hold up the hand opposite the batter with your palm facing the pitcher. When you are ready for the pitch, point at the pitcher and say "Play" or "Play ball." At this point, it is imperative to pick up the ball with your eyes while the ball is in the pitcher's hand.

- Track the ball — watch the ball from the pitcher's hand into the catcher's glove using a slight movement of the head guided by the nose — from the pitcher's hand to the catcher's glove or to the ground. Tracking is not an exaggerated head movement or just an eye movement. It is a movement of the nose which simultaneously brings the head with the pitch as the eyes are locked on the ball.



Kathy Mauer, Apex, N.C., rings up a strike. Perfecting the stance will help plate umpires remain consistent.

- The verbal call is always made from the down position. The strike call should be elongated and made briskly and

loudly. Then rise to an upright position without moving the feet and bring the right arm up to a 90-degree angle so the elbow can be seen with your peripheral vision. The fist should be closed with the palm facing your ear. A strong hammer adds certainty to your call. Any swinging strike should be a signal only. In Fast Pitch on a called third strike, both a strong verbal call and signal should be given. For further emphasis, verbalize the words "Strike three." Ball calls should be short and crisp and made in the down position. Use volume to indicate closeness of the pitch.

- On a foul tip, rise and brush the fingers of the right hand over the left hand, at least chest high in front of the body followed by the strike signal.

- There are times when the count should be given. Signaling the count is done by raising both arms above the head indicating balls with consecutive fingers on the left hand and strikes with consecutive fingers on the right hand. Give both the number of balls and strikes every time the count is given. Rotate your hands, not your body, so everyone can see the count. □

KEEPING FOCUS A MUST FOR UMPIRES

In umpiring concentration is perhaps the most important aspect for consistent performances. When you lose concentration, you must get it back fast or lose the game and likely your reputation with it.

Whether working the plate or the bases, it's easier to lose concentration in long games. The key is to recognize you're losing it before the coaches, players and spectators do.

On the plate ask yourself if you are setting too soon. Setting in your calling position stance too soon can compromise your concentration. Call one pitch at a time and get it right. Pretend you have to catch the next pitch and then catch it with your eyes.

After five innings, give yourself a kick and a pep talk. Say to yourself, "I've

got a good game going here so I'm not going to screw it up. Two innings to go and I've finished a good game."

On the bases try to anticipate plays but never anticipate calls. Call one play at a time and get it right. Between innings go to a neutral zone in the outfield and briefly relax. Casually watch the infielders throwing to first and try to figure who might make a bad throw and study the first baseman's mannerisms.

Then bounce back to your position and turn the switch for the next half inning. If you feel you are losing concentration, tell yourself that your next call will decide the game. If that technique works, try it again the next inning.

Don't give in to distractions. Try

to stay in the "here and now." That means not feeling guilty about the past or worrying about the future. Work on lengthening your concentration as a ballgame is longer than most people can concentrate. Train yourself to tune out that loudmouth fan in the stands or that you are annoyed with your assigner or that you have an unpleasant duty at work. Take deep breaths to increase oxygen to your brain.

Vow to think about personal issues at another time when you don't have the responsibility of umpiring a game that's important to many people. You cannot solve personal problems on the field anyway. If you lose concentration and miss a pitch or play, things will go from bad to worse as you'll then be thinking about your incorrect call. □

DUMP THE SLUMP, UMP!

Even the best ballplayers go into slumps. A hard-hitting batter is suddenly “popping them up.” A dominant pitcher “loses the strike zone.” An ace fielder begins praying, “Please don’t hit the ball to me.” A top baserunner commits surprising blunders. Slumps are part of the game.

Umpires have slumps too. That’s especially true for plate umpires. Like most slumps, they come on without warning and usually go away in time.

However, unlike a player, a plate umpire doesn’t have the luxury of riding out a slump. For the record, Webster’s Electronic Dictionary on my computer defines a slump as “a decline from a standard or accustomed level.”

Getting out of a slump

To break a slump the plate umpire must go back to basics. The umpire must set his/her feet with the heel of the foot closest to the batter in a straight line with the toe of the foot closest to the catcher. Do this by setting your foot behind the catcher first and squaring your shoulders to the outside front corner of the plate. Then bring in your foot behind the batter so your feet are in a heel-toe alignment, making sure your ear closest to the catcher is lined up with the inside corner. Both feet should be turned slightly outward so your knees are over your toes. On a right-handed batter set your right foot first, then your left foot. On a left-handed batter, set your left foot first, then your right foot. This will provide the same stance on both a left-handed batter and a right-handed batter. Your feet should be at least shoulder width apart or wider, if comfortable, keeping in mind that you will have to move when needed.

