



# BASEBALL

2024 PRESEASON GUIDE

## Listening Skills

### NFHS Approves One-Way Communication Devices

Communication between coaches and players, and more specifically, the tools allowed to facilitate it, took center stage in June during the 2023 NFHS Baseball Rules Committee meeting in Indianapolis.

The committee voted in favor of three rule changes related to communication devices and clarified one rule related to the forfeiture of games due to sportsmanship issues, all of which were subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors for implementation during the 2024 high school baseball season.

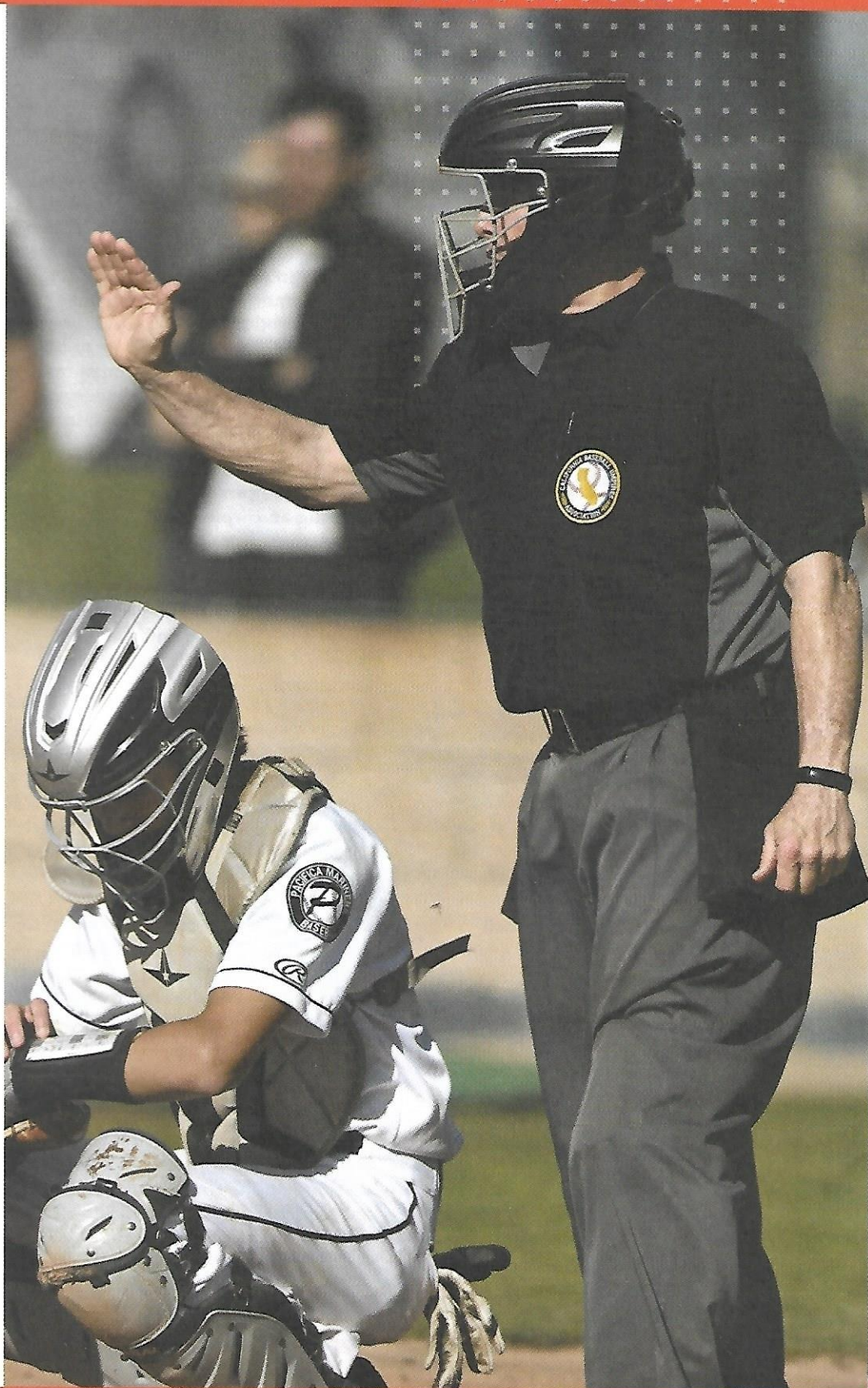
#### Player Communication Equipment/Coaching (3-2-5 NEW, 1-6-2 NEW)

The NFHS now allows one-way communication devices from the dugout to the catcher while the team is on defense for the purpose of calling pitches.

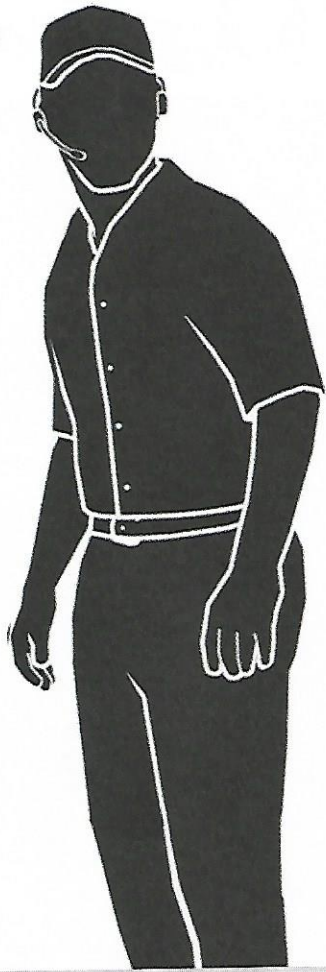
Coaches are only allowed to use a communication device to communicate with the catcher while their team is on defense. The coach must also be in the dugout/bench area.

The penalty for improper use of the communication device is a team warning on the first offense. Any subsequent offense will lead to ejection

A new NFHS rule for the 2024 season states that any wristband being worn containing defensive shifts, offensive plays or pitching choices must be worn on the player's wrist or forearm, as is the case with this catcher. If umpire Derek Clair, Yorba Linda, Calif., notices this piece of non-electronic equipment being worn improperly, he needs to issue a team warning.



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Any coach who is going to use a one-way electronic communication device with his catcher must do so from the dugout/bench area and only when his team is on defense.

of the offender and the team's head coach.

**Play 1:** After putting the ball in play to start the game, the plate umpire notices team A's catcher is wearing (a) an earpiece, (b) an electronic watch or (c) a microphone. Ruling 1: Legal in (a) and (b), illegal in (c), as the communication device may only be one-way from the coach to the player. The catcher must remove the equipment in and and the team is issued a warning for using illegal equipment.

**Play 2:** During the second inning, the base umpire notices the team A shortstop has an earpiece and is receiving (a) pitch signals or (b) defensive positioning instructions

from the third-base dugout. Ruling 2: Illegal in both (a) and (b), as the communication device may only be one-way from the coach to the catcher. The shortstop must remove the earpiece and the team is issued a warning for using illegal equipment.

**Play 3:** During the third inning, the plate umpire notices the team A catcher is receiving instructions via an earpiece. The umpire asks the catcher where his coach is located, and the catcher responds that his coach is (a) in the first-base dugout, (b) in team A's bullpen down the right-field line or (c) in team A's locker room. Ruling 3: Legal in (a), illegal in (b) and (c), as the communication device may only be used from the dugout/bench area. The coach must relocate to the proper area or the catcher must remove the equipment in and and the team is issued a warning for using illegal equipment.

**Play 4:** During the fourth inning, the plate umpire notices batter B1 is wearing an earpiece and receiving instructions from his coach in the third-base coaching box. Ruling 4: Illegal, as the communication device may not be used on offense. A1 must remove the earpiece and the team is issued a warning for using illegal equipment.

### Player Communication Equipment (1-6-1 NEW)

Any wristband with defensive shifts/offensive plays/pitching choices or game directions attached shall be considered non-electronic equipment and is permitted as long as it is a single, solid color.

For pitchers, it may not contain the colors white, gray or be distracting. It does not have to match the color of the uniform or the sleeves worn underneath the uniform.

Finally, it must be worn on the player(s) wrist or forearm, and pitchers must wear it on their non-pitching arm.

