



A batter is illegal if she is in the game and does not have a right to that position. Other types of illegal players include illegal pitchers, baserunners and illegally re-entered players. When a player is officially illegal varies between the different major associations. Terry Dodd, Issaquah, Wash.

# OUT OF PLACE

## No 'Substitute' for Illegal, Ineligible Players

By John Bennett

The strategic manipulation of team players into and out of the game is an important aspect of coaching. Some coaches are experts at doing this — moving players into and out of the batting order, using the DP/Flex rule to the extreme, and switching defensive positions on a regular basis. So, occasionally umpires may encounter a game with a large amount of substitutions.

The plate umpire must keep an accurate lineup card by taking the time to accept each substitution and verify with the coach that it is being accepted

correctly. This will help the umpire to avoid the “darker side” of the lineup — illegal and ineligible players.

**The roster and ineligible players.** If a player not listed on the official roster is involved in a game, the umpires do not get involved. An opposing coach may threaten to protest a game or demand that it be forfeited because an ineligible player is participating. However, the umpires must go strictly by the lineup submitted during the pregame meeting with the coaches, even if the protesting coach has a copy of the other team’s roster and tries to convince the umpires that a certain player is ineligible.

Umpires should allow the game to be played and tell the protesting coach to contact the association.

**NCAA and ineligible players.** The only exception is in NCAA where the term “ineligible player” is used in the rulebook for these situations:

- A player’s last name is not entered on the lineup card.
- A non-uniformed player is outside the team area engaging in certain activities (rule 5.9.2).
- A player is not listed as one of the substitutes if the team does not list the entire team roster on the lineup card.
- A name of an otherwise eligible player has been omitted from the team

roster at the bottom of the lineup card.

**Illegal players.** An illegal player is one who participates in the game but does not have a legal right to that position. In USA Softball and USSSA, illegal players include illegal pitchers, batters, runners and illegally re-entered players.

An illegal pitcher is a player who has been removed from the pitching position due to an excessive number of defensive conferences and then takes the pitching position.

An illegal batter would occur by placing the Flex player in the batting order in a spot other than the DP's spot.

An illegal runner is an unreported courtesy runner or an offensive player put in the lineup as a runner for another offensive player, the Flex running for someone other than the DP.

Illegal re-entries include a starter or substitute re-entering a second time.

NCAA has the same criteria and adds a few more, including an unreported or misreported substitute, illegal tie-breaker substitute or pinch runner and an ejected or suspended player.

**Illegal player notification.** In USA Softball and USSSA, a player is not illegal until a pitch has been thrown. It is handled as a protest by the offended team at any time the player is in the game.

High school determines illegality when the ball becomes live and the player has taken her position; it can be discovered by the umpire(s) or either team.

In NCAA, the player becomes illegal when the umpire has recorded the substitution or she competes in the game. It is handled as an appeal by the offended team.

The "dark side" of substitutions does not happen often, but plate umpires should be watchful for them and, if possible, prevent them. If the situation does arise, the plate umpire should be prepared to show his or her "dark side" by knowing the penalties and applying them.

*John Bennett, Anaheim, Calif., works NCAA, high school and travel ball, and is involved with training umpires at all levels. He worked the 2014 NCAA Division II championships and multiple other championship series. □*

## Penalties, Effects for Illegal Players

### Illegal Batter

If an illegal player is in the batter's box, she is not illegal in USA Softball and USSSA until a pitch is thrown. In all other codes, she is illegal as soon as she enters the batter's box.

In USA Softball, the penalty for this illegal batter is disqualification and a legal substitute replaces her.

In NFHS, she is restricted to the dugout for the remainder of the game.

NCAA and USSSA have more stringent penalties. NCAA ejects the illegal batter, and if it is not discovered until a pitch is thrown, she is also called out. USSSA penalizes both the player and coach with an ejection if a pitch is thrown.

If an illegal batter is not discovered until she has completed her turn at bat, and no pitch has yet been thrown to the next batter, the codes differ slightly.

▶ USA Softball – disqualified and declared out; all other outs on the play stand; all other runners return to their bases occupied at the time of the pitch.

▶ NCAA and USSSA – out and ejected, all play is nullified.

▶ NFHS – restricted to the dugout; out if on base.

If an illegal batter is not discovered until she has completed her turn at bat, and a pitch has been thrown to the next batter:

▶ USA Softball, USSSA – disqualified (USA Softball) or ejected (USSSA) and replaced if on base. All play stands.

▶ NCAA – ejected and declared out if on base.