Make sure you are not too close or too far from the catcher. Remember this rule of thumb: You must see the complete plate and then the ball from the pitcher’s hand to the catcher’s glove or the ground as it passes through or out of the strike zone.

Rotating your head and eyes toward the pitcher will assist you in seeing the ball from the pitcher’s hand to the catcher’s glove or the ground.

Be sure to bend at the knees, not



Carin McNeill, Winterville, N.C., delivers a strike three call.

at the waist. This allows your back to be as straight as possible with a slight tilt forward to bring your head into the proper position. This will reduce the pressure on your lower back and the top of your legs.

Set position

The plate umpire assumes the set position to call balls and strikes. To be in a good set position the plate umpire should follow these guidelines:

The umpire must start in the slot. The slot is defined as the position the umpire assumes prior to going set in which he/she is behind the catcher, slightly inside the inside corner of the plate with your ear closest to the catcher, lined up with the inside corner, and outside the perimeter of the strike zone.

You must have Good Pelvic Alignment, referred to as GPA. This position is achieved when the umpire

has his/her pelvis aligned with the outside front corner of the plate. This allows you to look down and through the strike zone.

Set no lower than the top of the strike zone in relationship to the batter. Your body should be locked in a stationary position to see the ball released from the pitcher’s hand and travel all the way to the catcher’s glove or the ground. Your hands should be placed in a comfortable position in front of your body.

Drop to the set at the start of the pitch. In Fast Pitch, this is when one hand is taken off the ball after the hands have been placed together. Each pitcher is different and the time you go set can vary accordingly.

Being in the correct slot and set position on both sides of the plate gives you an unobstructed view of the strike zone on every pitch from the same angle. □

LEARNING FROM OTHER SPORTS

No-calls are common to officiating in all sports. Sometimes it's advantageous to use examples from other sports to explain softball rules and plays. Unfortunately, many times players quote rules from other sports trying to convince us we've made the wrong call.

Here are two examples. Accept one and refute the other.

By far, the most erroneously used crossover rule is from football. That is when a fielder makes a spectacular effort while attempting to catch a fly ball. It usually happens that the fielder has the ball inside the glove, then rolls on the ground, only to have the ball end up on the ground.

Immediately after we signal no catch, we usually hear, "Hey! I had it when I hit the ground. The ground can't make you fumble."

Correct interpretation, but for the wrong sport.

The rulebook makes the determination of a catch easy with the inclusion of the statement, "A catch shall not be credited if immediately following a catch, the fielder ... falls to the ground and fails to maintain possession of the ball."

In trigonometry it is said that $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. In softball, if the ball was in the glove but came out when it hit the ground, it's not a catch.

As Plan B, it could also be said that in football, the ground can't cause a fumble, but it can cause an incomplete pass, which is also somewhat analogous.

The other crossover rule example that we can use is from basketball. Many softball fields are not ideal, to say the least. Because of that, you have opportunities for balls to go out of play and even players going out of play.

There's a question about a player being on the playing field when making a catch and subsequently going into the dead-ball area. One example is an outfielder catching a ball at the fence and then falling over it. Similarly, when using chalk lines

to mark dead-ball areas, there is the possibility of catches being made near the out-of-play area and the fielder continuing into the dead-ball area.

The basketball rule used to explain the proper interpretation of those softball plays concerns where a player establishes her location on the court. Many times, when a ball is going out of bounds, players leave the court by jumping into the air and are actually "out of bounds" in the air before knocking the ball back into the court and landing out of bounds. The important concept there is the player's location when she becomes airborne. If done properly, the player's position is inbounds because that is the area she was in before she touched anything out of bounds.

So it is for softball. If the player jumps into the air to make a catch, has control of the ball and then falls over the outfield fence, you have an out. She made the catch. Award bases for unintentionally taking the ball into dead-ball territory.

The same is true for catches that are close to a chalk line. As long as the fielder's last contact is in the playing field, she can be in the air over dead-ball territory and make the catch. If she comes down in dead-ball territory, award bases accordingly.