The penalty for wearing these wristbands improperly is a team warning on the first offense. Any subsequent offense will lead to ejection of the offender and the team's head coach.

The rationale for the rule change is to allow consistent enforcement of

these communication systems due to their increase in popularity. The rule change prohibits these types of products from being worn in other places on the body or uniform.

**Play 5:** A1 comes to the plate in the top of the first inning with a wristband containing offensive plays written on it. Team A is wearing white uniforms with red trim. The wristband is (a) solid red, (b) solid blue), (c) being worn on A1's wrist or (d) being worn looped around A1's belt. Ruling 5: Legal in (a), (b) and (c), illegal in (d). The wristband must be removed from the belt in (d) and team A is given a warning for improperly wearing the equipment.

**Play 6:** Pitcher B1, who is right-handed, is wearing a wristband with pitching signals written on it. Team B is wearing gray uniforms with blue trim. The wristband is (a) solid gray, (b) solid black), (c) being worn on B1's right wrist or (d) being worn on B1's left wrist. Ruling 6: Legal in (b) and (d), illegal in (a) and (c). A gray wristband may never be worn by a pitcher and a pitcher may never wear the wristband on his throwing arm. It must be removed in (a) and (c) and team B is given a warning for improperly wearing the equipment.

**Play 7:** A2 comes to the plate in the bottom of the second with a runner on first base and no outs. Before A2 steps into the batter's box, the third-base coach yells out, "32!" A2 reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wristband with offensive plays written on it, then puts the wristband back into his pocket before taking his position in the batter's box. Ruling 7: Legal. A2 is not improperly wearing the equipment.

### Umpire-in-Chief (10-2-3h)

The umpire-in-chief may forfeit the game for prescribed infractions by coaches, players or team/bench personnel.

This rule has been edited to remove the word "spectators" from the umpires' jurisdiction. Umpires have jurisdiction over the confines of the field, players, coaches and team/bench personnel. If there are issues with spectators, it is the responsibility of game management to deal with the problem and ensure the facility is safe for all involved. ■

# NFHS 2024 Points of Emphasis

The NFHS Baseball Rules Committee has issued three points of emphasis (POE) for the 2024 season. They are not listed in priority order and are considered of equal importance:

## Malicious Contact

Intentional, violent collisions have frequently been the focus of the NFHS rules committee, as malicious contact was also a POE every year from 2006-08 and also in 2014. That it shows up again in 2024 illustrates it remains an area of concern.

The NFHS notes that malicious contact is a difficult topic on which to provide a complete and understandable definition that captures every possible scenario. For instance, there are infrequent “train wreck” plays where a runner, a fielder and a thrown ball all meet at the same time, contributing to a violent convergence that is not intentional nor the result of anyone trying to hurt another player. In other words, it is just a “normal” baseball play.

Contact or a collision is considered to be malicious if it is the result of intentional excessive force, and/or if there is intent to injure. The absence of these two conditions does not preclude malicious contact, but these two elements of the play provide a reasonable starting point, as does various rules guidance found throughout the NFHS Rules Book.

Umpires should have flexibility to judge whether contact they witness is malicious or not, with said judgment being enhanced by education, video review, association training, game experience and umpiring mechanics.

## Profanity (Direct or Indirect)

The elimination of bad language continues to remain a POE for the NFHS across all sports, with the ongoing emphasis that education-based athletics are a direct extension of the classroom and that behavior that would not be allowed in school should also not be allowed on the baseball field.

Just as a student who blurted out a profanity, whether toward someone else or in frustration, would be disciplined by a teacher or administrator, such

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Umpires are encouraged to use their judgment, supported by rulebook definitions, when adjudicating possible malicious contact situations, as shown in Mechanigram A. That is one of the three points of emphasis for the NFHS for the 2024 baseball season.

behavior on the baseball field needs to be addressed by the umpires.

Rule support is clear, starting with a verbal warning to the offender, a written warning to the offender and restriction to the bench/dugout for the remainder of the game, or ejection for a major offense. NFHS rule 3-3-1f1-4 also provides several sub-articles in the rulebook addressing profanity and harmful behaviors.

## Pace of Play

At other levels of baseball, the length of games and certain elements within the game that contribute to that fact have attracted the attention of rules-writing committees. While the NFHS does not share some of the same challenges when it comes to pace of play, it does recognize there are areas in which the teams and umpires can be more efficient when it comes to time management.

• While a 20-second time limit rule has been in place for more than 40 years, the rules committee does not want such

a rule to negatively impact a game, but rather be used when preventive officiating fails to provide the desired outcome.

• The NFHS rule for time between innings is one minute, 20 seconds from the last out to the next pitch. Umpires should facilitate the defense getting into place and the pitcher warming up and being ready to start the inning. Umpires should not be visiting with fans or having extended discussions with one another during these breaks in the action.

• The NFHS rulebook is clear

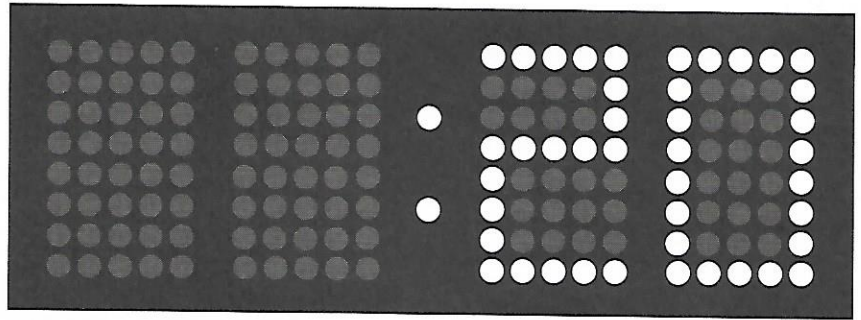
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about when a batter is allowed to step outside the batter's box during an at-bat. Repeatedly stepping out to alter the rhythm of the pitcher or delay the game is not acceptable, and applicable penalties need to be applied by the umpires.

- Umpires need to be consistent in motivating both teams to get on and off the field, expedite conferences involving coaches and especially those between players, and prevent batters from excessively stepping out of the batter's box. While umpires have no control over the skill level of players, they can positively impact the pace and speed of the game by utilizing these suggestions. ■

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While a 20-second clock is on the books in NFHS baseball (MechaniGram B), the rules committee stressed in a point of emphasis for the 2024 season that it wants umpires to use it as a preventative, not punitive, measure to help address pace of play.

## Flashback

# Review of 2023 Rule Changes

The NFHS Baseball Rules Committee convened in person in June 2022 for the first time in three years and used the occasion to make some significant changes to the official NFHS Rules Book for the 2023 season.

Players' use of jewelry and legal pitching positions were among the handful of items that were addressed with new rulebook language. Those rule changes, along with updated official NFHS umpire signals, were subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors in July 2022.

### Player Equipment (1-5-12, 3-3-1d)

The longstanding prohibition of jewelry being worn by players on the field, with the exception of religious or medical medals, was significantly altered. The rule now states that all jewelry, including religious or medical medals, is permitted, and that said medals no longer must be taped and worn under the uniform (1-5-12). However, a provision does remain that any jewelry an umpire believes poses

An NFHS rule change for the 2023 season allowed for players to wear jewelry, so long as the umpires do not believe it poses harm or injury to the wearer or opponent.



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harm or injury to the wearer or their opponent shall be immediately removed (1-5-9).

The new language for rule 3-3-1d now simply states that no coach, player, substitute attendant or bench personnel shall wear bandannas. All mentions of jewelry have been stricken from that rule.

The rationale for the rule change is there is no substantiating sports medicine data that supports the prohibition of jewelry.

**Play 1:** B1 comes to the plate in the top of the first inning wearing (a) a necklace with a cross that is dangling outside of B1's uniform, (b) a nose piercing, or (c) a silicone wristband.

**Ruling 1:** All of the items are legal, so long as the umpire does not believe it poses harm or injury to any participants on the field.

