

2026 SOFTBALL PRESEASON GUIDE



PLAY.
PERFORM
COMPETE.
TOGETHER.

A New Shade of Gray

NFHS Adopts Charcoal Pants Among Rule Changes

During its annual meeting June 15-17 in Indianapolis, the NFHS Softball Rules Committee recommended three rule changes, which were ultimately approved by the Board of Directors.

The three rule changes deal with umpire uniforms, electronic devices worn by players and a rewriting of Rule 8.

Here is a breakdown of the three rule changes.

Equipment and Apparel (10-4-2)

Umpires have the option of wearing heather gray, charcoal gray or navy blue slacks. Effective January 1, 2027, heather gray slacks will no longer be permitted as part of the umpire's uniform.

"Manufacturers have ceased production of heather gray umpire pants, and this update will help guide umpires toward selecting pant options that are actively being produced and readily available," said Sandy Searcy, NFHS director of sports and liaison to the Softball Rules Committee.

The rule change takes effect with the 2027 season, as this allows umpires an opportunity to buy pants in the new gray shade. Navy pants will remain acceptable as well.



The NFHS Softball Rules Committee passed three rule changes at its meeting in June. One of those changes adjusted Rule 10-4-2, which notes the official umpire uniform allows the use of charcoal gray pants (as shown in this photo) instead of heather gray pants, starting with the 2027 season. (From left) Greg Caldwell, New Ross, Ind., Janice Beck, Walkerton, Ind., and Dale Beck, Walkerton, Ind.

Other Equipment (1-9-6)

As technology continues to creep into the game, the rules committee adopted new language that prohibits players from transmitting or recording audio or video from the playing surface. This change further clarifies the use of electronic devices and what is permitted after language was adopted last year to allow electronic communication for coaching purposes. The use of one-way communication devices from the dugout to the catcher while the team is on defense is still allowed. However, players are not permitted to wear devices, such as microphones or

cameras, to record or transmit video or audio during the game.

"While increased media exposure has positively influenced the growth and visibility of softball, the committee determined that the potential risks associated with players transmitting or recording audio or video through devices during live play outweighed the benefits," Searcy said. "As wearable technology continues to evolve, the committee believed it was essential to establish clear guidelines regarding the permissible use of such devices to ensure the safety and integrity of the game."

The penalty for a player wearing such devices is ejection of the player from the game, unless the offense is judged to be of a minor nature. If deemed minor, the umpires may warn the offender and eject if the offense is repeated.

Play 1: As the umpires arrive at the field, they notice one of the players from the home team has a microphone attached to the front of the jersey. **Ruling 1:** The umpires should address the situation with the head coach and have the player remove the microphone. The player should receive a warning and any continued use would result in an ejection. Because the equipment was found prior to the start of the game, the violation should be deemed minor.

Play 2: During the second inning, the base umpire notices the shortstop for the home team is wearing a body cam and is actively streaming the events of the game to a social media site. **Ruling 2:** Because this infraction occurred during the game, this should be considered a major offense and the player should be ejected

from the game. A warning would be prudent if the umpires notice the illegal equipment prior to the game. However, once the equipment is found on a player during live competition, it should be an ejection.

Batter-Runner and Runner (Rule 8)

The third and final rule change involves the reformatting of Rule 8 in the Rules Book. Rule 8 has been reformatted for clarity. Changes have separated longer articles, and organized exceptions, penalties, and effects into outline format for improved comprehension.

One of the major edits involved separating 8-4, which has been divided into two sections, one dealing with runners entitled to advance with liability to be put out and one section dealing with runners entitled to advance without liability to be put out. The separation is aimed at helping differentiate between the penalties and help clear up some confusion in the Rules Book with how it was previously written.

Major Editorial Changes

The rules committee also approved several editorial changes. The first involves moving language concerning uniforms from 3-2 to 1-6 in order to align with other NFHS Rules Books. Sections 6-8 of rule 1 have been renumbered to reflect this change as well as sections within Rule 3.

The second major change deals with forfeited games. Amended language in 4-3-2 states if a game is forfeited after the number of innings required for a regulation game and the offending team is behind, the score remains as recorded; otherwise, the score shall be 7-0. All individual and team averages shall be included in the official records, except that no pitcher shall be credited with a victory or charged with a loss in such a game if it is not a regulation game.

The final major editorial change deals with corrections to two casebook plays. The plays (3.2.5B and 3.2.5C) have been updated to reflect a 2024 rule change that stated there are no color restrictions to headbands. ■

Flashback: Review of 2025 Rule Changes

The NFHS Softball Rules Committee approved two rule changes for the 2025 season and made one significant editorial change. Here is a breakdown and refresher on those changes.

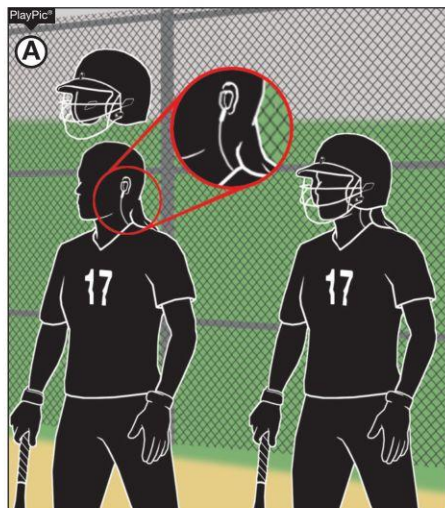
Other Equipment 1-8-6 Exception and Penalty, Bench and Field Conduct 3-6-11

The most impactful rule change involved the use of one-way communication devices to allow a coach

A new rule allows high school coaches to have one-way communication with catchers while on defense. Catchers may wear electronic devices on their wrist or they may wear an in-ear device to receive signals from the dugout. Umpires, such as Brian Peterson, Morehead City, N.C., will need to monitor communication to make sure it is only one way from the dugout to the catcher, and only while on defense.



CARIN GOODALL-GOSNELL

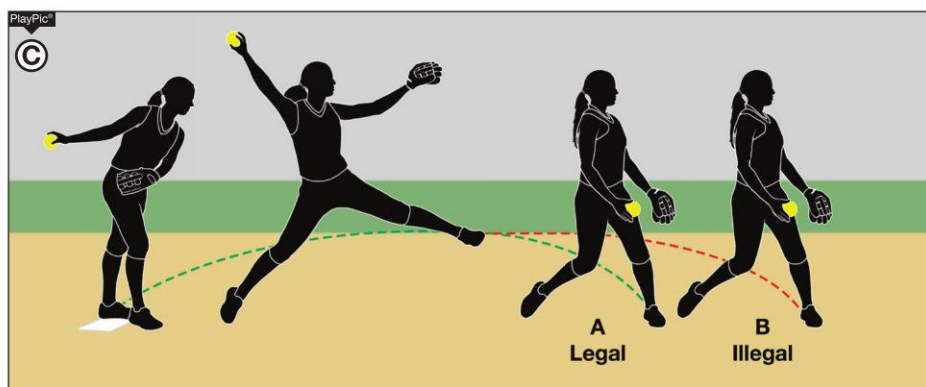
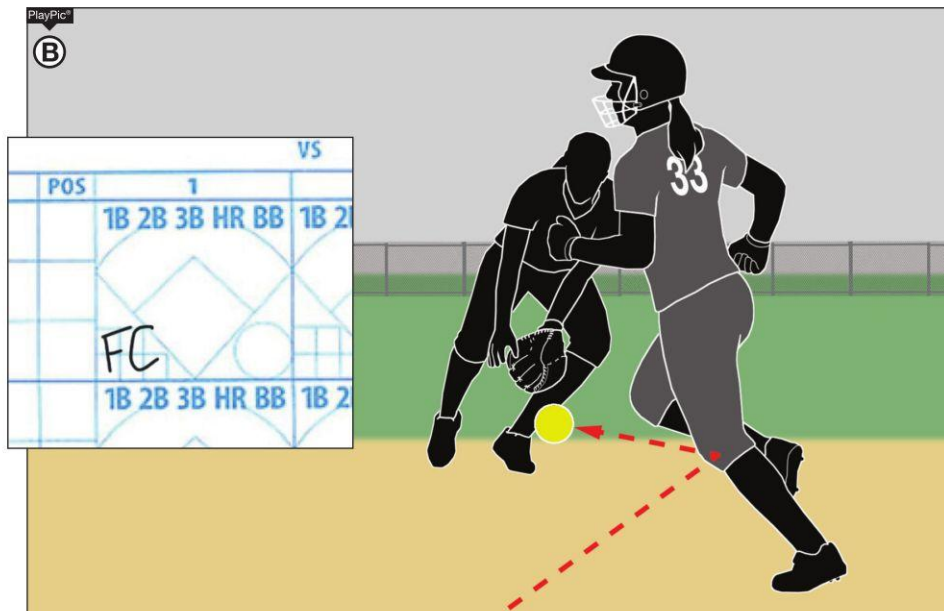