Whether making calls or no-calls, we can draw parallels from other sports. The challenge is to know the parallels and understand which ones we should accept and which ones to refute. □

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WHEN IT'S RUNNERS MAKING THE ERRORS



Plate umpire Jerry Forkner, Duvall, Wash.; and partner Josh Francis, Woodinville, Wash., cover a rundown between third and home.

A baserunner caught in a rundown between two bases can be among the most exciting plays in fast-pitch softball, but it also creates a challenging situation for umpires.

The umpires must be alert to the possibility of obstruction as the fast-paced, back-and-forth action unfolds. There's also a chance of the baserunner

violating the basepath guidelines as she tries to avoid being tagged. And what happens when the rundown ends with two runners occupying the same base?

For umpires, the starting point in sorting out that type of baserunning blunder is understanding the rules that govern runners occupying bases and the definition of a runner's basepath.

A runner who has acquired the right to a base by touching it before being put out is entitled to hold the base until she has legally touched the next base in order or is forced to vacate it for a trailing runner. Two runners may not occupy the same base simultaneously. In the case of a rundown, if the trailing runner occupies the same base the first

▶ runner has left, the trailing runner cannot be put out while occupying that base. If the first runner, however, returns safely to the base she left and both runners are then occupying the same base, the trailing runner is out if touched with the ball.

A runner's basepath is defined as the imaginary direct line, and three feet to either side of that line, between a base and a runner's position at the time a defensive player is attempting to apply a tag. A runner who attempts to avoid a tag by running more than three feet to either side of a fielder with the ball in her possession is declared out.

In the chaos that can occur during a rundown, umpires must maintain focus in order to make the correct ruling when two runners end up at the same base.

Play: R1 is on first when B2 hits a ball into the gap. R1 advances and rounds third but retreats when the throw goes to the catcher. Meanwhile B2 has arrived at third base. F1, F2 and F5 converge on third base along with the two runners. F2, holding the ball, tags R1. The umpire signals safe but makes no verbal call. R1 suddenly sprints for home plate, which the defense had left unattended. B2 remains on third base.

Ruling: The run scores and B2 remains on third base. The batter-runner, as the trailing runner, is not entitled to the base. Had the defense tagged the batter-runner while both players occupied third, it would have resulted in an out.

Ensuring that baserunners touch each base as they pass it or return to it is especially important in the event the defensive team makes an appeal that a runner missed a base. There are two kinds of appeals: live-ball and dead-ball.

In a live-ball appeal, a fielder in possession of the ball touches the base missed or tags the runner committing the violation while informing the umpire of the appeal. In a dead-ball appeal, time is called and any defensive player in the infield or the coach makes a verbal appeal that specifies which runner missed which base. The umpire then makes a ruling. A dead-ball appeal must be made before the next pitch, legal or illegal.

If a runner fails to touch home plate and is not tagged by a defensive player holding the ball, the situation can result

in an appeal play. The umpire should hesitate slightly to ensure the plate was missed and no tag was made, then declare the runner safe. The defense may appeal by tagging the runner or home plate, at which point the umpire rules on the appeal.

A play at first base in which the batter-runner passes the base before the throw arrives but fails to touch the base also can result in an appeal play. The batter-runner in that situation is considered to have touched first base unless a live-ball appeal is made before the runner returns to the base.

A baserunner leaving a base too soon on a legally caught fly ball is another example of an appeal play. The runner is released from the base when the fielder first touches the ball; it is not necessary to wait until a catch is completed. Umpires must glance between runners tagging up and the fielder preparing to catch a fly ball in

order to determine if a tag-up is legal.

Among the more unusual baserunning situations is a runner passing another runner. The runner who passes a preceding runner before that runner has been put out is immediately declared out. Umpires should be especially alert to that situation when a runner is on first base and the batter-runner hits a fly ball that appears likely to be caught. The runner typically will hesitate between first and second base to see if the ball will be caught. The batter-runner may make an aggressive turn past first base and end up in the same area as the runner on base.