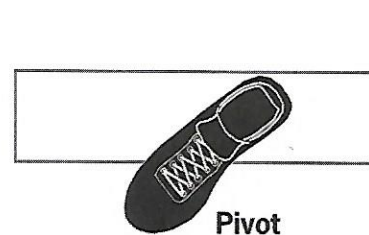
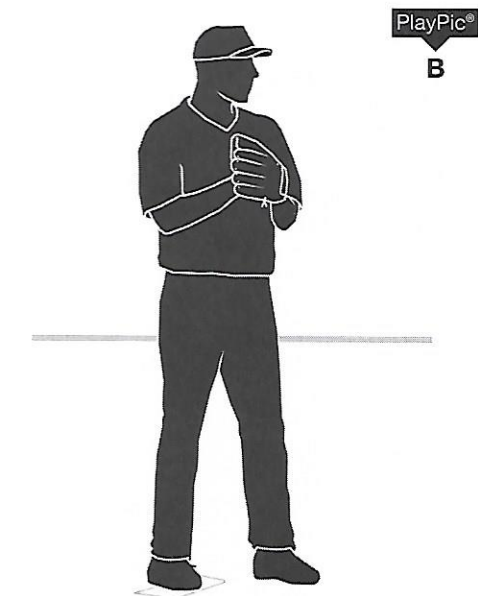
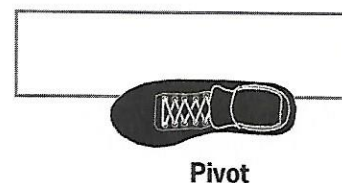
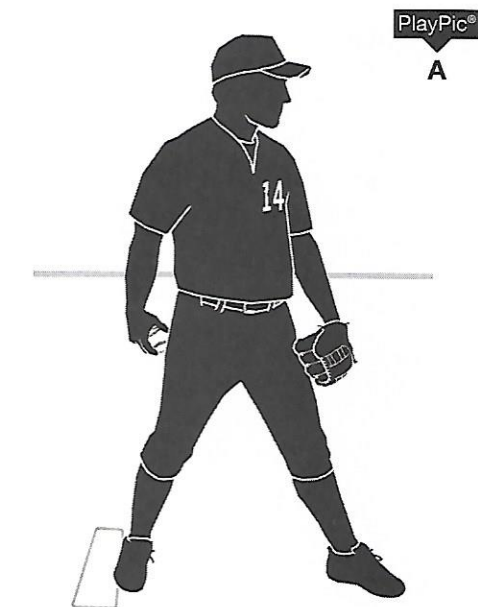
**Play 2:** During a defensive conference, the coach decides to have the shortstop and pitcher switch positions. The shortstop, who was wearing sunglasses while playing in the field, places them atop his hat while completing his warmup pitches. The plate umpire notices there is a glare from the lenses while the pitcher is warming up. **Ruling 2:** According to rule 1-5-9, any player equipment the umpire judges to be distracting to the batter is illegal. The umpire may tell the pitcher to remove the sunglasses from the hat.

**Play 3:** B1 comes to the plate and is wearing a silicone bracelet that has a racist word written on it. **Ruling 3:** The umpires should instruct B1 to remove the bracelet because NFHS rule 3-3-1f2 prohibits any items that use profanity, intimidation tactics, remarks reflecting unfavorably upon any other person, or taunting or baiting.

**Pitching (6-1-1, 6-1-2, 6-1-3)**

All three rules articles related to pitching positions now include new language that spells out whether a pitcher is legally in the windup or set position, based on the position of the pivot foot when the pitcher engages the pitcher's plate.

The pitcher will be considered to be in the set position when their pivot foot is in contact with or directly in front of and parallel to the pitcher's plate (PlayPic A). The pitcher will be



considered to be in the windup position when their pivot foot is in contact with the pitcher's plate and not parallel to it (PlayPic B).

No longer will umpires need to enforce penalties against pitchers for using the "hybrid" pitching stance that combined elements of the windup and set positions based on the position of the pivot and non-pivot feet, as such a stance no longer exists by definition according to NFHS rules. The pitcher is either in the windup or the set based on

the position of the pivot foot only.

The rationale for the rule change is that with the evolution of pitching styles at the high school level, using only the pivot foot to determine whether the pitcher is in the windup or the set makes it clean and easily discernible for all involved.

**Play 4:** Right-handed pitcher F1 engages the pitching plate (a) with the right foot at a 45-degree angle on the plate, or (b) with the right foot parallel to and in contact with the plate. In

both positions the left foot is in front of the plate. **Ruling 4:** In (a), because F1's pivot foot is not parallel with the pitching plate, F1 is in the windup position. In (b), because F1's pivot foot is parallel with the pitching plate, F1 is in the set position.

**Play 5:** With a runner on third base, F1, a left-handed pitcher, engages the pitching plate with the left foot at a 45-degree angle on the plate and the right foot in front of the plate. The offensive team's head coach, in the third-base coaching box, yells at the plate umpire to call a balk because F1 is using an illegal hybrid pitching position. **Ruling 5:** There are no longer any hybrid pitching positions in NFHS baseball. The position of F1's pivot foot means F1 is in the windup position and must meet all of the other criteria for a legal windup.

#### Player Equipment (1-5-4)

In its ongoing quest to keep unsafe aftermarket equipment out of the game, the NFHS clarified its rule regarding the catcher's helmet-and-mask combination to state that not only must it meet the NOCSAE standard at the time of manufacture, but that eye shields that are not designed for baseball shall not be attached to the catcher's mask after manufacture. Any eye shields attached at the time of manufacture must be constructed of a molded rigid material and be clear without the presence of any tint. Tinted eyewear worn on the face and under the facemask is permitted.

The rationale for the rule change is the increase in catchers attaching aftermarket eye shields to their facemasks that are tinted and not approved by the original manufacturer.

Also, tinted eye shields are problematic as one would prevent a medical professional from accessing the eyes of the catcher to determine their condition.

**Play 6:** The plate umpire notices F2 is wearing a helmet-and-mask combination with (a) a clear eye shield, (b) a tinted eye shield, (c) a clear eye shield while also wearing sunglasses, or (d) an ill-fitting eye shield designed for attachment to a football helmet/facemask. **Ruling 6:** Legal in (a) and (c), illegal in (b) and (d).

#### NFHS Officials Signals

The committee approved eight signals to be used pre-pitch between umpires to demonstrate situations, situational changes and their explanations, and eight additional signals to demonstrate calls during play and their results. ■

## Proper Rulebook Language Breeds Confidence

Virtually every baseball umpire working games in an organized league or association has become "certified" to work at that level. The primary method of certification is gained in passing a rules exam. Umpire candidates spend many hours studying the rulebook through group study, online practice and old-fashioned reading the rulebook to prepare for and pass an exam. The best scenario upon passing the initial exam is an annual follow-up in the form of a similar but perhaps scaled-down version of an entry exam, even if that follow-up is an open-book, online exam that forces us to open and read the rules.

Unfortunately, too often once an exam is passed, some umpires put the rulebook on the back burner and rely on their field presence and "knowledge of the game" to get them through potentially difficult situations. They miss out on an opportunity to fill their tool belt with a good fundamental skill

in dealing with coaches and managers when discussing things that happen on the field and what they need to do to correct them by rule. That skill would be the use of rulebook terminology.

An often overlooked resource in the rulebook is its Playing Terms and Definitions (NFHS), found in rule 2.

Coaches rarely use proper rulebook terminology during plays where the action develops in a manner a bit out of the ordinary. For instance, one of the most frequent improper requests from a coach deals with obstruction and interference. Coaches will often ask for one — primarily calling everything "interference" — when looking for a call to go their way.

We are not recommending our role is to educate coaches on the proper use of terminology. That would most certainly lead to confrontation. What we must avoid is doing the same when explaining one of these calls on the field. While it is commonplace for the coaches to misuse the labeling of these

two infractions, we cannot afford to allow ourselves to do the same.

When we are talking about interference and obstruction, we gain a ton of credibility and believability when we can use "rulebook language" in explaining our call. Using phrases like "impeded the progress of the runner" when talking about obstruction or "interferes with, impedes, hinders or confuses a fielder attempting to make a play" when talking about interference shows an umpire has rulebook mastery. With obstruction and interference in particular, such knowledge, and the ability to communicate it using rulebook language, is crucial when a call is made and "there is no contact." Coaches are going to want to know why we might call it when they don't see any contact, and we need to be able to explain the reasoning behind the ruling.