from the dugout to communicate with the catcher. This change affected two separate rules, but they both relate to each other. The purpose of the rule change was to support the use of emerging technology within the sport. This technology allows a coach to quickly and effectively communicate plays and pitches to the catcher, as opposed to having to use hand signals or wristbands with cards, which can be more time consuming.

Some of the caveats of this rule are as follows: only catchers are permitted to have this communication; catchers are precluded from communicating back to the dugout using these devices; and communication to the catcher may only occur while on defense and is prohibited while on offense. While it is prohibited on offense, catchers may still wear the device while on offense (as shown in PlayPic A); they just are prohibited from receiving communication. The penalty for violating the rule is ejection, unless the offense is ruled to be minor in nature. If minor in nature, a warning may first be issued to the offender.

Player's Batting Record 9-3-2b

In order to align with the enforcement of Rule 8-6-11, which covers the runner's actions and provides the direct penalty for those actions, the committee voted to change



9-3-2b, which deals with a baserunner being hit by a batted ball before it passes an infielder. Previously, a batter was credited with a base hit in the official scorebook. This rule change credits the batter with a fielder's choice in this instance, as shown in PlayPic B.

The committee also passed a handful of editorial changes. There is one that was of major importance to umpires. It dealt with the definition of a replant (2-47). The committee changed the definition to read, "A replant of the pivot foot occurs when the pitcher pushes off the playing surface from anywhere other than the pitcher's plate resulting in the non-pivot foot becoming closer to home plate." The italicized

part of the definition was new language to help clarify what is legal/illegal and matches the wording in Rule 6-1-2c. The illustration, shown in PlayPic C, was provided last year, when the committee voted to change the pitching rules in regard to disengagements and replants, to provide a visual depiction of this violation. ■

QUICK TIP

Never take the field looking sloppy. Your appearance says a lot about you and if you show up looking like you don't care, it doesn't matter how good your calls are, your credibility will be shot before the game even begins. Look at yourself in the mirror before you take the field to ensure you look professional.

Copyright © 2025 jointly by the National Federation of State High School Associations and Referee Enterprises, Inc. All rights reserved. Not to be reproduced in any medium without written permission of Referee Enterprises, Inc., 2017 Lathrop Ave, Racine, Wis. 53405. Telephone: 262-632-8855. Fax: 262-632-5460. E-mail: referee@referee.com. Produced by Brad Tittington, *Referee* Associate Editor. Graphics by Matt Bowen, *Referee* Publication Design Manager. Edited by Sandy Searcy, NFHS Director of Sports & Officials Education. Contact the NFHS at P.O. Box 690, Indianapolis, Ind. 46206, 317-972-6900 or nfhs.org

NFHS Adopts Two POEs

The NFHS has adopted two Points of Emphasis (POEs) for the 2026 season. The two POEs are obstruction and maintaining an unobstructed view. Here is a breakdown on both POEs.

Obstruction

Obstruction continues to be a cause of confusion for some, especially as umpires and players participate in other rule codes that have different rules and interpretations. One thing to remember are the rules surrounding obstruction in the high school game have not changed for this upcoming season.

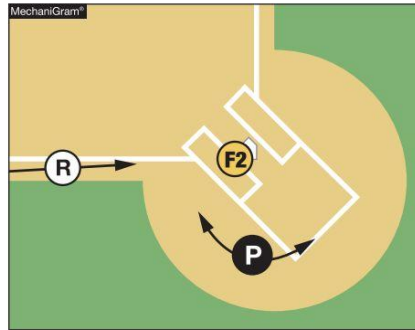
The NFHS rule is clear — obstruction is the act of a defensive team member that hinders or impedes a batter’s attempt to make contact with a pitched ball or that impedes the progress of a runner or batter-runner who is legally running bases (as shown in PlayPic A), unless the fielder is in possession of the ball or is making the initial play on a batted ball. The act may be intentional or unintentional, physical or verbal and it results in a delayed dead ball (as shown in PlayPic B).

The key point for obstructing a runner that umpires need to understand is the phrase “impedes the progress of a runner or batter-runner.” If the runner or batter-runner is not impeded, there is no obstruction, regardless of where the fielder is set up.

With the exception of a fake tag, a fielder’s actions or positioning alone can never result in an obstruction ruling. The fielder’s actions or positioning must result in the runner being impeded to result in obstruction being ruled. Until the runner is impeded, by rule there is no obstruction. Impeding a runner is causing a negative effect by delaying or preventing them from running the bases. Some examples of impediments include:

- A runner slowing down.
- A runner changing the runner’s chosen path.
- A runner stopping or retreating to the last base.
- A runner contacting a fielder, preventing the runner from continuing upon the runner’s chosen path.

These are just some examples of how a runner may be impeded. The list is by no means all-inclusive. One way to remember whether there was obstruction



is to determine if the runner’s “RSBQ” was altered. RSBQ stands for rhythm, speed, balance and quickness. If any of those are affected because of the action of a defensive player without possession of the ball, then obstruction should be called. It is always umpire judgment if and when a runner is impeded.

One thing to remember with obstruction is an award for obstruction differs from other awards. Most awards for violations are “standard” or the same each time a violation occurs. Some examples include:

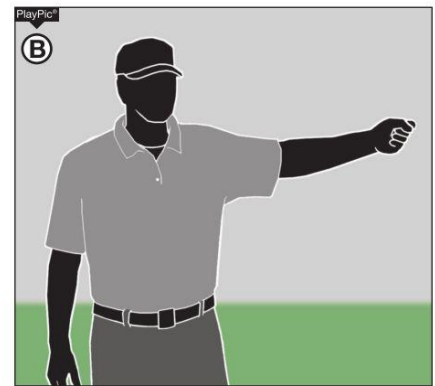
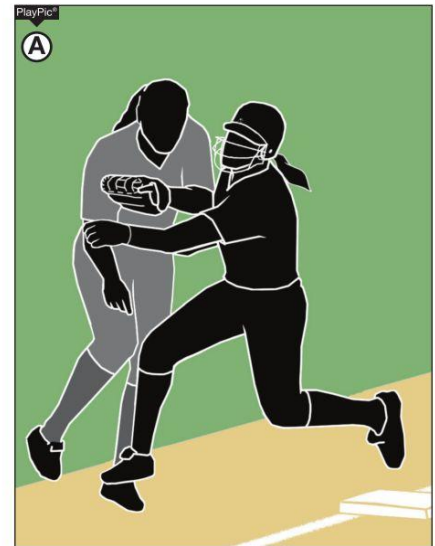
A thrown ball, other than a pitch, that goes out of play results in runners being awarded two bases.