There is an exception in which a preceding runner can be passed legally — if the preceding runner is obstructed, she is awarded the base she would have reached, in the umpire's judgment, had there been no obstruction. The ruling also applies to runners following the obstructed runner. □

National Federation of State High School Associations



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ON SOLID GROUND (RULES)

Knowing a field's quirks preloads information that may be critical during the game. When the ball is bouncing around in a corner or close to dead-ball territory, it changes your thinking from "That is odd" to "I got that!" A few minutes spent walking the field before the game can save you from difficult conversations with coaches once the game is under way.

There are few things more satisfying than stepping onto a field that is perfectly enclosed and maintained. The chance of ground-rule issues occurring are reduced. Those fields are an umpire's dream. No matter how well a field is designed though, there are always areas where the ball can become blocked.

It is a great practice to walk a field before a game to find those areas where, against all odds, a ball can disappear.

A good example involves a temporary fence. Remember that a fielder who places a foot on a temporary fence may make a catch as long as the fence is not completely horizontal.

Trees hanging over the field, flags, signs and poles that jut out into live-ball areas can kill play and restrict the offense. There are a lot of fields out there with no home-run fence. Sometimes the end of the field is a roadway or other hazard to players. It seems unfair when a batter hits a ball for extra bases but must stop because the rules call for a two-base award because of a ground rule. The umpire's job is to award bases according to the rules and not concoct their own interpretations.

The inspection of the field will allow the crew to be aware of those issues that need to be discussed at the pregame meeting with the coaches. Any openings that allow a ball to roll out of play should be identified. Holes in the backstop where a pitched ball will exit the field, or a temporary fence that is not long enough or has gaps along the bottom are some of the problems that can affect your game. The presence of a tarp should lead you to review what determines a catch or no catch and where and when a ball will be considered blocked.



Was that tarp discussed in the ground rules before the game? If the player attempts to recover the ball in this situation, is it considered live? If a foul fly goes near the tarp, can a player put one or both feet on it to attempt a catch? All of those situations and other ground rules should be considered during the plate meeting before the game.

Special ground rules may be used as long as they do not conflict with the rules book. Those should be reviewed during the pregame. Both teams must

agree upon any special ground rules. When they do not, it is the responsibility of the umpire to properly formulate the ground rules. □

FLASHBACK: 2019 RULE CHANGES

Here is a review of the 2019 NFHS softball rule changes.

Illegal Pitch Penalty (6-1-1 Pen., 6-1-2 through 4 Pen., 6-2-1 Pen., 6-2-7 Pen.)

The penalty for an illegal pitch was changed to create more balance between offense and defense. Previously all baserunners were advanced one base as well as a ball being called on the batter. The change removed the advancement of baserunners. Only the batter receives an advantage from the penalty.

An illegal pitch results in a delayed-dead ball. The batter is awarded a ball.

The exceptions are as follows:

- If there is an illegal pitch and the batter reaches first base safely and all other runners advance at least one base, the illegal pitch is nullified.
- If the batter does not reach first base safely or if any baserunner fails to advance at least one base, the coach of the team at bat has the option to take the result of the play or the penalty for the illegal pitch.

- If the batter is hit by an illegal pitch out of the strike zone, the batter is awarded first base and baserunners advance only if forced by the award to the batter. In prior years, the baserunners were also awarded one base; that is no longer the case.

- If ball four is an illegal pitch, the batter is awarded first base and the baserunners advance only if forced by the award to the batter. In prior years, this exception also included an automatic award to baserunners; that is no longer the case.

Face Shields (1-8-4)

Defensive players are permitted to attach eye shields to face/head protection worn in the field, but the shield must be clear and permit 100 percent (no tint) allowable light transmission.

Players were already prohibited from

wearing tinted or reflective eye shields on batting helmets or catcher's masks. This rule change extends that prohibition to the face/head protection.

Adjustable Knobs (1-5-2a)

The committee clarified that a bat with an adjustable knob is permissible, provided the knob is permanently fastened by the manufacturer.

Intentional Walk (2-65-2)

Once the umpire awards an intentional walk, there can be no appeal of a play that occurred prior to that award. The intentional walk is treated just as if the pitcher had pitched the ball.

Start of the Pitch (6-1-2a, b)

Updated rule language clarified what motion constitutes the start of the pitch and when the step back of the non-pivot foot may be taken. The pitch starts as soon as the pitcher separates her hands. □

SMALL TOOL IS A BIG HELP

The indicator is an umpire's tool for every game, but have we taken it for granted? It can become a valuable tool to help us manage the option play situation, and also to keep us completely focused during the game.