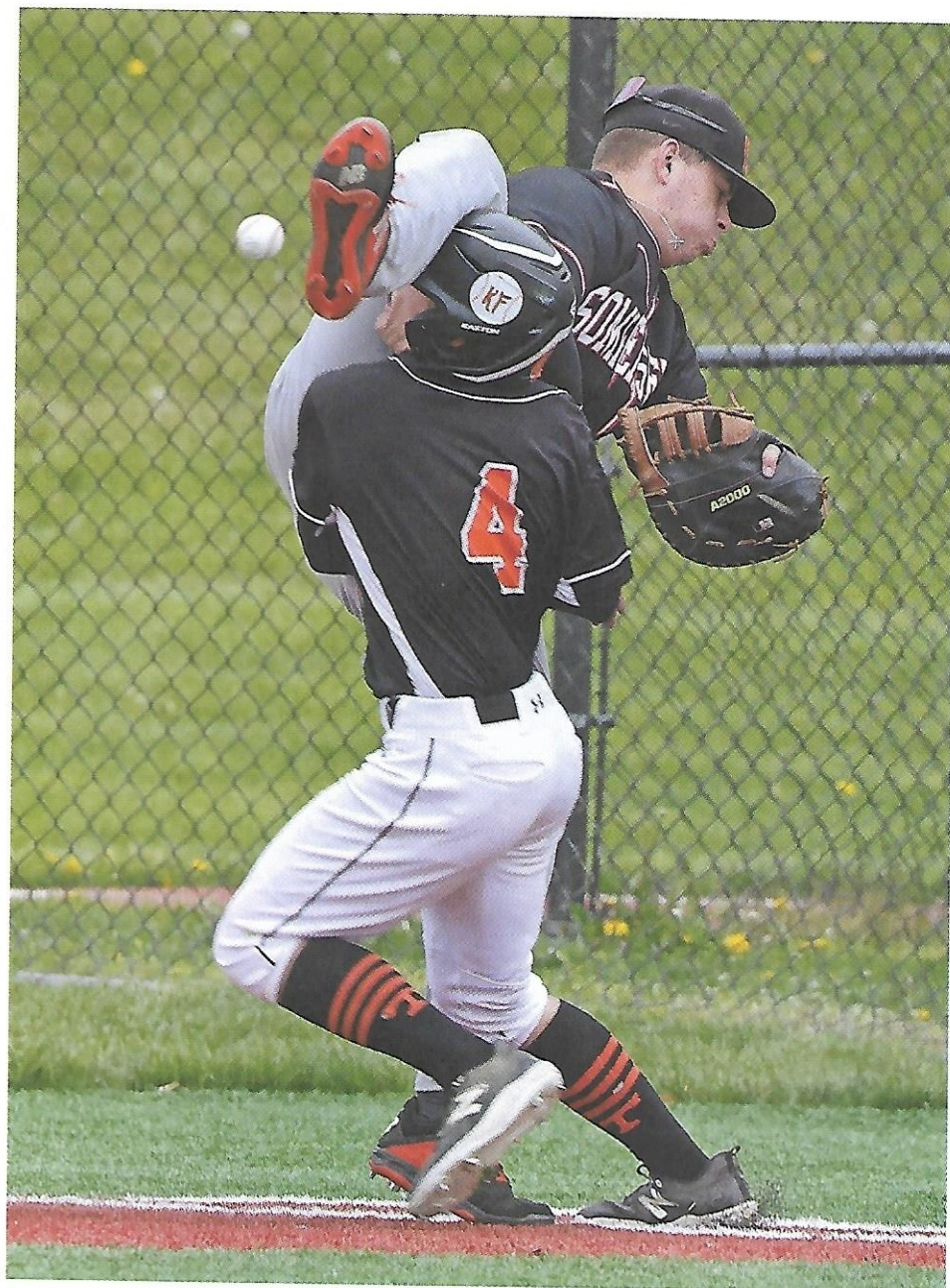
One of the most basic definitions that umpires know well — but coaches

and players often do not — is that of a catch. It is among the first official terms we learn when we graduate from being a fan or casual observer to becoming a certified umpire. We know this definition and the requirements for a catch due to our preparation and rules study in advance of an exam, but the common belief among others is “he held it long enough.” We hear this all the time. We know, however, a combination of “firm and secure possession” and the release of the ball being “voluntary and intentional” are necessary in determining a catch/no catch. It is not good enough if we fall back into our old baseball language from when we were a fan or a player and use common but unofficial words when explaining our call such as “held it long enough.”

Another place we can insert proper rulebook terminology is explaining the status of a ball. Is it a ball in flight? Is it a bounding ball? Is it a thrown ball? Is it a batted ball? We know in determining whether the ball is fair or foul the words “ball in flight” and “bounding ball” mean a lot. We also know terms like “batted ball,” “thrown ball” and even “pitched ball” are key when awarding bases on a ball that leaves the field of play. We must use these words when explaining our awarding of bases so it’s clear to a coach who later may look up the rule to see if we got it correct.

With proper study and a commitment to continue to perfect our onfield presence, we gain a lot of credibility in both the way we sound in our explanation on the field and also how we look from the viewpoint of a coach who later might read the rulebook and see words we quoted in our discussion explaining our decision. When we have the confidence to use these words correctly, and insert the words “because of (fill in the action)” and “by rule,” we have elevated our game.

These are only a few examples where we can make our job easier by simply knowing the proper terminology. We can also insert rulebook language explaining pitching violations, balks and baserunning infractions like using the term “last time by.” These words are often improperly just shouted out by



**Is this play interference, obstruction or neither? Whatever the umpire decides, you can bet there is going to be a conversation with one head coach, and perhaps both. And when that happens, the umpire needs to use proper rulebook language to instill confidence that there is a clear understanding of what transpired on the play and the ruling that is ultimately rendered.**

coaches, but we are not afforded that luxury and latitude when enforcing rules, applying penalties and explaining calls.

It would be a good habit to start out each pre-game meeting with the umpires or when facilitating an umpire’s training to use the definitions

as listed in the rulebook.

Moving forward, take advantage of these opportunities to elevate your credibility on the field by using the words and terms defined in the rulebook. It will also increase your confidence to rule on action on the field as it plays out before you. ■



Plate umpires need to revert to strong fundamentals during a seven-inning contest to maintain success throughout the game. Some of the things Wes Johnson, El Paso, Texas, might think about while working include proper head height, his position in the slot and his timing when calling pitches

## Give a Top Plate Performance Until the Final Pitch

With an average of almost 300 pitches being thrown over the course of a three-hour game, putting together a good day behind the plate is more of a marathon than a sprint. So how do we ensure we are able to bring our best effort on the field night after night?

There are three components to calling a good game that, when in sync, result in a successful outing. However, when just one of those slip, it can result in disaster. These three components are solid fundamentals, good physical conditioning and a mental approach that rivals that of a professional golfer.

Ask any experienced umpire working high-level games: The moment they start to struggle or feel uncomfortable, they will always revert back to the fundamentals they learned at umpire school or advanced clinics. Our standard checklist of timing, slot position, head height, heel-to-toe positioning and tracking are the foundation to being able to see any individual pitch throughout the course of the game. However, there are factors that can come into play that will influence this foundation.

Your physical conditioning can start to influence your plate

stance throughout the game. As we squat throughout a game, our hips, hamstrings, core and back muscles all start to wear down, and maintaining a solid foundation becomes more difficult. We no longer are squatting as low, giving us a higher head height than we had in the first inning. Our core and back muscles are stressed, causing us to drift in our stance. We also will start drifting down into our stance instead of going from A to B quickly, which means we are moving as the pitch is coming in. It is important we prep our body for the season the same way we prep our minds by reading the rulebook and going to



camp. This can be done with a series of body weight exercises, focused on low-weight, high-repetition sets.

The third piece to this puzzle is training our minds. Earlier, we compared the mindset to that of a professional golfer. Umpiring a seven-inning game is like going out and winning a four-round championship. You may be able to recover from one bad shot, but those shots get more and more important as the championship goes on. While every pitch is important over the course of a game, a 3-2 pitch in the first inning doesn't quite hold the same weight as a 3-2 pitch in a one-run game in the seventh. We need to be able to control one missed pitch and keep it from snowballing into several missed calls. The best way we can do this is to recognize we may have missed a pitch, make an adjustment and move on to the next one.