A pitched ball that enters dead-ball territory results in runners being awarded one base.

Obstruction awards, however, are based on each individual play. The intent of obstruction awards are to remove the negative impact the defender had by impeding the runner. That is why runners are awarded the base they would have reached had there not been obstruction — not “awarding” the runner but simply removing the negative impact the obstruction had on the runner. Awards may advance runners or might send them back to a previous base depending on where the umpire judges the runner would have reached had there not been obstruction. There is not a one-size-fits-all guide when it comes to obstruction and each scenario is different.

Maintaining an Unobstructed View

Verbiage has been added to the 2026-27 NFHS Softball Umpire Manual to provide guidance to umpires when it is necessary to move from the primary position during a play. This movement



has always been allowed; however, it was not specifically spelled out in the manual. Because the language was not specifically written out, umpires often thought certain mechanics — the wedge — were not allowed in NFHS play. The concept behind the wedge mechanic is allowed, but the starting position of the plate umpire with plays at the plate is a bit different in NFHS than in NCAA or baseball, with the starting position outlined in the MechaniGram.

There are key interactions of the four elements (offense, defense, ball and base) on each play that need to be viewed clearly in order to make a judgment call. These include:

- Defense contacting offense with the ball (tagging the runner).
- Defense maintaining control of the ball during the tag.

- Offense contacting the base.

Umpires must maintain proper distance while adjusting to keep all three interactions in view. Prior to umpires moving from their primary positioning, key elements of the play need to be understood. These include:

- Defensive positioning.

- Location, direction and height of incoming throw.

- Runner's path.
- Timing of throw and runner arriving near the base.

All these items need to be evaluated in each particular play prior to moving from the primary positioning as each

play develops slightly differently. Understanding how these items are going to come together on a particular play allows the umpire to determine where the key interactions will occur, allowing them to adjust, when necessary, to maintain an unobstructed view of the play. ■

Opening Day Coming in Hot

Prepare Now, Succeed Later

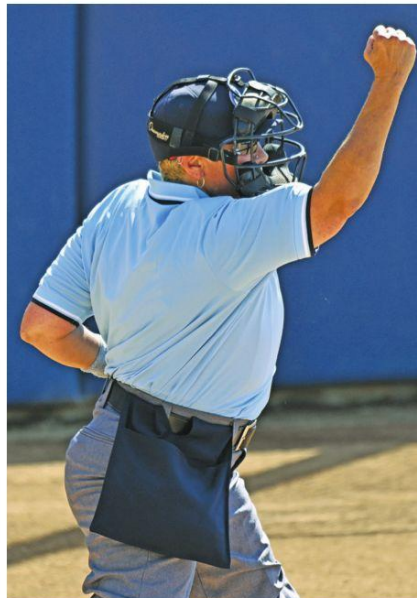
The players and coaches have been preparing for the upcoming season for months now. Umpires should be doing the same. At the higher levels, assigners mandate umpires must not have the first pitch of the season be the first "live" ball the umpire has seen. With so much at stake, it makes sense assigners expect and demand their umpires be ready to go when that first pitch comes and be in mid-season form on day one.

If you haven't started preparing, there is still time. However, don't put it off too much longer or your first game will be here before you know it and you won't be ready to tackle it head on. And for those who are multi-sport officials, it is important to remember you use different muscles and train your eyes differently for every sport you work. Just because you worked 80 basketball games during the winter doesn't mean you can jump on the softball diamond without any prep and be ready to go. If you do that, your quads and lower back will be barking after that first game. And chances are your strike zone will suffer as you work to figure it out.

There are a lot of different ways umpires prepare for the upcoming season. Here are some of the ways you should be preparing for opening day, as it will be here sooner than you think.

Get in the Gym

Cardio and stamina are paramount to ensure you can stay focused and fresh for the two hours or so you are going to be on the field. And a lot of times, especially early in the season, you are on the field for much longer. Many times, you are working tournaments



Umpires must take the time to prepare for the season. The first game of the season should not be the first time umpires see live pitching. If you aspire to work the postseason, like TC Castro, Fontana, Calif., preparation should begin months before the season starts so you are already in midseason form when you first step on the field.

or working conferences that play doubleheaders, even at the highest levels. In those cases, you need to make sure you can stay focused and keep up with play for four or more hours. It is extremely important to get to the gym to work on cardio and light weights. The one thing to remember is to start slowly. You don't want to risk injury and put yourself behind the proverbial

eight ball before you even start. Early on, start with walking on the treadmill or riding a stationary bike until building up strength and stamina to run. And make sure to stretch both before and after working out.

Work Scrimmages/Track Pitches

Many teams are practicing and scrimmaging throughout the winter to prepare for the upcoming season. While working scrimmages is ideal as you get the opportunity to get reps in under real-time conditions, sometimes scrimmages aren't a possibility. However, you can get to a practice and work a bullpen session in order to see pitches. Most coaches are more than happy to have an umpire come and call pitches or just let you get some work in. If you aren't sure where to go, ask veteran umpires or your assigner and they will be able to point you in the right direction. Going to a practice allows you to see many different pitchers and gets you an opportunity to start to train your eyes and hone in on your strike zone without any pressure. This way, once the first real game comes around, you've already seen it.

If you are looking at changing your plate stance so you can better see the outside corner or just to be more consistent, try tweaking your stance during one of these bullpen sessions or during a scrimmage to see if it works for you. Generally, it isn't advised to change your stance during the season unless there is something flawed in your current setup.

And working scrimmages isn't just a way for veteran umpires to get ready for the season. New umpires should ask veteran umpires if they can tag along

to work practices or scrimmages. This gives new umpires the opportunity to work on things and ask questions without any pressure. These are also great opportunities to build rapport with higher-level umpires and potentially get noticed by coaches who may request to have you work their games.

Read the Rules Book/Manual

This sounds obvious, but it bears repeating. Unless you have a photographic memory, it is nearly impossible to memorize the Rules Book. And there are usually at least a few changes from year to year that you need to know. Read a chapter a night before bed. And if there is something that is confusing or a specific rule you are having trouble with, highlight it in the Rules Book. Then, find a veteran umpire you trust with the rules and have that person break it down for you. Come up with scenarios that focus on those specific rules and talk about them with other umpires. During the offseason and right before the season starts is a great time to get into rule discussions with other umpires. Many associations encourage having study groups to prepare for the certification exams. And a lot of rule codes allow you to print out the exam ahead of time. The goal is to get umpires into the book. Print the exam when it becomes available, form a study group with other umpires and find a convenient time to get together and talk about the

exam. Many study groups will meet both in-person and over Zoom and make it a routine to meet every week or every other week to make sure everyone is on the same page with the rules.