▶ NFHS – restricted to the dugout; declared out if on base.

### Illegal Runner or Tie-breaker Runner

▶ USA Softball – disqualified, replace with a legal substitute.

▶ NCAA – when discovered, she is ejected. In addition, there are penalties (NCAA 8.3.4.2.3 Effects).

▶ NFHS – restricted to the dugout (rule 3-4-2c); like NCAA there are more detailed penalties.

▶ USSSA makes no mention of an illegal pinch-runner or tie-breaker runner.

### Illegal Defensive Players

▶ USA Softball – if the illegal player is a pitcher, she is ejected and all play stands.

▶ USA Softball – for any other defensive player, if she has made a play and a pitch has not been thrown to the next batter, the offense has an option of taking the result of the play or having the play nullified.

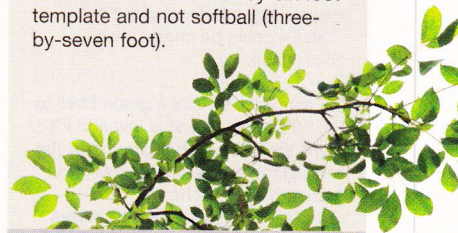
▶ NCAA – player is ejected; same as USA Softball regarding taking the play or not; if the play is nullified, all runners are awarded one base.

▶ NFHS – different penalties based on a batted ball or non-batted ball. See rule 3-4-3.

▶ USSSA – same as NCAA but no awards to baserunners if play is nullified.

## QUICKTIP

Walk around the perimeter of the field before the game to check for any openings in the outfield fence and fences near the first- and third-base lines. Check for any wires or tree branches that might be hanging over or near the field and for any safety hazards in dead-ball territory. **Make sure the field is clear of any debris and that the field is properly lined, especially the batter's box area.** Sometimes the boxes will be lined for baseball with a four-by-six foot template and not softball (three-by-seven foot).



## BY THE NUMBERS

There are differences among the major codes in fast-pitch softball between number of players required to start and finish a game.

**9** Number of players that must be in the game at all times in NCAA and number of players that must start the game in NFHS.

**8** In NFHS and USA Softball, teams may finish with eight players and take an out. In USSSA, teams may finish with eight unless it is because of an ejection. USSSA teams can start a game with eight absent a player in the ninth batting position. USA Softball teams can start with eight and take an out in the vacant position.

## TOOLS

### Rules Differences

USA Softball offers a PDF of the rules similarities and differences between USA Softball, NFHS and NCAA. Umpires can download the document, which highlights everything from the definition of a bunt to rules on batting and pitching, for free at [teamusa.org](http://teamusa.org).



## TEST YOURSELF

Each of the following includes a situation and possible answer(s). Decide which are correct for ASA, NFHS, NCAA or USSSA rules and which might vary. **Solutions: p. 81.**

1. Fast pitch. R1 is on first base when B2 hits a hard, one-hop smash off F1's leg. As F4 attempts to play the batted ball, R1 hinders F4's attempt to field the ball.

- a. R1 is out for interference.
- b. B2 is automatically out for R1's interference.
- c. R1 is out only if she intentionally interferes with F4.
- d. F4 could be charged with obstruction.

2. Fast pitch. B1 hits a ground ball to F6. F6's throw to first is low and F3 stops the ball with her glove over the ball but the ball is also touching the ground as B1 reaches first base.

- a. B1 is not out unless F3 raises her glove to show control of the ball before B1 reaches first base.
- b. B1 is out if F3 demonstrates control of the ball by turning her glove upward either before or after B1 reaches first base.
- c. B1 is out if the umpire rules F3 has secure possession of the ball.

3. Fast pitch. On a 1-1 pitch, B1 steps out of the batter's box after F1 releases her pitch to the plate.

- a. The pitch shall be called a ball or a strike depending upon the location of the pitch.
- b. B1 is charged with a strike.
- c. The umpire will declare no pitch and begin play anew.

4. B1 hits a slicing fair ball down the right-field line. With the ball bounding near the sideline fence, a spectator accidentally deflects the ball that is in the field of play. After ruling the ball dead, the umpires award B1 third base based on their judgment that third base is the base she would have reached because of her superior foot speed.

- a. The umpires erred by ruling a dead ball because the spectator accidentally deflected the batted ball.
- b. B1 is awarded two bases and is placed on second base.
- c. The umpires are correct in awarding B1 third base.

5. R3 occupies third base with two outs. B1 hits a roller to F1, who flips the ball to F2 at the plate. R3 is ruled safe. F2 alertly fires to first base to retire B1 on a close play. The run scores.