We have all had pitches throughout the game where we second-guessed our call immediately. It may have gone unnoticed by either team, but the important part is we recognized why we missed it so we can prevent the mistake from repeating itself. Every missed pitch has a reason it was missed, and those reasons typically come back to our fundamentals. Was our timing too fast? Did we not track the ball well out of the pitcher's hand? Was our head height too low? If we can recognize our mistake immediately, we can make an adjustment before the next pitch. It is important to fix this immediately, because once you give pitchers a pitch outside of the zone, they are going to want to go right back to that same spot. There is a stubbornness that is needed to call a consistent strike zone, but we also must be able to break that stubbornness when we know we missed a pitch so that it doesn't become our zone for the day.

The best umpires in the world will make adjustments from pitch to pitch. Too many only try to make adjustments inning to inning or even game to game. You ask yourself, was my zone too wide today? Was it too low? Making adjustments from pitch to pitch is how you are able to turn a game with 12 misses into a game with just one or two.

What this constant state of making adjustments does is keep your mind focused from start to finish. It is easy for focus to drift during long games or

to get caught up in the moment of big games. If you are able to take the game pitch by pitch and really lock into fine-tuning your fundamentals throughout the game, not only will you call a much better game, but you will look up and suddenly the game is heading into the ninth inning.

Pitchers always talk about missing small. We want to do the same as umpires. For instance, getting fine-tuned to the corners so when we miss a pitch, we miss by one or two inches off the plate and not four to six inches. Once we can recognize the difference between a pitch two inches off the plate and one three inches off the plate, we will become more consistent and accurate umpires.

There are several training tools to help. In my role with United Umpires, we use a system called the Laser Plate. This is a series of lasers that sit at the front or back edge of home plate and give the location of a pitch as it crosses over based upon a set upper and lower

edge of the strike zone. It then gives immediate visual feedback with a green light located on the plate for a strike, a red light for a buffer zone (acceptable) strike or no light for a pitch out of the zone. You also have immediate feedback of the exact location via a charted strike zone on a tablet or laptop.

Other training products have their own versions of communicating pitch location in real time. While acceptable strike zones will vary level to level, the best way to train your eyes to determine a pitch location in space is to get on these systems, through camps, tournaments or indoor training facilities and get immediate feedback.

Baseball is well into its technology era and will continue to grow all the way down to the youth level. We need to be sure not to fight against it but to use it to our advantage. Use it to train, evaluate, educate and also to grow with the game of baseball. The technology is here to stay and there is no reason why we can't adapt to it. ■

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# Good Timing Requires Proper Use of Eyes

We often receive inquiries from high school umpires as to how can they better themselves. Questions like:

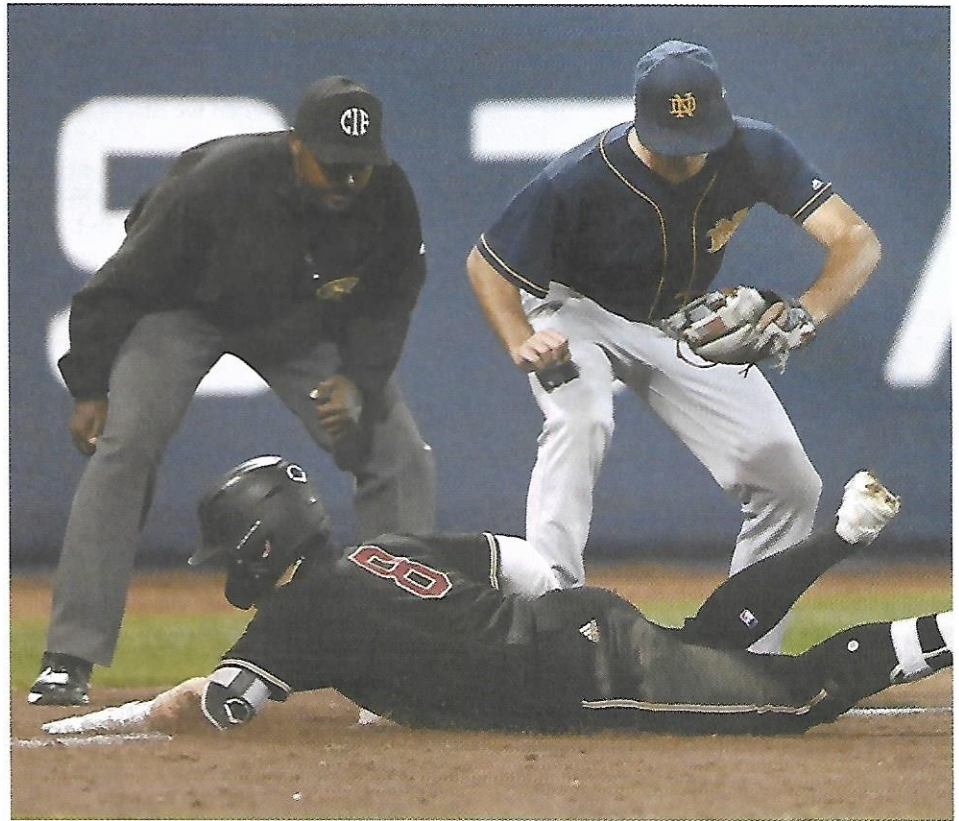
- How do I become a better umpire?
- How do I decrease the number of missed calls on the bases?
- What can I do to get to the next level?

In most cases, the answer to these questions and many others like them is simple. Umpires need to get back to the tried-and-true fundamental umpire basics that many of us tend to stray from daily.

The reality is, most calls on the bases will almost make themselves. Most of us will get the majority of our calls correct based on proper positioning, instincts, the reaction of the players on the field, umpiring talent or pure luck. Umpires are not judged on those calls but rather the 5-10 percent of calls that truly challenge our decision-making process — the swipe tags, the pulled foot, the bang-bang plays or any play where a tag is applied. The umpires who can properly rule on that 5-10 percent are the umpires who are able to separate themselves from everybody else.

How many of us have heard comments like this from an evaluator? “Slow down your timing; you are too quick.” “Take your time; don’t rush it.” “Let the play finish; don’t anticipate.” One common denominator with all of these comments is the concept of timing. It is very easy to have good timing on a play where a runner is out by 10 feet, but somehow, umpires tend to speed things up as the plays become closer. We look like a million bucks on the easy ones, but the minute an umpire has a bang-bang play, our timing becomes lightning quick. Those are the calls umpires commonly miss the most or are not consistent on, the 5-10 percenters.

So how do we define the word timing? That is the million-dollar question and one that has been answered in many different ways. The only way to clearly define timing in all



**When baseball umpires discuss having good timing, what they actually mean is using their eyes properly to see an entire play before rendering a decision. Here, Anthony Banks, Long Beach, Calif., takes his time observing the tag play before making his call.**

aspects of umpiring, whether on the plate or on the bases, is simply through the proper use of our eyes. Timing is not waiting a specified amount of time before rendering your decision. It is not replaying the play in your head or asking yourself what you may have seen. In cases like this, the amount of “fake time” that has gone by has simply delayed an incorrect call by a second or two. Waiting that second or two will not allow an umpire to factor in and process all of the critical elements of the play. Using your eyes properly will allow you to process the play and all of its elements better. It creates the element of time that we all talk about without even

thinking about it. Umpires who use their eyes properly have perfect timing.

The question becomes on all plays: When is a runner truly out on a force play, on a tag play and on a catch or no catch? Only our eyes can answer those questions. When we don’t use our eyes, that’s when we begin to miss calls or guess on them. Some of us are better guessers than others.

## Force Plays

When we begin to break down force plays, once an umpire has determined the ball has entered the fielder’s glove based on the sound of the glove, and viewed that fielder is still in contact

with the base, now and only now does the element of time come into play. If we take a deeper dive into this play, the runner can only be out if the fielder has firm and secure possession of the ball. How do we answer that question? By moving our head and our eyes directly to the fielders' glove to confirm exactly that. Now — and I do not suggest doing this — the verbal is essentially, "Now, you're out." I say this because the runner is not out until we can confirm the last and most critical element of this play: Does the fielder still have the ball in his glove? Once again, without even knowing it, the umpire has created the timing we all talk about and has done it in the proper way.

