



Interference by Runners Can Happen Anywhere

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Collisions between a runner and a fielder are not an everyday occurrence. When those do occur, the fielder usually has the right of way. The runner may also collide with the ball, and that usually results in an out as well. Except where noted, the material applies equally to NFHS, NCAA and pro rules.

Runner hit by batted ball. If a runner is hit by a fair batted ball before it passes an infielder other than the pitcher, the ball is dead and the runner is out. The batterrunner is awarded first base and is credited with a hit. If all the infielders, on the runner's side of the infield, are playing in, a runner who is hit by a batted ball is not out unless he intentionally interferes.

A challenging scenario for umpires is when one infielder, most likely F3 or F5, is playing in front of the baseline, and another infielder, most likely, F4 or F6, is playing deep.

In NFHS and NCAA, the umpire must determine if the deeper (second) fielder might have been able to make a play. If so, the runner is out. If not, the ball remains in play.

In pro, it does not matter if the deeper fielder could have made a play. The key is whether the first (shallower) fielder had a chance to field it. If so, the runner would not be out. Whether the fielder had a legitimate chance to field the ball is a judgment call. The guideline for "a chance to field it" is if the ball passed within an arm's reach of the fielder. The "step and a reach" guideline applies only when a runner is attempting to avoid a tag.

If the first fielder did not have a legitimate chance to field the ball, the runner is out regardless whether another fielder could have fielded the ball (NFHS 5-1-1f, 8-4-2k, 5.1.1H, 8.4.2I, 8.4.2 K; NCAA 6-2e, 8-2g, 8-5k, interp; pro 7.08f, interp).

Play 1: With R2 on second, B1 grounds the ball into the hole. F5, playing in front of the baseline, dives for the ball, which passes under his glove. The ball then hits R2. F6 had gone deep into the hole. **Ruling 1:** In NFHS and NCAA, R2 is out if the umpire judges F6 might have been able to make a play. In pro, R2 is not out and the ball remains live as F5 had a legitimate chance to field the ball.

In play 1, if F5 had touched (deflected) the ball and it then struck R2 (unintentionally on the part of the runner), it is live and in play under all codes despite the fact that another infielder might be in position to field the ball.

Play 2: With R2 on second and R3 on third, the infield is playing in. B1 grounds the ball into the hole about midway between F5 and F6. Neither fielder is within an arm's reach of the ball. The ball then hits R2. **Ruling 2:** In NFHS and NCAA, the ball remains in play. In pro, R2 is out.

Runner hit by pitched ball. There are two scenarios for a runner to be hit by a pitch. The first is a runner on third who is trying to steal home and the second is a batter-runner who makes contact with a dropped third strike.

Steal of home. If a runner tries to steal home and is hit by a pitch, the ball is immediately dead and the pitch is called a ball or a strike. All runners are awarded one base. In the rare circumstance that such a pitch were a strike, the batter would be out if it were strike three and the run would not score if strike three resulted in the third out (NFHS 8-3-1a; NCAA 6-4b; pro 5.09h).

Dropped third strike. After an uncaught third strike, the batter may not interfere with the catcher's fielding or throwing by stepping out of the batter's box or making any other movement that hinders the catcher's play (NFHS 8-4-1a; NCAA 7-11h AR 1, 7-11h AR 2; pro 7.09a). If while attempting to advance to first base, the batterrunner intentionally deflects the ball, the batter-runner is declared out, the ball is dead and all runners return.

If he unintentionally deflects the ball, the ball is live and in play. NCAA rules further specify that if there are fewer than two outs and first base is occupied, the ball is dead and all runners return, unless the runner(s) are stealing on the pitch.

Play 3: With no runners on base, B1 swings and misses a pitch in the dirt for strike three. F2 blocks the ball, which then rolls forward. As he leaves the batter's box, B1 kicks the ball into foul territory. B1 is safe at first. **Ruling 3:** The umpire must judge whether B1 intentionally kicked the ball. If so, B1 is out for hindering F2's attempt to field the ball; the ball is dead. If not, the play stands.