The same goes with the manual. Many umpires read the rule changes and then take the exam but forget to read up on mechanics. While knowledge of the Rules Book is extremely important, it is just as important to get in the manual and understand the mechanics and signals. Remember, you get out of it what you put into it. If you aspire to work a postseason conference tournament, a state final or a national championship, you have to work on it. And the best time to work on perfecting your mechanics is during the offseason. If you don't have a magnetic training board, you are highly encouraged to get one. The board is perfect to set up situations and talk through movements of each position. Many umpires at camps will bring them and discuss situations and assigners and evaluators can quickly show movements on these boards. You can also download an app on your phone or iPad that allows you to do the same. If there are specific runner configurations or situations that are confusing you, use these tools to help see where you should be to get in the best position to make the call.

Watch Film

One of the best ways to get ready for the season is to watch film. Ideally,

it is best to watch yourself and break down things you do well and things you need to work on. Nowadays, almost every game at every level is streamed. See if you can find some of your games online and watch them. If you can't find any of yourself, find others of umpires you trust and watch what they do. Remember, watch games at the level you work. The mechanics for high school and college are vastly different. Make sure you are watching and learning the proper mechanics for the level you will be working. While it is commendable to watch others at a higher level, remember the mechanics aren't going to be alike. However, there are things like the way umpires signal, body language, how they talk to coaches, etc., that translate to every level.

Doing these four things will help you get ready for the season ahead. While it may still seem like you have plenty of time until that first pitch, now is the time to start planning and preparing. The teams are getting ready and they expect you to do so as well. The earlier you start, the more prepared you will be for that first pitch. Coaches, assigners, players and partners will know if you didn't prepare for the season. Don't use the first two weeks of the season to get yourself in midseason form. Start now and you will be that much farther ahead of everyone else who procrastinated. ■

Get Together and Fix It!

Umpires can do everything right and still potentially be wrong. While these situations are thankfully rare, they do happen enough that umpires need to understand what to do when they arise.

The situations involve an umpire putting a player or team at jeopardy because of a delayed call or a reversal of an umpire's call. The rules give the umpires the authority to rectify any situation in which an umpire's delayed call or overturned call places a runner or a team in jeopardy (10-2-3m). In these situations, umpires must put ego aside, get together with partners and decide what the fair and proper ruling should

be, regardless of which team may get upset by the change.

Let's take a look at some common plays that often lead to umpires having to get together to "fix" a call and how umpires should rule.

Play 1: With R1 on first base and a 3-2 count on B2, R1 attempts to steal second base on the next pitch, which is ball four. F2 throws the ball to F4, who tags R1 before R1 reaches second base. The base umpire, not realizing the umpire ruled ball four, calls R1 out. R1 begins jogging off the field and is tagged again by F4 while off the base. **Ruling 1:** In this situation, the base umpire's call

caused R1 to leave the base, incorrectly believing the fielder had tagged R1 out. The base umpire's ruling placed R1 at jeopardy. The umpires should call time and place R1 back on second base.

Play 2: With a 3-2 count on B2 and R1 on first base, B2 takes what appears to be a half-swing. The plate umpire calls ball four and R1, upon hearing the plate umpire say ball, trots toward second base. The catcher throws the ball to F4, who tags R1 before R1 reaches second base. The catcher then asks the plate umpire to check with the base umpire to see if B2 swung at the pitch. The base umpire rules B2 did swing at



When umpires place runners in jeopardy, they generally need to get together to right the wrong. After getting together, the calling umpire should then render the decision to right the wrong. Here, California umpire Michael Patterson, Yorba Linda, signals a runner is safe.

the pitch. **Ruling 2:** In this situation, the reversal of the plate umpire's call from ball four to a swinging third strike put R1 at jeopardy. The umpires should get together and rule B2 is out for swinging and missing at strike three. The only reason R1 went to second base was because of the perceived base-on-balls call by the plate umpire and R1 should be returned to first base.

Those two situations happen at least

a few times a season and are relatively easy to rectify. Now, here is a situation that doesn't happen quite as often, but did happen in a game last season.

Play 3: With one out and a runner on second, B3 hits a deep fly ball to left-center field. No base umpire chases and F8 leaps and attempts to catch the ball near the wall. The wall is fully padded and obstructs any view of anything behind the wall. F8 leaps and comes

down and it appears to the plate umpire that F8 caught the ball. The plate umpire signals catch, without seeing F8 actually show the ball. The batter, thinking the ball had been caught because of the ruling by the plate umpire, jogs off the field and enters the dugout. After a few moments, it becomes apparent that F8 did not actually catch the ball and the ball landed behind the wall. **Ruling 3:** In this situation, the umpires should get together and determine the ball was not caught and the correct ruling should have been a home run. Now, the batter-runner has crossed into dead-ball territory and clearly "abandoned" the base. However, the only reason for doing so was because of the plate umpire's incorrect ruling of a catch. As a result, the abandonment should be ignored, the batter-runner should be credited with a home run and both the batter-runner and R1 should be required to finish their baserunning duties, starting at the base last legally touched and then touching each base in order.

For umpires, it is important to see a play all the way through and make sure you have all the pieces of information before making a call. While most of the caseplay examples could be avoided, there are times when things happen beyond our control (the main one being the late checked-swing request) and our delayed call or the reversal of a call causes us to place a team in jeopardy.

Understand the importance of getting together with your partner(s), determining the appropriate and fair outcome, fix the error and then calmly explain the decision to a coach. While these plays don't happen every game, failure to understand them can cause severe headaches when they do. ■

Softball Injury Surveillance Study

As participation in high school softball 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 (SMAC) and the NFHS Sport Rules Committees



use data from the National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study (High School RIOTM) to monitor rates and patterns of sports injuries

among high school athletes. High School RIO is currently collecting the 20th year of sports exposure and injury data.

Among the nine sports included in the original sample of High School RIO for which national estimates are constructed (i.e., football, boys' and

girls' soccer, girls' volleyball, boys' and girls' basketball, wrestling, baseball, and softball), softball had one of the lowest injury rates in 2023/24, ranking 7th overall and in competition and 8th in practice. However, girls' softball had the 4th highest practice concussion rate among the nine original sample sports.

In the 2023/24 academic year, the head/face (20%), hand/wrist (14%), and shoulder (14%) were the most commonly injured body parts, and strain (19%), sprain (17%), and fracture (15%) were the most common diagnoses. Contact with

playing apparatus was the most common mechanism of injury in competition and practice (39% and 35%, respectively). In 2023/24, pitchers sustained the most injuries during competitions and practices (19% and 13%, respectively). Muscle strains, ligament sprains, and contusions were common injuries among pitchers. 40% of softball dislocations/subluxations were recurrent, and 22% of concussions resulted in a time loss of more than 21 days.

Understanding patterns of injury in girls' softball is one important tool

when considering injury prevention efforts to keep softball athletes as safe as possible.

If you are interested in more information about the High School RIO Study or you are a certified athletic trainer who is interested in becoming a reporter for softball, please email the High School RIO team at highschoolrio@datalyscenter.org. Please visit <http://datalyscenter.org/resources/high-school-rio-annual-reports/> to access the annual summary report referenced above. ■

Give 'Em the Option

Umpires have a lot of rules and mechanics to remember when they take the field. Some of those rules and mechanics are pretty basic. Others, however, can be a little more tricky. One such rule that can sometimes cause confusion deals with option plays.

The main two instances of option plays occur because of an illegal pitch or because of catcher's obstruction. When either of these two occur, umpires should signal delayed dead ball and let the play continue. Then depending on what occurs, the umpires may have to give an option to the offended team.