### Tag Plays

On a tag play, it is even more important we focus on the glove to avoid those uncomfortable moments where, because we did not use our eyes properly, an umpire calls a runner out and has to change the call because the ball has fallen out of the glove and is now lying on the ground. The same rules apply. Focus on the base/tag

relationship: Once it's determined the tag was applied to the runner before the runner safely reaches the bag, move your head and eyes to the glove to determine firm and secure possession of the ball at the completion of the tag. In many cases, the timing of this may take a bit longer, but this runner is not actually out until we have determined through proper use of our eyes the fielder's possession of the ball has been secured through the entirety of the play.

### Fly Balls

When we look at fly ball catches, no fly ball decision should ever be made until we have answered two very important questions: Did the fielder have firm and secure possession of the ball? Was there a voluntary release by the fielder? This can only be achieved by using our eyes properly on these catch or no-catch situations. Many of these determinations will take even longer than tag plays based on outfielder position at the time of the catch, angles created by the base umpire while trying to decide on a catch or no catch, boundary decisions such as

out-of-play lines or fences, or a fielder who is diving or rolling on the ground while attempting to make a catch. Many of these decisions are not easy, but it is even more important that we slow down, be set and let our eyes do all of the work before we make a call.

One thing to note, firm and secure possession and voluntary release are defined differently at different levels of baseball. It is important to know the rules at your level and apply those rules along with these principles when going through the decision-making process.

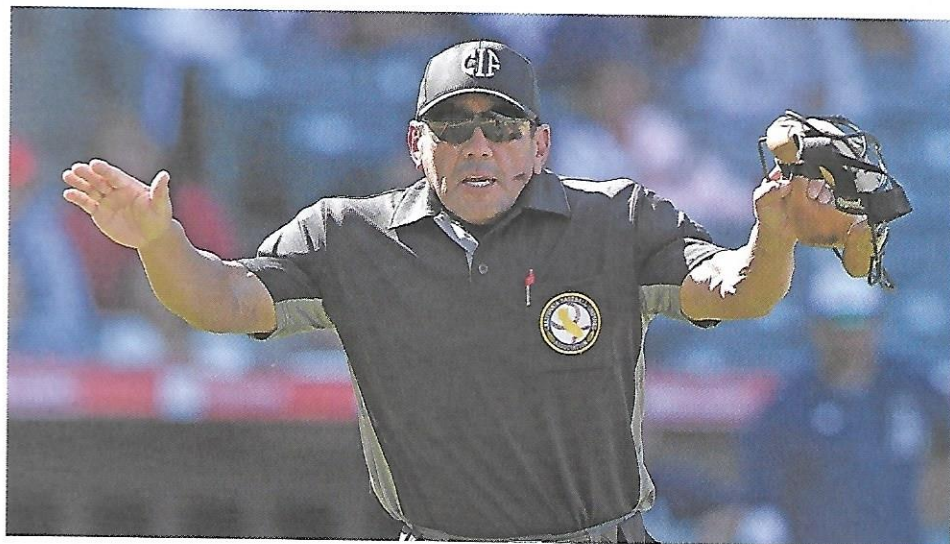
Good umpires know where to go on the field, look good in their uniform, are approachable and enjoy the game. Great umpires know how to handle people and situations on the field and are bionic. They don't miss calls. One simple way to make sure you cut down on the number of missed calls is to use your eyes properly on every pitch as a plate umpire, and every force play, every tag play and on all fly ball decisions on the bases.

It seems simple, but it takes focus and hard work to achieve that. The best of the best are able to do that. ■

## The Intricacies of Fourth Outs

Other than umpires, there are not many people who understand there can be four outs in an inning. The purpose of getting a fourth out is to negate a run scored as a result of a baserunning infraction. Baserunning violations only result in an out when an appeal is made. The opportunity for a fourth out has not occurred very often in professional baseball and there apparently has never been a successful fourth-out appeal in MLB, at least in modern times, but does exist in the high school game.

In order to understand the benefit of a fourth out, we must first understand the types of third outs that prevent a run from scoring even though a runner touches the plate before the third out is actually made. There are three general ways such a run is not scored. They are when the third out is made by the batter-



When can plate umpire Fernando Sala, Laguna Niguel, Calif., wave a run off the board? One situation is when there is a fourth out in an inning that negates a run being scored due to a baserunning infraction.

runner before he touches first base; another runner being forced out; or a preceding runner who is declared out upon appeal because of a baserunning infraction. The role of an appeal in the third instance is obvious, but if an appeal can create a fourth out that falls under any of those three categories, a run that has been recorded can be erased.

The baserunning infractions that can be appealed are: failing to properly retouch a base (leaving too soon); and missing a base, including failing to touch home immediately after overrunning/oversliding. In NFHS, a runner who takes a running start on a tag up is immediately declared out (8-4-2o).

Of course there is a limit on when a fourth-out appeal can be made, and

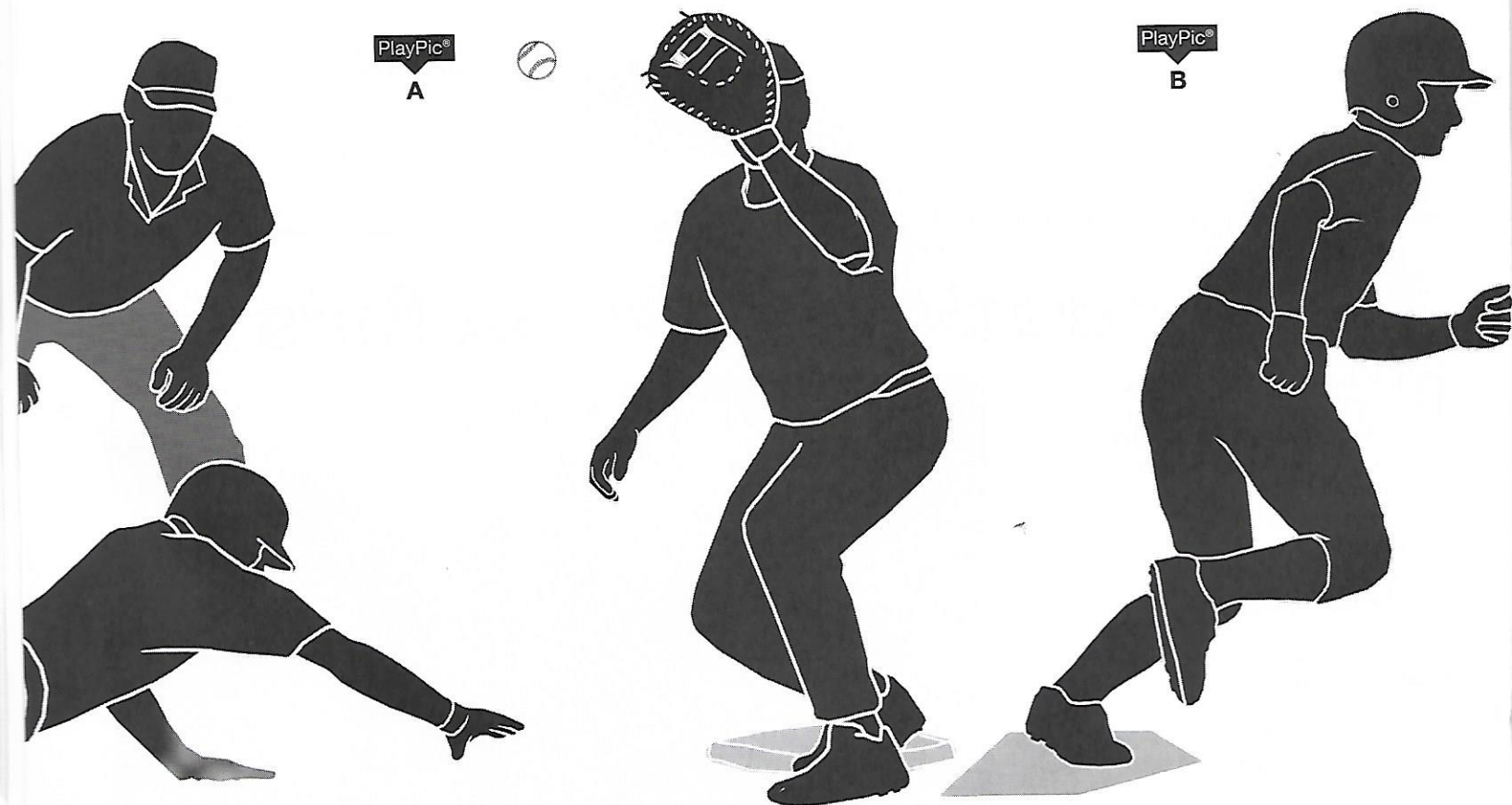
that is before the defensive team leaves the field. That means before the pitcher and all infielders have crossed the foul lines. In high school, the appeal can be made any time before the umpires leave the field (NFHS 8-2 Pen.)

and his run should have counted; the third out was a time play, not a force play. The Brewers failed to appeal that Pagliarulo left third too soon for a fourth out that would have negated his run.