- a. True.
- b. False.



Plate umpires should use the drop-step with either the right or left foot, depending on which way the catcher turns, and move back and away to get out of the catcher's way before pulling off their mask with the left hand. Josh Francis, Woodinville, Wash.

## There's 'No Catch' to Working With the Catcher

By Jay Miner

Developing good working relationships with catchers is vitally important. It is as essential as mastering good plate mechanics. That includes working in the slot between the catcher and the batter, establishing a locking mechanism to keep your chin at least above the top of the catcher's helmet and calling a pitch.

**Do not complicate the catcher's play.** Make sure you don't interfere with or complicate the catcher's ability to play or make her uncomfortable in any way. Do not place your hand on the catcher's back. Do not inadvertently "knee" the catcher during a pitch. Prevent that by turning your back foot 45 degrees away from the catcher to add a buffer zone area between you and her.

Try not to instruct the catcher about jumping up for a pitch as she may have a "pitch out" on or her coach likes an active catcher. Do not wind yourself around the catcher with your face next to the side of her face.

**Use credible mechanics.** On foul flies, do not look up and try to locate the ball as many fictional TV umpires do. That method often has disastrous results, including collisions. Simply watch the catcher's shoulders and use an opposite drop-step away and back with your back foot from the catcher to allow her an open path to the ball.

Realize that most right-handed amateur catchers turn to their right 90 percent of the time. So with a right-handed batter and the catcher turning right, open the gate by using the "clear the catcher technique." Use

the drop-step with your right foot moving back and away to get out of her way. With a lefty batter, pivot back and away with your left foot. Do not rip off your mask and spin toward the ball while looking up, and then spring at the ball.

Follow the catcher to the ball from a distance of about 10 feet and remove your mask if a play develops. There is not much we can do with unpredictable lefty catchers but try to figure them out and stay out of their way. On foul balls near the backstop, move so you can see between F2 and the screen.

Behind the plate, use the catcher as your first defense, but do not follow her when she moves. That will mess up your strike zone every time because you are seeing pitches from a different perspective. Brush off the

plate if the catcher gets hit by a foul ball even if it doesn't need dusting. That courtesy will give her time to recover.

The catcher can help you, especially when you show her you aren't going to miss strikes.

#### Manage technical violations.

If the pitcher commits a technical infraction or rushes into a pitch, send the catcher out with a subtle warning for the pitcher. That usually makes everyone on defense happy, but do the same for the opposing team when it is their turn in the field.

**Reward precision.** If the catcher sets up on the outside corner and the pitcher hits the spot, that's a strike every time. Politely inform the catcher not to jerk a pitch over the plate because that is too obvious. If she catches it softly with a good

motionless frame, give her that pitch and every one thereafter for both teams.

At appropriate times, encourage the catcher to catch the ball with her glove fingers facing up whenever possible. With a simple adjustment by the catcher, that is possible.

**Be professional.** Between innings don't place your mask on the top of your head or, worse, throw your mask on the ground.

After a catcher-pitcher conference at the pitcher's circle, keep the game moving by hustling back to the plate. But don't leave too soon, allowing them to continue their meeting.

If you work well with the catcher, she may even praise you to her coach. That is better than the alternative.