For an illegal pitch, if the batter reaches first base safely and each other runner advances at least one base, the illegal pitch is nullified, all action stands and the coach is not given an option. However, if the batter does not reach first base safely or if any baserunner fails to advance at least one base, the umpires should ask the offended coach if they would like to take the result of the play or take the penalty for the illegal pitch, which is a ball added to the batter's count (6-1-1 Pen. Exc.) If the illegal pitch hits the batter out of the strike zone or if the illegal pitch is ball four, the batter is awarded first base and runners only advance if forced. Coaches are not given an option in these two scenarios. Sounds simple enough, but here are a couple of plays that could trip up some umpires.



Play 1: With R1 on first and no outs, F1 delivers an illegal pitch. B2 hits the pitch into the gap in right center and advances to second base. R1 is thrown out trying to reach home plate. **Ruling 1:** The play stands. Since B2 safely reached at least first base and R1 advanced one base once R1 reached second, the illegal pitch is nullified and the result of the play stands.

Play 2: With R1 on first and no outs, F1 delivers an illegal pitch. B2 hits the pitch into the gap in right center and advances to second base. R1 advances safely to third base. As the ball is relayed into the infield, the defense throws the ball to first base, F3 has the ball and stands on first base and correctly appeals B2 missed first base. **Ruling 2:** Even though B2 missed first base and is called out for missing the bag, B2 is considered to

have reached it safely once B2 passed first base. Therefore, B2 is ruled out, R1 remains at third base and the coach is not given an option.

Play 3: With R1 on third base and one out, F1 delivers an illegal pitch. B3 hits a grounder to second base. F4 fields the ball and throws to first base to retire B3. R1 scores. **Ruling 3:** In this situation, the offensive coach should be given the option to choose the result of the play or take the effect for the illegal pitch. If the coach takes the illegal pitch, R3 is returned to third base and B3 is returned to the plate with a ball added to the count. The coach may want to take the result of the play since a run scored. In these situations, umpires should never assume the coach will take the illegal pitch penalty and the option should be given.

Catcher's obstruction is handled roughly the same way as an illegal pitch when it comes to option plays, with a small exception. Again, if the batter reaches first base safely and all runners advance at least one base, the obstruction is canceled and all play stands. If those two things don't happen, the offended coach has the option of taking the result of the play or having the batter awarded first base and all runners advanced one base if forced (8-1-1d Eff.). For purposes of this article, we are only dealing with catcher's obstruction when a batter swings and contacts the catcher's mitt and still makes contact with the ball. ■

Shades of Gray

One piece of equipment umpires don't think about enough or often overlook is sunglasses. Spending as much time as we do outside, it is important for us to take care of our eyes. And while it is imperative we protect our eyes from the sun and the wind, that doesn't mean anything goes. Remember, sunglasses are a tool to help us do our job and should not be seen as making a fashion statement.

Here are some basic guidelines to use when it comes to wearing sunglasses.

Don't Stand Out

When it comes to sunglasses, they should be non-mirrored with dark or clear lenses and the frames should be all black. The reason for this is simple; umpires should not draw any undue attention to themselves. If you are wearing frames that are not all black or the lenses are mirror-like, you will be noticed. We are criticized enough. We should not do something to invite additional criticism. Also remember, you are going to invite criticism anytime you wear sunglasses. There will naturally be that one fan in the stands who will call you out for wearing them if that fan perceives you missed a call. Chances are that fan would criticize you even if you weren't wearing sunglasses, but this just gives them added fuel.

Remove Them for Lineup Exchanges and When Talking to Coaches

As a sign of respect, umpires should remove sunglasses during the plate meeting, national anthem and when talking with coaches. This allows coaches to see your eyes and is simply a sign of respect. You can put them back on once the anthem is over and you head to your position to start the game. If you wear prescription sunglasses and need them to read the lineups, obviously you do not need to remove them in this instance.

Hide Them Inconspicuously

There are times when shades are necessary to start a game but the conditions change and sunglasses are no longer needed. In these instances, do not put the shades on top of your hat or

tucked inside your collar. Instead, put them on the back of your belt. Again, this helps you from being noticed. Refrain from putting them in a dugout or looped into a fence. Chances are you will forget them or they may get damaged or stolen.

Adhere to Assigner's Preferences

Some assigners have different philosophies when it comes to wearing sunglasses on the field. Some do not like umpires wearing them at all, some do not like plate umpires using them, while others don't have much of a preference at all. The best advice is if an assigner suggests you not wear them, you heed the advice if you want to continue working for that assigner. However, as an independent contractor, is that type of an assigner someone you really want to work for? Doctors will

tell you working outside and being exposed to the sun for long periods of time can greatly damage your eyes. Is pleasing that assigner worth ruining your eyes?

Be Careful on Plate Games

Many umpires wear sunglasses behind the dish. If you have a big game coming up and you don't typically wear sunglasses when working the plate, refrain from doing so in that big game. Try wearing sunglasses in a game that doesn't have a lot riding on it to see if you like it. It will give you a different feel and the glare can potentially cause more issues. Make sure you are comfortable taking your mask off and putting it on without having to constantly adjust the glasses. It can take some time to get used to wearing them.

REFEREE THE TRUSTED VOICE FOR SPORTS OFFICIALS SINCE 1976

MAGAZINE

GET 12 MONTHLY ISSUES

For Officials, By Officials

SUBSCRIBE TODAY
REFEREE.COM/HIGHSCHOOL
 OR CALL 800-733-6100

EVERY ISSUE INCLUDES
 RULES // MECHANICS
 CASEPLAYS // NEWS QUIZZES
 // FEATURES ANALYSIS

Only \$5 PER MONTH

COVER: MLB UMPIRE FONZY | C&A M
 SOFTBALL
 VIDEO CLIP

You Get What You Pay For

Sunglasses are in the same realm as shoes, as in you can't afford to cheap out when it comes to your comfort. While it is perfectly acceptable to not be comfortable spending hundreds of dollars on sunglasses, just be aware you

get what you pay for. While you can get by with the sunglasses from the corner store that cost \$10, chances are they aren't going to last very long and they probably won't protect your eyes very well. Spend the extra money to get a quality pair of glasses that look professional, can stand

up to the elements and protect your eyes. It is better to spend a little extra and get a good pair that will protect you and look good for multiple seasons than have to constantly replace a cheap pair that gets scratched the first time you wear them. ■

High and Tight

Guidance to Accurately Rule on Up-and-In Pitches

Being a plate umpire is a difficult job. Having to make hundreds of split-second decisions every game can be a challenge and it is what separates elite umpires from good ones.

One of the most challenging calls for plate umpires is ruling on up-and-in pitches. Umpires must determine whether the pitch hit the batter (including the batter's hands) or the bat, whether the ball was completely within the batter's box and whether the batter attempted to hit the pitch. These plays develop quickly and can explode on umpires, so it's important to follow some key guidance to make the right call.

Pre-Pitch Prepare

Preparation begins with your pre-pitch routine. Before you get set, observe the batter's position in the box. Where are the batter's feet? Are the hands over the plate, between the plate and the batter's box, or inside the batter's box? Is the batter wearing any arm or elbow guards, and are these being worn correctly? Understanding the batter's setup helps you assess the potential location of ball/batter/bat contact. Batters who wear a lot of guards may be susceptible to getting hit with a lot of pitches and can raise your radar. Some batters are looking for an "easy" way to get on first and may lean out over the plate and may also try to get hit by pitches. Umpires should have awareness of this when batters take their position in the batter's box.