**Play 1:** With two outs and runners on first and second, B5 hits a ball in the right-center gap and is thrown out going for a triple. R1 and R2 score before the out at third, but R1 misses both second and third. **Ruling 1:** The defense must properly appeal to cancel both runs. An appeal on R1 at third will cancel R1's run but not R2's score.

An appeal on R1 at second will cancel both runs because that would be a force play. Both appeals may be made, but if the first appeal is at second, an appeal at third would be unnecessary.

**Play 2:** With two outs and runners on second and third, B5 makes a half swing on a 3-2 pitch in the dirt. The ball gets away from F2 as R3 scores easily, but R2 is thrown out after overrunning third to seemingly end the inning. The defensive coach asks for an appeal on the swing and the base umpire rules it a strike. F5 then throws to F3, who tags first for the out on B5, who instead of running had watched the play. **Ruling 2:** The fourth out on B5 negates R3's run, which cannot count if the batter fails to reach first base safely. ■



If a runner leaves a base too early on a caught fly ball and is thrown out while trying to return (PlayPic A), this is both an appeal play and a time play, not a force out. If another runner scores ahead of the out (PlayPic B), the run counts. However, if the scoring runner also left early, the defensive team can also appeal that play and record a fourth out that takes the run off the scoreboard.

# Pregame in the Parking Lot

As another high school baseball season beckons, so does the need examine just what a proper pregame discussion should look like.

In that crucial 30- to 60-minute window before a ballgame, we should be having a productive pregame meeting with our partner(s) for that day's game.

## Notify game administration upon crew arrival

Once all members of the crew have arrived at the ballpark, the first order of business should be making contact with whomever is responsible for game administration. This allows the crew to confirm its arrival, putting administrators and coaches at ease they will indeed have umpires for the game, no small consideration given the shortage of game officials that has emerged in many areas. It also gives the crew knowledge of who to consult should the services of a game administrator be required during the course of the game (i.e. dealing with an unruly spectator). This meeting is also a good time to confirm the time of first pitch, whether there will be any unusual pregame festivities that could delay the start of the game and any other initial housekeeping matters.

## Crew uniforms and duties

Much of this can be handled with proper communication even before arrival on site. Whomever is serving as the crew chief for the game should be reaching out to partners to discuss what time everyone will arrive, where everyone will park, who will be working the plate/bases, etc. Still, once everyone is in tow, a quick refresher is in order. Are we wearing black or blue shirts? Jackets, long sleeves or short sleeves? Are you still good with working the plate? Once the logistics are sorted out, the discussion can shift to that day's game.

## Rules discussion points

Pregame meetings are not the time to have a full-blown rules clinic. They are the time, early in the season, to discuss rule changes that are now in effect,



The pregame in the parking lot is where umpires begin to develop the communication that will make them an effective crew come gametime on the field. From left, Gary Coy, Des Moines, Wash.; John Keepers, Bremerton, Wash.; Eric Jensen, Seattle.

points of emphasis and any part of the rulebook that is causing a particular crew member to have some pause and some uncertainty. Start your actual pregame with these discussions before moving on to specifics for that day's ballgame.

## Fair/foul responsibilities

It's the first item in the order of operations whenever the ball is put in play: Is it fair or foul? Therefore, the crew must know who has fair/foul responsibilities based on how many umpires are on the field and where they are located in a given situation. There also must be discussion about any situations where the crew is going to deviate (and why that is justified) from accepted mechanics — for example, if the home-plate umpire is giving up fair/foul responsibilities on a ball that has yet to reach the first- or third-base bag.

## Catch/no catch responsibilities

This is the second order of operations after fair/foul rulings. Again, based on the number of umpires working the game and where they are located in a given game situation, the crew must understand who has responsibility when a catch/no catch judgment is required on a play. This is where outfield coverage also must be discussed, so the crew is in agreement on who is responsible for routine fly balls, trouble balls with converging fielders, trouble balls along the foul lines and trouble balls involving the fence and possible home run rulings.

## Rotations

The only thing worse than having two umpires standing at a base waiting to make a ruling is having no umpires at a base waiting to make a ruling, especially at home plate. The crew must discuss basic rotation mechanics, understanding they will be different

depending on the number of umpires on the field. The crew should also discuss how it will pre-pitch signal to one another and who will initiate such signaling whenever a rotation situation is in play.

### Additional signaling

Along with rotations, the crew must be in agreement on non-verbal signals that will be used for infield fly situations, double tag situations, time plays, appeals and whether or not an umpire has information to share with a partner about a ruling. Nothing is worse than standing on a field, giving a pre-pitch signal to a partner and getting a “deer in the headlights” look in response. Thus, this pregame communication is crucial.

### Unusual plays

The crew should discuss how it will handle rulings that may involve more than one umpire, such as checked swings, possible batted balls hitting the batter before/after he leaves the batter’s box, the force-play slide rule on the front end of a double play, base touches and tag ups that lead to appeals, etc. Again, do not allow a lack of pregame communication to lead to situations where more than one umpire is making a ruling, or worse yet, no umpire is in position to make one.

### Handling dugouts/coaches

Part of being a good partner and a good crew is knowing the people you are working with will take care of business when it’s necessary. Discuss among the crew how you will handle excessive noise from a given dugout, the administration of restrictions and warnings and when it will be necessary for an umpire to intervene in an onfield discussion between a partner and a coach or player.

### Final words of wisdom

With all of the key points covered, give everyone on the crew one last opportunity to address any lingering question or concern, remind one another to work hard and be the best crew on the field, toss the lawn chair into the trunk, give yourselves a once-over to make sure zippers are up and shoes are tied, and walk as a crew to the field, knowing you have mentally prepared for a solid performance. ■

## Be Careful About the Over-Commit

With four bases to account for and just two sets of eyes on the field, there are going to be situations where an umpire just doesn’t get the best look at a particular play in the two-umpire system and must determine what sacrifices need to be made in order to cover all of the action. Here is a perfect example:

**Play:** Bases loaded, less than two outs, a fly ball hit to deep right-center field.

**Coverage:** First, let’s discuss pre-pitch alignment. The base umpire will be in the C position, on the shortstop side of the infield between the pitching mound and second base.

Next, let’s cover responsibilities on this play. For the plate umpire, it’s pretty simple. PU has responsibility for the tag-up by R3 at third base and any possible plays at the plate. Given this is a deep fly ball to an outfield gap, the ensuing play after the catch is likely not going to be at the plate, as R3 should score easily.