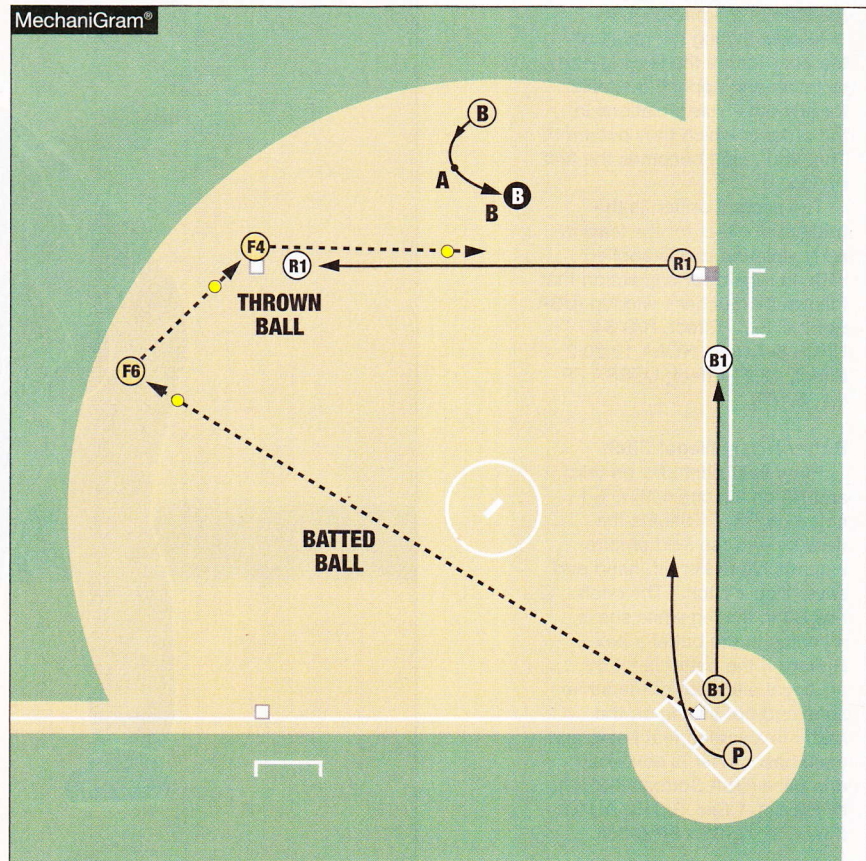
*Jay Miner is a longtime umpire and rules interpreter from Albany, N.Y. □*

## Drift Into Position on Double Plays

Fast-pitch games have become lightning fast at all levels of play. Men and women have been playing amazingly athletic softball for decades but USA Softball Junior Olympic, high school and other associations for girls and boys have dramatically improved their playing skills. Umpires also need to improve to provide all managers, coaches, spectators and enthusiasts with the best possible officiating.

More double plays than ever are being turned these days, but don't discount those critical safe calls. The DP drift technique helps take the "bang" out of the "bangers."

In the MechaniGram with R1 at first, U1 reads that B1's sharp ground ball to F6 qualifies as a serious double play attempt. U1 moves up a step or two and stops at "A" to view the action and all elements of the play at second base. With R1 out on the force, U1 drifts toward first base, sets, and announces and signals the decision at "B" while moving toward first base. That technique allows U1 to gain ground toward first. □



## CASEPLAYS

**Two Runners Leave Early**

**Play:** Fast pitch. R2 is on second and R1 on first with no outs as B5 bats with a 1-1 count. As F1 delivers the pitch, both R2 and R1 leave early. B5 hits the pitch into center field for a base hit. R2 scores and R1 ends up on third. **Ruling:** In USA Softball, NFHS and USSSA FP, the umpire will declare “no pitch” and the ball is immediately dead. The umpire will decide which runner to call out for leaving early. It is not possible to obtain two outs on the look-back (leaving early) rule. The other runner will return to the last base she legally occupied at the time of the pitch. B5 returns to bat with a 1-1 count and play resumes with one out.

In NCAA, the umpire will signal a delayed-dead ball. At the conclusion of the play, the coach of the defensive team has the option of (1) taking the result of the play or (2) selecting, “no pitch,” the offending runner is out and the other runner is returned to the base legally occupied at the time of the pitch.

In determining the result of the play, ignore the leaving-early violation and apply the effects for any other rule violations in the order in which they occurred. That end result becomes the first option.

The second option is the traditional effect for the leaving-early violation and is applied with no regard for any action that follows the pitcher’s windup (USA Softball 8-7T Effect, R/S 34; NFHS 8-7 Pen.; NCAA 12.20.2 Effect, 12.21 Effect; USSSA FP 8.2, 8.18k).

**Batter Hit by Illegal Pitch**

**Play:** Fast pitch. R1 on third and R2 on second with a 1-1 count on B3. F1 begins the delivery and the field umpire extends his or her left hand and says “illegal pitch.” The pitch hits B3 in the leg while she is standing in the batter’s box.

**Ruling:** If the batter is hit by an illegal pitch out of the strike zone and not swung at, the batter is awarded first base, and each baserunner is advanced one base (USA Softball 6-3N(3); NFHS 6-1-1 Exc. 3; NCAA 10.8 Effect (3); USSSA FP 6-3D).

## Stop, Ready, Set, Go

Stopping and getting set, as shown in the PlayPic, is as critical for umpires working the bases as it is for the plate umpire.

Take, for example, a routine ground ball to the shortstop with no runners on base. Suddenly the shortstop bobbles the ball and the runner is moving down the line faster than expected. What should have been a routine out blows up on the base umpire if he or she doesn’t prepare correctly.