As part of indicator management, do not clear your indicator until you are completely settled into your next starting position and making eye contact with the plate umpire. By using that mechanic throughout the game, when an unusual situation unfurls itself at the most unlikely moment, all umpires should be ready to handle it with confidence.

The importance of indicator management often occurs when a runner attempts to steal a base, or there is a wild pitch or passed ball. Many base umpires get so involved with their responsibility on the advancing runner that they lose focus on the plate umpire's ball/strike decision. The base umpire may have also forgotten to advance his or her indicator

because he or she is already moving toward the play on the advancing runner.

When the play is over and the base umpire starts toward the next starting position, it is an uneasy moment when you do not know the last pitch called. As part of umpire crewness it is a well-established policy for the plate umpire to give the count before the next pitch after that type of play, as shown in the PlayPic. But when that is not done there can be a problem because one of the umpires on the field might not know the count.

How can we prevent that problem as a base umpire? As the runner starts to steal and on your first move toward the play, concentrate on the plate area and watch the plate umpire's call. Say to yourself "ball" or "strike," then advance your indicator as you are moving to the play.

When you get to your next starting position, there should be no more uncertainty on the count. And if you



Because the ball-strike indicator fits in the palm of the left hand, it isn't a hindrance in giving the count.

get into the habit of saying to yourself after every non-contacted pitch "ball" or "strike" when you see or hear the plate umpire's call, you will be more focused on every single pitch of the game.

It may be an indicator — if you are not sure of every count on every pitch of the game — that you are not using good indicator management.

CHALLENGING PLAYS IN FRONT OF PLATE

As the plate umpire, anticipating and being mentally ready for the bunt goes a long way to getting all the possible parts of the call right. Is the batter short or left-handed? Is it the top or bottom of the batting order?

Yes, some bunters and bunts do not always fit those criteria and may catch both you and the defense off guard, but for the most part you should be ready for bunt attempts and all that follows. A bunt down the first-base line, especially with a runner on first, adds more to view and rule on.

Hit by pitch

As the batter turns to bunt, the first judgment is whether the pitch is a ball or strike. But what if the batter gets hit by the pitch? What if your vision is blocked and you can't tell if the ball hit the bat or the batter? Try to use sound and the reaction of players on both offense and defense to help make that determination. If that does not work, get help from your partner(s).

Pop up

Once the ball is bunted, find it and watch to see if it is popped up. If so, watch for a diving catch, trap or ball off a fielder. Was the attempted play made in fair or foul territory? Did the pop-up bunt hit the batter and, if so, was the contact in or out of the batter's box? Fair or foul? Most importantly, where was the ball touched?

Once the ball is on the ground, the batter's feet and ball must stay in view. Once again, did the ball contact the batter? In or out of the batter's box? In fair or foul territory?

The bat

Now locate the bat. Did the bat hit the ball or did the ball roll against the bat without batter intent? Did it happen in fair or foul territory? After making those checks, also be aware of interaction with the batter and the catcher. Look for any interference with the catcher, or possible obstruction of the batter-runner.

As the ball is slowly rolling near the first-base line, a swipe tag by the pitcher or first baseman, interference by



A bunt attempt along the first-base line presents many challenges for a plate umpire. Umpire Mike Rabin, Woodinville, Wash., starts to take off his mask and keeps all of the necessary elements in front of him — the ball, batter-runner, defense, baseline and bat during the bunt attempt.

the batter-runner and obstruction by a fielder who is not the primary one fielding the ball all have to be considered. Then when the throw is made, be alert for any running-lane violation, pulled foot or swipe tag by the second baseman covering first base.

Runner on first

Let's say there is a runner on first base during a bunt attempt. That often happens during the course of a game. If the runner takes off on the pitch, which is a "run and bunt," she could possibly be heading to third. In both two- and three-umpire systems the plate umpire is responsible for the secondary play at third.

In a two-umpire crew, U1 has the call at first base. The plate umpire has the fair/foul call. If R1 is rounding second

base, the plate umpire needs to get to third base for that possible play while looking toward first base to help as much as possible.

The plate umpire's responsibilities after the fair/foul call, include helping with any running lane violation, but their primary responsibility is a play at third base.