Play 4: B1 swings and misses a pitch in the dirt for strike three. B1 takes off for first and F2 deflects the ball into him. B1

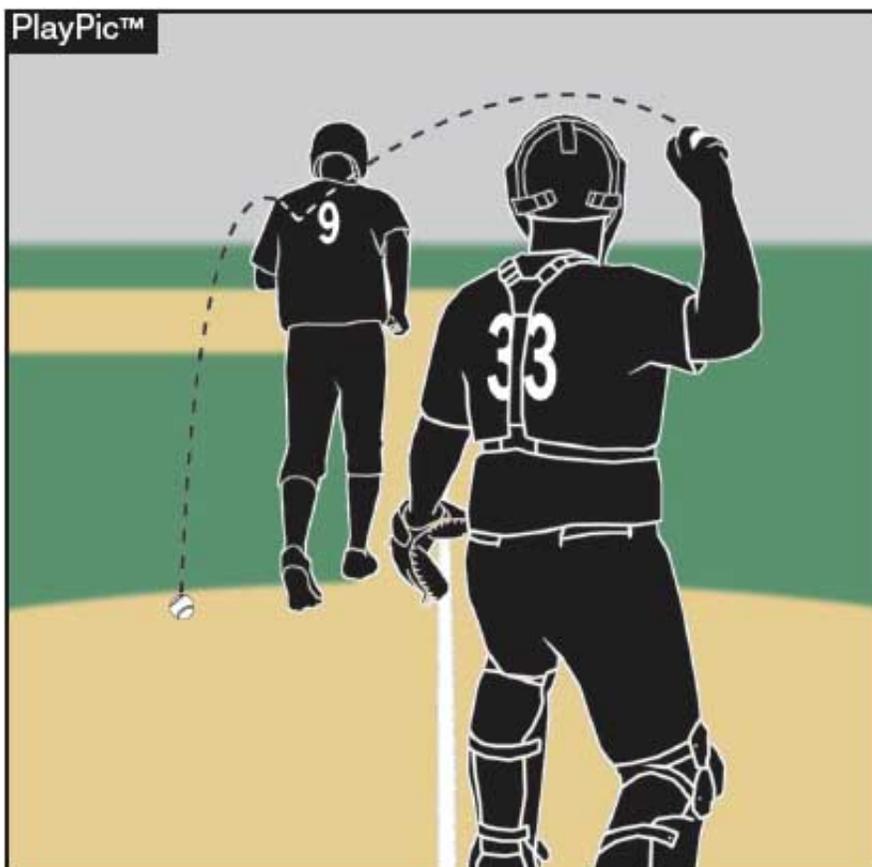
is safe at first. **Ruling 4:** The ball is live and in play. When a batter-runner has left the batter's box and is hit from behind by a ball deflected by the catcher, he should not be called out for interference.

Runner hit by thrown ball. Perhaps the most memorable incident of a runner hit by a thrown ball is that of Reggie Jackson in game four of the 1978 World Series between the L.A. Dodgers and N.Y. Yankees. In the last of the sixth, the Yankees batted trailing, 3-0. With Jackson at first and Thurman Munson at second, Lou Piniella ripped a sinking liner to the left of Dodger shortstop Bill Russell. Russell dropped the ball, picked it up, stepped on second to force out Jackson and fired toward first. Jackson was only a few strides from first and froze in his tracks when the ball closed in on him. Without moving his feet, Jackson swiveled his right hip toward the ball. The ball struck Jackson in the right leg and bounced into short right field. Munson scored as Jackson advanced to second with Piniella obviously safe at first. Dodger Manager Tommy Lasorda went ballistic as he vociferously argued that Jackson had intentionally interfered. The Yankees eventually won the game in the 10th inning.

Other than a batter-runner being hit by a thrown ball while outside the three-foot lane, NFHS and pro rules agree that a runner is guilty of interference only if he intentionally allows a thrown ball to hit him. In NCAA, the act does not have to be intentional.

Play 5: With R1 on first, B1 grounds sharply to F6, who tosses to F4 at second for the force. F4's throw to first hits a surprised R1, who was halfway to second. **Ruling 5:** NFHS, pro: The play stands. NCAA: R1 is out for interfering with the throw.

Runner outside lane. The rules require the batterrunner to run the last half of the distance from home to first base within the three-foot lane. If the runner does not, there is no penalty unless, while the ball is being thrown to first base from the area of the plate, and in the umpire's judgment, he interferes with the fielder taking the throw at first base. Intent is not a factor.



The reference to the origin of the throw being from “the area of the plate” does not appear in any rulebook, but does reflect the intent of the rulemakers and the practical application of the rule. It is not a precise area and it allows umpires to make a distinction between throws that are roughly parallel to the first-base line and those made from the infield dirt or the pitcher's mound.

The lines are part of the lane, so stepping on the line is not a violation. Also, one foot inside the lane (or on the line) and the other foot in the air is permissible. The batter-runner must step totally outside the lane to violate the rule.

The penalty for interference is to declare the batterrunner out and return any other runners to the base occupied at the

time of the pitch (NFHS 8-4-1g; NCAA 7- 11p; pro 6.05k, 7.09k).

Written by George Demetriou, a resident of Colorado Springs. He is a former president and is the current rule interpreter for the Colorado High School Baseball Umpires Association. With thanks to baseball historian Jay Miner, Albany, N.Y.

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