



April 29, 2024

NFHS Softball Weekly Rule Interpretations

Situation 1: Team A has a lineup that has #2, the 4th batter in the lineup, listed as the pitcher and #5, the 3rd batter in the lineup, listed as the catcher. In the first inning, #2 does not get on base but #5 does get on base and utilizes #13, an eligible sub, as a courtesy runner. Prior to their team taking the field Team A's coach informs the plate umpire that #1 listed in the 6th spot in the lineup will be their pitcher and #2 will play first base. The umpire does not allow this change stating that #2 must face the first batter (at least one pitch) in the bottom of the first inning. **RULING:** Incorrect ruling. Other than recording statistics, the identification of the pitcher and catcher are only important in regards to who is capable of utilizing a courtesy runner. Since the pitcher did not utilize a courtesy runner in the top of the first inning, they are not required to face the first batter in the bottom of the first inning. Since the catcher did utilize a courtesy runner in the top of the first inning, they are required to face the first batter (one pitch) in the bottom of the first inning. (8-9-2)

Situation 2: Team A is at bat with R1 on second base and no outs, B2 hits a deep base hit toward right center field. As R1 is rounding third and heading home, F2 is setting up for a play at the plate. When the runner is approaching home, F2 is moving to catch the thrown ball and make a play on the runner. The umpire rules obstruction on F2 as they blocked the plate prior to gaining possession of the ball. Team B's coach objects to this call stating that the runner was not impeded by F2's actions prior to them having possession of the ball and ruling obstruction simply because F2 was blocking the plate is a misinterpretation of the NFHS Softball obstruction rule. **RULING:** Incorrect wording and possibly an incorrect ruling by the umpire. NFHS Softball rules are straightforward when it comes to obstruction. If a fielder impedes the progress of a runner or batter-runner who is legally running the bases without possession of the ball or not making the initial play on a batted ball they are guilty of obstruction. Where the gray area enters these situations is "impedes the progress of a runner or batter-runner..." Whether the runner was impeded or not is a decision made by the umpire and is based solely on their judgement of the play. One definition of impede is to delay or prevent progress or movement. When we apply that definition to a softball play in order to be guilty of obstruction the runner has to be delayed or prevented from progressing along their path of running the bases. Can blocking the base/plate result in a player being impeded? Yes, but simply blocking the base/plate does not automatically result in the runner being impeded and obstruction being ruled. If a fielder is blocking a base or home plate and the runner is so far away from the base that they would not be able to touch it without the fielder blocking it then the runner was not impeded simply because the fielder blocked the base since they were not prevented from touching the base. However, if the runner reacted to the fielder blocking the base and altered their path or travel in some way (slowed down, stutter stepped, changed direction to avoid the fielder, etc.), then they were impeded (delayed in progressing) and obstruction should be ruled. Another possibility, if the runner is close enough to touch the base or plate and the fielders positioning without possession of the ball prevents or delays them from touching it by requiring them to change their approach to be able to touch the base or plate then they were impeded, and obstruction should be ruled. So does blocking the base or plate put the umpire on high alert? It should, but it is not by rule

obstruction until the runner is impeded. Again by the definition above delayed or prevented from progressing along their path.

Communications with a coach is a part of game management and it is much easier to manage a game when comments and discussions with a coach about a play or ruling focus on rule based statements. "Coach, in my judgement the runner was impeded by the fielder prior to gaining possession of the ball, that is obstruction. In my judgement the runner would have obtained home without the obstruction so the runner is awarded home." Again keeping the wording in line with that utilized in the obstruction rule keeps the conversation focused and ensures the rule was properly adjudicated and the ruling efficiently communicated to the participants. Will coaches always agree with the ruling? No, but if the ruling is properly communicated in a means that is in line with the rules governing the play they will better understand the ruling and will have to accept the umpires judgement as it was made and communicated in accordance with the rules of the game. (2-35, 8-4-3b)

This same approach should also be taken when dealing with interference. As with obstruction, the interference rule is simply worded, but the enforcement also deals with a large amount of umpire judgement of the actions during the play. Interference is an act by the offense, typically, that hinders impedes or confuses a fielder. There are many forms of interference and each have their own nuances based on the specific rule (initial play, passed a fielder and another has a chance for an out, deflected ball, etc.) but the same type of judgement based rulings apply to interference. As with the discussion above about obstruction, umpires judge the play and have to determine if the fielder was hindered, impeded or confused by the actions of the offensive player in a way that violates a rule. When dealing with these plays and the communications with coaches about them umpires should remain focused on the specifics of the rules governing the play and communicate the ruling base on those rules. "Coach, yes the ball hit the runner's foot while they were off the base, but it was not interference as the ball had already passed an infielder and no other fielder had a chance to make an out." (2-31, 8-6-11, 8-8-4)