Squeeze plays

The squeeze or safety squeeze also can be a challenging situation for the plate umpire. When a bunt is hit fair in that situation with the runner charging toward home from third, adjust back to a holding position to see the runner and be ready for the first or second play to be at the plate. Keep the ball and runner in view. Always pre-pitch plan. □

WATER WILL WORK WONDERS

It is the middle of the season and you are umpiring at high noon with temperatures in the 90s. The humidity is so high you wish you had gills to breathe. In those situations, most of us understand the importance of keeping our bodies hydrated. Yet do you realize that perhaps the most important medical necessity anytime of the year, even in the winter, is your level of hydration?

Water makes up 66 percent of your body and is involved in most of the body's vital processes. Some people do not believe that staying hydrated or avoiding dehydration is needed unless you are an athlete or engaged in strenuous activity. However, when you are dehydrated, your body is not functioning optimally. It has effects on you as an official.

During spring and summer, dehydration is the main culprit in most heat-related illnesses, but it can occur any time you do not keep your fluid intake up. Unfortunately, most people are in a mild, chronic state of dehydration the majority of the time and don't even know it. Even mild dehydration (one to two percent of body weight) can decrease muscle strength and endurance, decrease mental abilities and bring about much quicker fatigue, possibly resulting in injury. You wouldn't think something as simple as drinking water to stay hydrated would be so beneficial for keeping our bodies healthy and injury free, but it is true.

There are some simple things you can do to avoid being dehydrated and prevent a trip to the emergency room (either for dehydration or injury).

Thirst mechanism

The first revolves around the thirst mechanism. If you are relying on your thirst to tell you when to take a drink, it is too late. By the time you are thirsty, your body is already dehydrated. Therefore, drink a given amount of fluid (non-caffeine, non-alcoholic) on a regular time schedule. For instance, drink eight ounces every hour (more often in the summer heat). At the end of



Ted Buehner, Bothell, Wash., enjoys a refreshing drink of water during a break in the action.

the day, drink plenty of fluids to replace what was lost so you do not enter the next day already dehydrated. Keep that glass of water next to the bed.

Frequency of bathroom visits

The second idea is to pay attention to your frequency of urination and its color. People who are dehydrated often can't remember the last time they went to the bathroom or they have a tendency to go very infrequently. Long intervals between trips to the restroom should be a warning sign. Ideally as well, you want your urine color to be clear or have a yellowish tint (like lemonade for example). If your urine is dark (like iced tea) or has a foul odor, you are dehydrated and in trouble if it progresses.

By drinking on schedule and watching your urine, you can avoid

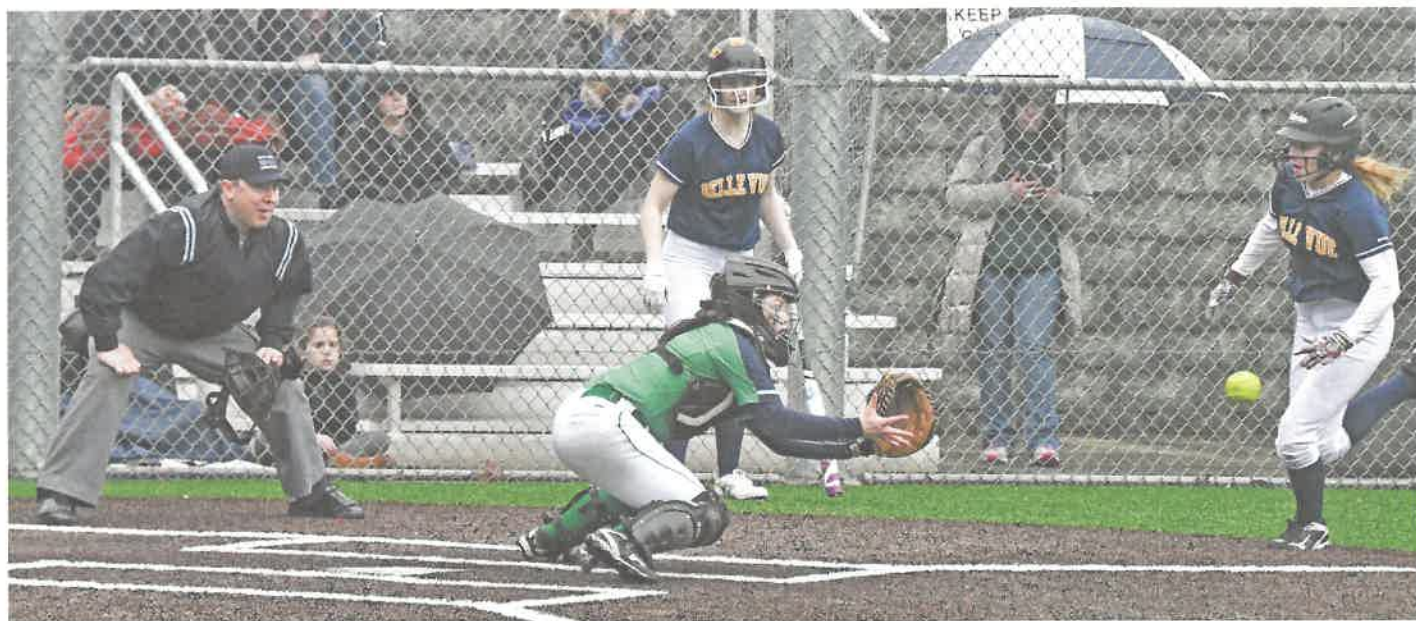
dehydration (and heat-related problems during the summer) and decrease your chance of illness and injury. Drink up! □