Use All Available Information

Because of the nature of these types of plays, the plate umpire can sometimes be blocked. As the ball comes up and in, catchers rise up to catch or reach for



One of the most difficult calls for plate umpires is handling the up-and-in pitch. Umpires must use all available information on these type of pitches to make an accurate decision.

the ball and batters turn, often creating an impossibility for the plate umpire to determine exactly what happened. In these instances, it's essential to rely on multiple senses to make an accurate

call. Watch for any changes in the ball's trajectory, listen to the sound of contact and observe the batter's immediate reaction. Be aware that sometimes the sound of the ball hitting an elbow guard

or even hitting the batter can sound the same as hitting the bat. And some batters may not react at all to being hit as they want to appear “tough” in front of their teammates. Just be aware every situation does not have a one-size-fits-all solution. If you notice a mark on the batter, it’s acceptable to use that as part of your decision-making.

One thing to also remember, the hands are not part of the bat. Coaches, fans, players, announcers and even some umpires confuse this rule. If the ball hits the batter’s hands, it should be an immediate dead ball. Then you must determine whether or not the batter swung at the pitch. Either way, kill the ball because it has hit the batter. Then use all available information to make the correct ruling. Normally if the ball hits the hands, the batter is going to drop the bat and start writhing in pain. It is one of those situations that is generally immediately painful and would be difficult for a batter to “act.”

Don’t Rush It

The most important thing in these situations is to avoid rushing your call. There is no need to kill this type of play immediately, especially when you may

have been blocked and aren’t 100% sure what happened. While you can make the play dead at any time, you can never make it live again once you have killed it. It is better to have a late dead-ball call than an early one in these situations.

For example, if the ball ends up in fair territory, only call it dead if you’re absolutely sure the batter was hit by the pitch. Base umpires are watching and can assist if you’re uncertain or get blocked. If there’s any doubt, keep the ball live and let play continue. At the conclusion of the play, get the crew together for additional information and come up with the appropriate ruling. The last thing you want to do is kill this play immediately and then determine the ball hit the bat and should have been kept live. You’ve now taken away an opportunity for the defense to get an out, or even for the offense to advance bases. Once you’ve killed it, you can’t make it live again and must live with the dead ball.

If you’ve determined the ball hit the batter and there’s any question about whether the batter attempted to swing, be sure to appeal the checked swing to the appropriate base umpire. The batter often turns on up-and-in pitches, which

can give the illusion of a swing. And as the batter turns to avoid the pitch, it can be impossible to see what is happening to the bat on the other side of the batter’s body. Not to mention the catcher who may be blocking your view as well.

Summary

While this play can be tricky, knowing the batter’s position, slowing down your decision-making process and relying on your partners can help you make the correct call. The most difficult thing to do in this situation is slow down. Plate umpires often get in a rush to kill the ball without knowing exactly what happened. Instead, slow down and only kill the ball when you know for sure the ball hit the batter and didn’t hit the bat. Then, once you kill it, take your time before either awarding the batter first base or keeping the batter up to bat. There is no reason to rush this play. Take your time, use all your senses, watch the batter’s reaction, use information from your partners and then make the correct ruling confidently. Remember, this is a difficult call at all levels and the more you see it, the more confident you will be in making these rulings. ■

Step and a Reach

Imagine you are one of the umpires on the game for the photo on the next page. The ball is hit to the shortstop, who fields the ball and extends the arms to try to tag the runner from second running by. What things are you thinking about as this play develops?

For this article, we are going to assume everything that happened prior to this moment in time happened legally. With that in mind, there are only a couple of decisions we have to make on this play. And both of those decisions will depend on what angle we have as the umpires.

Tag or no tag

One of the first decisions we have to make involves the tagging of the runner. It’s important to understand by rule what constitutes a legal tag on this play. Because the shortstop is holding

the ball in the right hand and not in the glove, the shortstop will have to make contact with the runner with the ball. Simply touching the runner with the glove would not constitute a tag on this play. Both umpires have a good angle of this play, however in general, the call would belong to the umpire the play is going toward; in this instance that would be U3. U1 may be blocked out by the runner’s body and the fielder’s glove to accurately rule on this play. It would be appropriate for U3 to give the safe signal and verbalize, “No tag!” on this play to alert everyone that a legal tag did not occur.

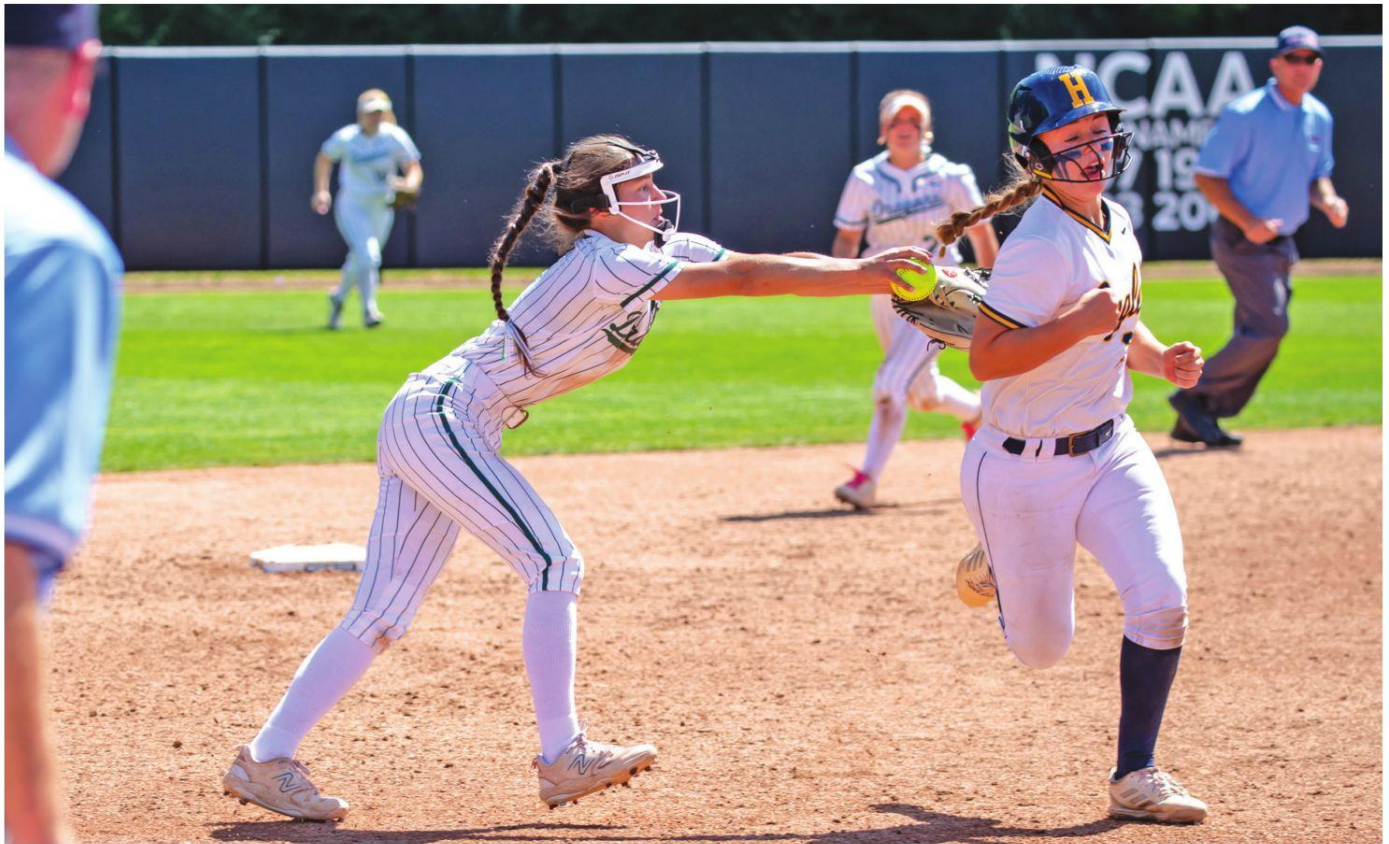
Basepath vs. baseline

We’ve determined the potential tag on this play did not happen. The ball in the hand does not make contact with the runner. So the next thing to

determine is if the runner’s actions are legal. The first thing to understand is many coaches, players, fans and some umpires will incorrectly interchange the terms basepath and baseline.