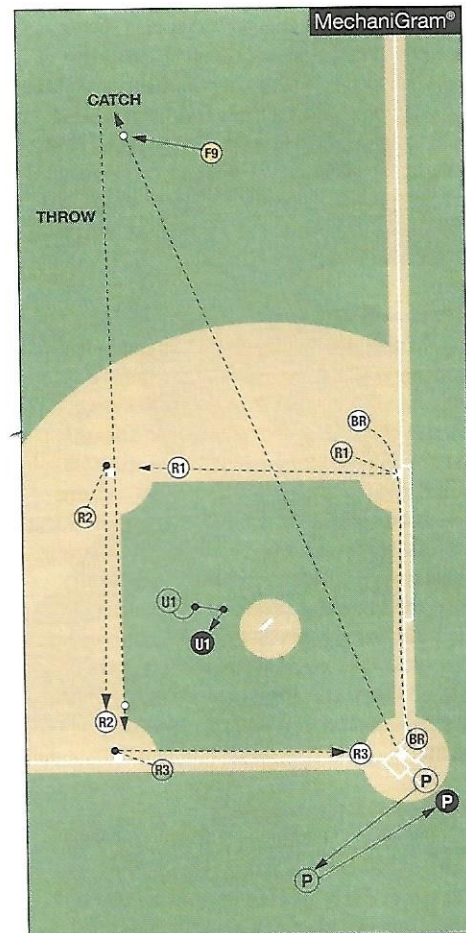
Things are much more complicated for the base umpire, who has catch/no catch responsibilities while also trying to line up a look at the tag-up of both R2 at second base and R1 at first base. The reality is U1 cannot see all three things at once and must prioritize. The catch/no catch always comes first in the order of operations. Based on the location of the fly ball, the tag-up by R2 at second base is next. So U1 must find an angle to see both of these actions, sacrificing any true look at what R1 is doing at first base. All U1 may get is a quick peek at first base after the ball is caught and R2 begins to advance to third base.

However, the fun is just beginning. What if F9, who catches the ball, makes a strong, on-line throw in an effort to retire R2 at third base? U1 does not want to get caught in a position in the working area with nothing but a view of a sliding runner’s backside on a tag play at third base. Ideally, U1 would be able to make progress toward what would be a 45-foot mark between third base and home plate, opening up a great angle for a tag play at third base. So U1 hustles from the working area behind the mound to this spot to get in

perfect position ... only to have R1 also decide to tag and advance at first base.

The shortstop cuts the throw, sensing a better opportunity to retire R1 than R2, and throws to the second baseman to make a play on R1. U1, having committed to a tag play at third base, has almost no look at what transpires, but is still responsible for making a ruling from close to 90 feet away. Talk about an “A-ha!” moment.

However, it’s also a great teaching moment, serving as a reminder of how pre-pitch self-talk carries plenty of importance. As the U1, recognize the possibility of this play exists, and mentally prepare yourself to find the best position to rule on all possible plays that may develop. Make the working area your friend and find the best spot where you can rule on plays involving both R2 and R1. Do not over-commit to one play at the expense of another. ■



# Infield In ... And So Are U Too

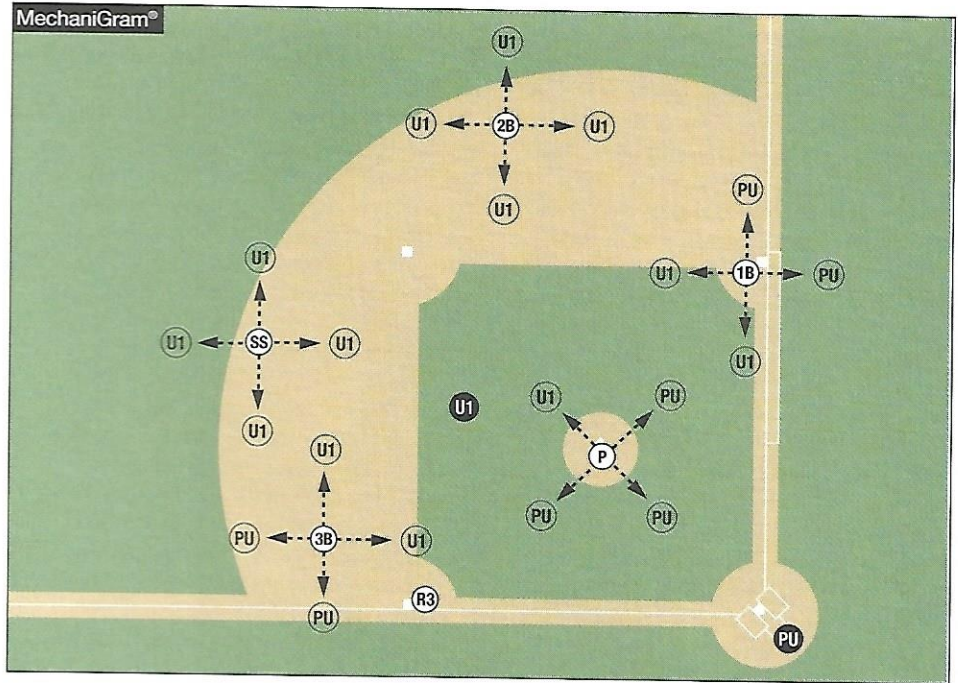
A common mechanics and positioning concern takes place in the two-person umpiring crew when the infielders move in as part of their pre-pitch positioning to be in place to cut off a potential run from scoring at the plate.

When there is any combination of runners that includes a runner at third base — except when there are runners on first and third — the base umpire, U1, is in the “C” position, between the pitcher’s mound and second base, slightly offset to the shortstop side of the infield. Because of the possibility of a pickoff play at third base in this situation, most base umpires will work a “deep C” that creates an angle for an open look at the front edge of the third-base bag.

However, if the infield decides to play in, the “deep C” is in the immediate proximity of where the shortstop will want to set up shop. As such, U1 must adjust and move slightly forward into the working area to maintain proper line-drive coverage in the infield.

As the MechaniGram illustrates, anytime U1 is in the middle of the infield, that umpire has catch/no-catch responsibilities for all line drives hit in the infield except the corner infielders moving back or toward a foul line and the pitcher moving in, left or right. If U1 starts in a position deeper than the two middle infielders, there is no way to see batted balls hit at the feet of the second baseman or shortstop. This creates the unenviable position of making the plate umpire responsible for these rulings — a ruling PU is otherwise never responsible for — and sets the stage for confusion where a double call is made or, even worse, no call is made.

Instead of moving deeper, U1 should move forward and find a spot in the working area that will allow the base umpire to stay clear of any immediate play on a batted ball by a middle infielder, while still allowing for an angle to see these plays being made. ■





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# Baseball Injury Surveillance Study

As participation in high school baseball 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 RIO™) to monitor rates and patterns of injuries among high school athletes. High School RIO is currently collecting the 18<sup>th</sup> 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), baseball had the lowest injury rates in the 2021/22 academic year. The

arm/elbow (17 percent) and shoulder (14 percent) were the most commonly injured body parts, and strain (29 percent) and sprain (17 percent) were the most common diagnoses. 20 percent of injuries sustained in competition and 15 percent of injuries sustained in practice were to pitchers. The most common injuries among pitchers in 2021/22 were ligament sprains and muscle strains (competition: strain 37 percent, sprain 32 percent; practice: strain 25 percent, sprain 25 percent). While concussion rates in baseball are generally low compared to other sports, concussion rates in practice have significantly increased over the study period. This trend will continue to be monitored during the upcoming academic year.

Understanding patterns of injury in boys' baseball is one important tool when considering injury prevention efforts to



keep baseball 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 baseball, please email the High School RIO team at [highschoolrio@datalycenter.org](mailto:highschoolrio@datalycenter.org). Please visit <http://datalycenter.org/resources/high-school-rio-annual-reports/> to access the annual summary reports referenced above. ■

## Always Say Yes to Safety

Whenever umpires step on the field, they should have two primary objectives above all else: keep the game safe and keep the game fair. When safety is at issue, there are no gray areas.

This PlayPic illustrates a perfect example, showing a piece of tape running through the earhole of a batter's helmet. Why is that tape there? It can only be for one of two reasons: either there is a crack in the helmet, or the padding on the inside has come loose and needs to be kept in place.

The NFHS rulebook states batting helmets must meet the NOCSAE safety standard at the time of manufacture (1-5-1) and defective equipment must be repaired or replaced immediately (1-5-6). If there is tape on the helmet, it likely means one of two things: There is a crack in it, or the padding on the inside of the helmet has come loose and is being held in place. Either way the helmet no longer meets that NOCSAE standard and should not remain in use.

Don't allow unsafe and illegal

equipment such as this to remain in any game you are working. It's an easy fix with strong rule support. Ignoring it puts

the player wearing the helmet at peril and puts you as the umpire at jeopardy should an injury result. ■