QUICK TIP

Umpires should cover specific and odd scenarios in their pregame meetings. While they may not happen often, have a leg up on any atypical situation if it does occur. Talk about how to handle rundowns, weather delays, darkness, power outages, umpire injuries and any other rare occurrences that could take place during the game. While everyone hopes that those situations won't occur, the bottom line is that they do happen. Discussing them before the game helps the crew be ready when they do happen.



KEEP KEY ELEMENTS OF EACH PLAY IN SIGHT



On this play at the plate, Jeff Pohjola, Duvall, Wash., keeps all of the elements of the play in front of him — the plate, the ball, the fielder and the runner.

There are four elements for every close play. The umpire's goal is to have the ball, the base, the fielder and the runner in front of his or her body. That is a lot to watch simultaneously, but with good concentration it can be accomplished.

Pause-read-react

As part of the four elements, every umpire should use the "pause, read, react" technique on every play. Some call that "wait, interpret, choose." Others call it "read, process, react." Whatever the name, the philosophy is for the umpire to devise the best plan for covering the play and not become the "wing it" umpire that tries to outrun the ball.

Angles and distance

Angles and distance obviously are important factors for determining your calling position. Successful umpires must understand the relationship between angles and distance. The angle you establish must enable you to keep the four elements in sight. Yes, there is a correlation between closeness to the play and correctness of the call. But angle beats distance every time. Occasionally, when you are not as close to a play as

you would like to be, finish your call with another step or two toward the play.

It is not always possible but an enterprising umpire can often arrive ahead of the play. That helps if you are a superior reader of plays, and, if that is the case, start for your calling position a split-second early.

An exceptional umpire can blend angles and distance to his or her advantage. On a play that is nearby, the umpire will go for the angle much sooner. If the play is some distance away, the umpire must first acquire the proper angle, then close the distance as much as possible. The umpire will then establish the proper calling position for the play.

Stop, set, focus, hold, call

"Stop" at your calling position and go to a down "set." The "focus" may be the most important step of all. The best calling position in the world goes for naught if you are not focusing in the proper area. Then "hold" for a second before making your "call."

Force plays and calls on the batter-runner at first:

On non-tag plays the umpire should, without taking your eyes off the ball,

move inside the foul line 90 degrees to the throw but no farther than a 45-degree angle from the foul line and no closer than 18 feet from the base. The umpire will focus on the side of the base the runner's foot will touch. Then use the "snap-thud theory" to use sound along with vision as you listen for the snap of the ball in the fielder's glove and the thud of the runner's foot on the base. If the snap beats the thud, the runner is out. Be sure to have an unobstructed view of the fielder's foot when she is stretching for the ball.

On force plays at second, third and home, you'll likely hear the snap, but the thud could be more of a scraping sound when the runner slides. However, you may have to learn to listen to excel on calling "whackers."

Tag plays

Work for a primary calling position of 10-12 feet from a tag play and about a 90-degree angle from the path of the runner. Try the "flash technique" by tracking the ball to about 25 feet from the play and then flash your eyes to the fielder's glove and let the glove take you to the tag. □