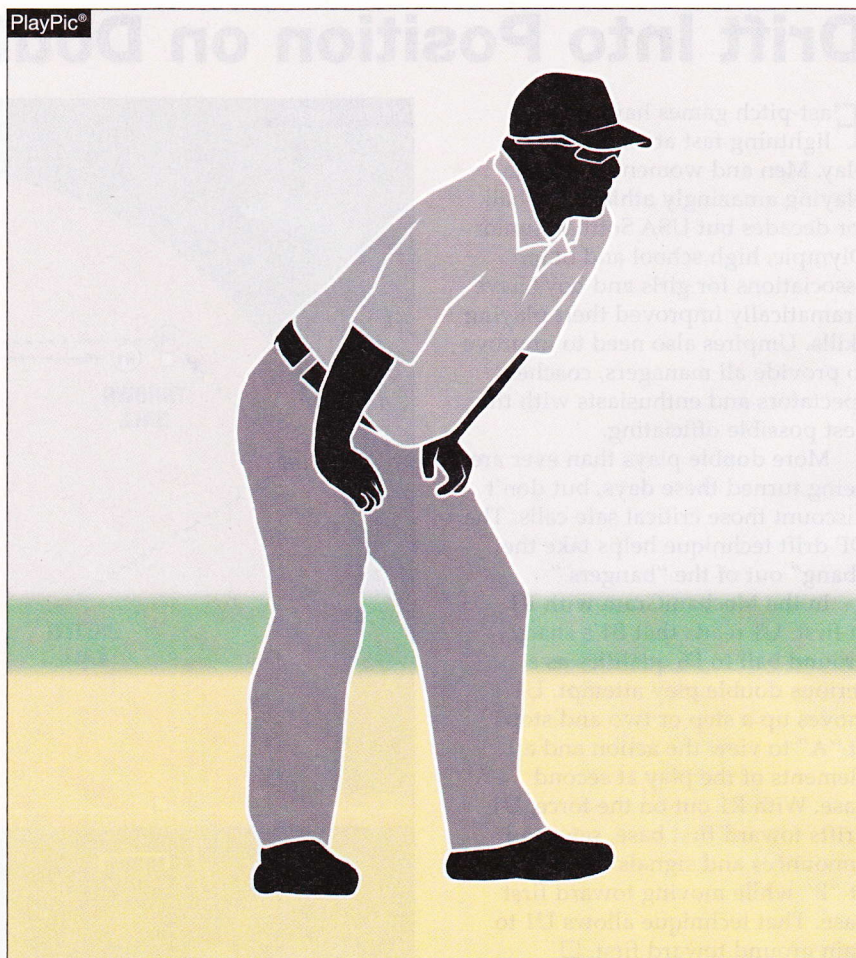
In order to avoid those situations, the base umpire must get to his or her position while watching the defensive player field and throw the ball. If the throw is on target, the base umpire should stop and get set with his or her hands on the upper thighs near the belt. Focus on the base and listen

for the ball in the glove or thud of the base by the batter-runner.

If the throw is not routine, the umpire should adjust for the swipe tag. Being set for a swipe tag is a challenge to accomplish, but knowing the tag is coming makes it easier to be in position.

On plays other than those at first base, umpires sometimes work to get closer to a play when they would be better off to be stopped and focused rather than moving. That is especially true for force plays in the two-umpire system.

It is imperative to read the potential play in advance and work hard to be in the best position. However, being set will lead to getting the call right more times than not. □



# THERE'S A CATCH

The definition of a catch is straightforward in all codes of softball. The fielder must demonstrate that she is holding the ball long enough to prove control or "securely gains possession," as the NFHS and NCAA rulebooks state.

**1** The first baseman has yet to gain control of the ball, which may give the batter-runner just enough time to be ruled safe. The covering umpire must be patient and wait till the fielder has securely gained possession before making a ruling.

**2** The fielder can only gain possession of the ball with her glove/mitt or hand. If, for example, the ball rolled up the fielder's arm or was prevented from dropping to the ground by some part of the fielder's body, equipment or clothing, the catch is not completed.

## OTHER NO CATCH RULES:

- ▶ Immediately following a catch, the fielder collides with another player, umpire or fence or falls to the ground and fails to maintain possession of the ball.
- ▶ The ball strikes anything, like a fence, or anyone other than a defensive player while it is in flight. It is ruled a ground ball.
- ▶ The fielder catches a batted or thrown ball with anything other than the hand(s) or glove/mitt in its proper place.
- ▶ An entire foot is touching dead-ball territory at the time of the catch.



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