First, let’s look at the baseline. The baseline is the direct line between two bases. It is a fixed mark. The basepath, however, is not a fixed mark and constantly changes as a runner moves. The basepath is the direct line between a runner and the base. Runners determine their own basepath as there are no restrictions to the basepath, unless a tag is being attempted on a runner. It is important for umpires to use these two terms properly when explaining possible violations to a coach.

So, for this situation, the baseline does not matter. The only thing the umpires need to be concerned with is



For plays between bases, it is important for umpires to work together to get the call right. This is especially true when it comes to plays like one, where there could be multiple things on which to rule. Here, Michigan umpires (U1) Kirk Caithamer, Ludington, and (U3) Jason Weigle, Fenton, each take an angle to see the play and correctly rule on both the potential tag and any basepath violation.

the runner's basepath. Once the fielder makes an attempt to tag the runner, the runner has three feet to either side of that established basepath in order to avoid the tag. If the runner moves more than three feet to either side of that basepath, the runner is out. The one thing for umpires to remember on this play is the runner may have already started moving closer to the infield in order to avoid the fielder fielding the ball on the initial play. The basepath of the runner should not be considered until the fielder tries to tag the runner. The baserunner then, in general, has one large stride to either side of the basepath in order to avoid the tag. If in doubt, the runner's move is legal. Once obviously outside that three-foot allowance, the runner should be called out.

So, knowing that information, what is the correct call? In this scenario,

it appears the runner is still legally within the basepath and the three-foot allowance to each side. It looks like the runner may have taken a stride to avoid the tag but is turning the shoulders back toward the base. To determine the legality of the runner, let's assume the runner took a large stride to the left and the left foot is now on the ground. Let's estimate that large stride is three feet. Now, we look at the right foot. If the right foot lands outside the left foot, the runner has now violated the three-foot allowance. If the right foot lands on the same path or inside the left foot, the baserunner would still be within that three-foot allowance and would be legal.

Again, in general, the ruling on this play would belong to U3 as the runner is coming toward third base. U1 can assist on this play, but U3 should have primary coverage. If this play happens

closer to second base, U1 may have a better angle and distance to assist on the play.

The guidance for umpires on this play would be to not signal "safe" in regard to the legality of being within the basepath.

The most important thing for umpires on these types of plays is to understand there is more than one thing on which to rule. These types of plays can catch umpires off guard if the umpires are moving too quickly or focusing on the wrong thing.

The most important thing is to get an angle to see everything, let your eyes read the play and let the whole play develop. Then make a ruling. While this one still shot might make this play look easy to handle, in real time, these plays are dynamic and happen very quickly.

The best umpires are able to slow them down and simplify them. ■

De-Fense Less

We aren't always blessed with umpiring in stadiums with permanent fencing and well-defined out-of-play areas. Instead, especially at the high school and travel ball levels, we often find ourselves in a situation like this, with a temporary, portable fence.

These fences can cause problems when it comes to trying to figure out ground rules. They can also complicate matters when it comes to catch/no-catch situations. Looking at this still frame, what would you rule on this play? Let's break it down.

The fielder has the ball in the glove. Let's assume the fielder caught the ball just prior to contacting the fence. As long as the fielder maintains control of the ball after falling to the ground and any release of the ball thereafter is voluntary, this would be a catch in all codes.

If there are runners on base, the umpires must determine if this is a catch-and-carry situation. If the fielder steps, touches or falls into dead-ball area, this would constitute a catch and carry. While the out would still stand, runners would be awarded one base, unless the umpires deemed the carrying of the ball out of play was intentional, in which case runners would be awarded two bases.

Let's say this fence was laying completely horizontal on the ground and the fielder was standing on it to make the catch. Would it still be a catch?

It is not a catch if a player stands on a fence that is completely horizontal and instead would be a four-base award.

Let's say the fielder jumped in the air, caught the ball, then lands on the other side of the fence still holding the ball. What's the call?

This is a catch and carry. The out would stand on the batter, but all runners would be awarded one base.

Finally, let's say the fielder jumped the fence, landed on the other side, then caught the ball. Is this legal?

No, this would be a home run.



Storm Warning

Be Safe, Not Sorry, Dealing With Weather

We plan for a lot of things when we head to the field to call a game. The one thing we sometimes don't plan for is weather. While we might plan for the temperature by packing additional layers, we often don't spend a lot of time thinking about what we are going to do if the weather turns inclement.

Often, we simply just play it by ear and we don't think about all the different scenarios that could potentially arise when we take the field — or even before it becomes our jurisdiction. And if we aren't thinking ahead and planning on what we might do when bad weather occurs, we are doing ourselves — as well as the participants — a disservice.

We should have an action plan and discuss with our crew what might happen and how we are going to handle the weather. We should also be in contact with the onsite administrator so everyone is on the same page.

Our Jurisdiction

The first thing we need to concern ourselves with is when the field becomes under our jurisdiction. In the NFHS Rules Book, the home coach decides whether the grounds and other conditions are suitable for starting the game (4-1-1). Once the game starts, the plate umpire assumes the authority for deciding when conditions become unsafe (10-2-3e).

While the rules book signifies who has the final say in terms of starting or stopping a game, in reality, it generally is a meeting of the minds when it comes to this decision. At the high school level, both coaches may come together to assess the field and then ask the umpires their opinions once they arrive, which is often 30 minutes before or even less, depending on the situation.

Inclement weather is always a possibility. Umpires must understand their role and responsibility when it comes to decision making, especially since they vary at the various levels of play. At the end of the day, umpires should always err on the side of caution when it comes to inclement weather.



© SCOTT ASH / NOW NEWS GROUP / USA TODAY NETWORK

Halt Right There

Deciding when to start a game or postpone it is often a much easier decision than deciding when to halt a game that has already started. We often try to push through rain and maybe a little mud in order to finish a game. But when should we halt a game? The easy answer is anytime we feel conditions are unsafe for the participants. It is generally easy to convince players and coaches why we are stopping the game if there is lightning or thunder.

Most of us have had situations when we saw lightning or heard thunder and halted a game and a coach, player or parent has decided to interject themselves to tell us that we can finish the inning or the game, or the lightning is still really far away and it is safe to play. The best advice is if you see lightning or you hear thunder, clear the field, no matter how close to finishing the inning or game you might

be. No game is more important than someone's life.

Make sure you document when the last lightning strike or sound of thunder occurred. Remember, you must wait 30 minutes to start from the last lightning strike or sound of thunder. That 30 minutes resets each time one of those occurs.

There doesn't have to be lightning or thunder present in order to halt a game. We also need to be wary of field conditions. If you work in the northern part of the country, rarely are there perfect field conditions in the spring. Between the winter thaw and April showers, fields seem to always be wet to some degree, unless you are fortunate to work on all-turf fields. The pitching circle and the plate area are the two most important things to look at when determining the safety of the field. If pitchers are slipping, the batter's boxes have standing water or mud and batters can't safely hit, or the bases or plate

become slippery and you can't keep them dry, stop the game and try to get the grounds crew (if there is one) to work on those areas. Also, if you can't keep the game balls dry or pitchers are struggling to grip pitches, it is time to halt the game as well.

In these situations, make sure you write down all pertinent information on the back of the lineup card so you can make sure you pick up where you left off when you resume. In some situations, you may not even be the umpire resuming the game if it is a halted game and finished at a later date (per state association policy).

Remember, every decision we make as umpires is not going to please everyone. This is true when it comes to halting or postponing games. It will be costly to you to continue to play in poor conditions and have a participant get seriously injured, or even worse. Safety of the athletes, as well as ourselves, should always be our top priority. ■

Agree to Disagree

Over the course of a game, not every coach is going to agree with every call we make. It is the nature of the business. Remember, nobody is perfect. While we strive for perfection, there are times we may miss something.

And when we do, we expect a coach may say something. And on occasion, a coach may even request time to come out and talk with us about that call, as shown in the PlayPic on the next page. And that is OK. Too often, we get immediately defensive and our body language says we are unapproachable. Instead, we should be OK having those conversations with coaches, provided they are respectful.

When coaches come out to respectfully ask about a call, there are ways we should approach those conversations. There are several things we should do to make sure these conversations are respectful, to the point and get us back to playing ball in an effective manner.

Visit NFHS Officials Store

www.nfhsofficialsstore.com

OFFICIALS APPAREL AND EQUIPMENT SUCH AS:

- Shirts
- Shorts
- Pants
- Jackets
- Compression Products
- Ball Bags
- Bean Bags
- Belts
- Game Cards/ Holders
- Hats
- Lanyards/ Whistles
- Penalty Flags
- Travel Bags

PRODUCTS ARE AVAILABLE IN THE SPORTS OF:

- Baseball/Softball
- Basketball
- Football
- Lacrosse
- Soccer
- Volleyball
- Wrestling



Remove sunglasses

Look the coach in the eyes and listen to what that coach is saying. It may not seem like a big deal to remove your sunglasses, but it does show a sign of respect. It is much more personable to be able to look into the eyes of the person you are talking to opposed to that person not even being able to tell if your eyes are open.

Remain calm

When a coach comes out to discuss a call, it can elevate our heart rate and increase our breathing. Remember, it is just a conversation. We can normally tell the intensity of the situation by how the coach walks — or sprints — out toward us.

However, we should always keep a good body posture that shows we are relaxed and try our best to defuse the situation instead of throw fire on it. We should not meet their intensity level and we should remain level-headed throughout.

While the coach is talking, plan what you are going to say

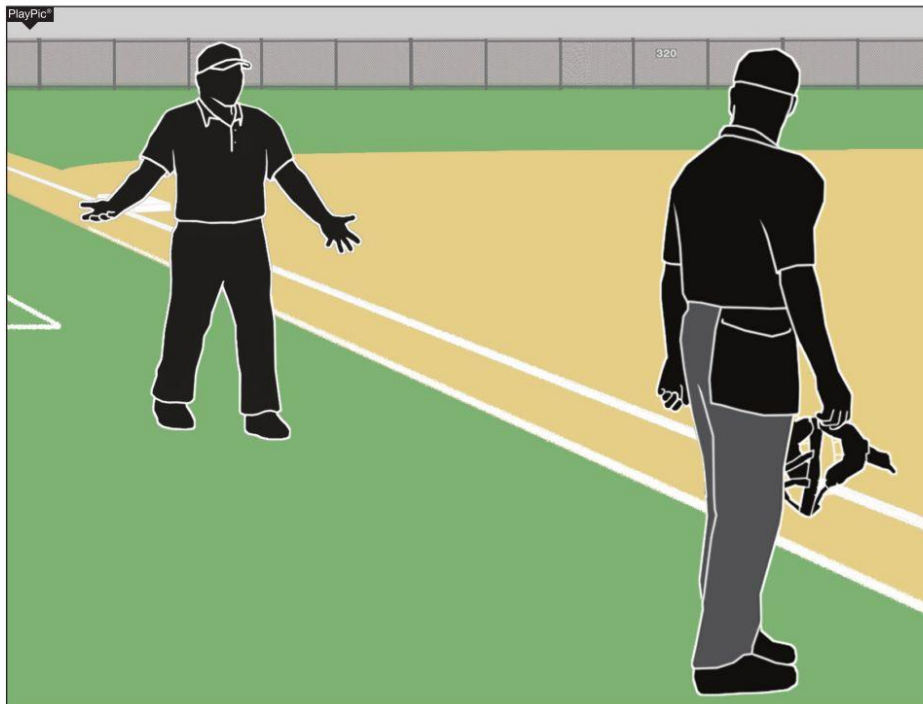
Remember it takes two to have an argument. This doesn't mean to not listen to the coach's concerns. It simply means that while the coach is talking, it gives us an opportunity to formulate our thoughts and allows us to put together our response so we sound confident in our answer.

Also, don't preplan a response. The coach may ask about something completely different than what we think might be questioned. If we have an automatic response, we might be barking up the wrong tree. Allow the coach to speak first so there is no confusion.

Let the coach talk

Often, coaches just want to have their say. A coach may simply be frustrated with the way the team is playing. A coach may also come out just to fire the team up. That coach may not even be upset with you but he or she may need to show the team he or she has the team's back.

Coaches may also need to do that to show an administrator or the parents they care. Don't take it personally.



Make coaches ask you a question about the play that brought them out to you

There is a statute of limitations when it comes to arguing or questioning calls. Coaches only get to ask about the last call. Do not allow them to question or argue something that happened last inning or three innings ago. Those types of discussions are no-nos and end up in ejections. If coaches bring up something from earlier in the game, we should tell them we are not discussing those situations. If they continue to do so, they should be ejected. We should only entertain discussions on the play or call at hand.

Try to stand next to coaches rather than facing them

Standing face to face is often viewed as confrontational. Try to stand to the side of the coach, rather than face to face, to help defuse any volatility. It is no different than taking a lineup change. We should stand shoulder to shoulder to help "soften" the look.

Explain your call

Repeat yourself once if the coach needs it. This is not a time to have a seminar on the rules. After that, the discussion is over. Tell the coach it's time to play ball. Move to your next

position or do something to get away from the coach if that coach is trying to continue the discussion. If you are working the bases, move to your next starting position. If you are working the plate, mark your lineup card, clean off the plate or retrieve game balls from the dugout. It does not matter, it should be something that lets everyone know the conversation from your vantage point is over. This should be a signal to your partner(s) that you are done and any further discussion from the coach could warrant an ejection and your partner(s) may need to step in to remove the coach.

You do not have to have the last word

If the coach is grumbling while walking away, let that coach grumble. Coaches in that situation are just trying to save face. That is OK. Your goal is to get the game going again. If you chase after them, you will be seen as the aggressor and that will just delay getting the game going again. Coaches will sometimes even offer a parting shot as they walk away. Remember the aesthetics of ejecting a coach who is walking away from an umpire do not always look good, especially on film. Try to ignore the comment. If it crosses the line, that coach has earned an ejection and which way he or she is facing is irrelevant. ■