

The Evolution Of Playing Rules

By Joel Balberman

Baseball is a sport with a lengthy history and tradition. Much of the game has been a constant defined by the confrontation showdown between the pitcher and the batter. The rules of the game of baseball, like most other sports, have evolved and changed, although surprisingly, very little at the core of the game is very different today than it was 100 years ago. Playing rules have been tried, discarded, re-written, dropped, developed and revised as the need arose. It might be fair to say that the rulebook is a work in progress, a never finished publication, subject to change as the need arises.

In order to have a solid understanding of the game of baseball/softball, all those involved with it need to have a working knowledge of the playing rules. To gain this, we all need to know a little about the history of the game, as the rulebook is really a reflection of the cumulative history of the game, as it has been changed and revised in response to real situations.

Sometimes rules were created or changed to prevent unfair tactics or cheating, or to provide uniformity in the playing conditions from park to park. Unusual plays and situations may have arisen where a ruling or a precedent had to be established. Wise managers and players may have found loopholes in the rules and found a way to get around them or have them interpreted in a way that was not intended by the rules makers.

First, let's take a walk down memory lane, as we look back at some of the quaint and unusual rules that used to exist as we study the way things used to be:

- Before 1869, the foul lines were made by digging a furrow with a plow.
- Before 1900, home plate was round, then evolved into a 12-inch square, finally becoming the five-sided shape we have today. It is 17 inches wide because the diagonals of a 12-inch square are 17 inches. The 12-inch sides are that length because they have to be cut off so that all the plate is in fair territory.
- An early rule had the batter being out if the ball was caught either on the fly or on one bounce.
- A runner between bases could be put out by throwing the ball and hitting him with it.
- Originally, a strike meant a swing and a miss, (the batter struck at the ball) and three misses meant an out.
- In the 1860's, if a bunt struck fair then rolled foul, it was ruled a fair ball because the ball originally landed in fair territory.
- Batters were not required to swing at a delivery they didn't think they could hit. There was no such thing as a called strike. In fact, the batter could indicate to the pitcher whether he wanted a high ball or a low ball and the pitchers were supposed to comply.
- The practice of umpires raising the right hand to indicate a strike came about due to a deaf big league player in the early 1900's named Dummy Hoy, who had no way of knowing what the count was.
- Up until 1880, nine balls constituted a walk; the number declined to four by 1889.
- Batters used to be able to foul off a pitch deliberately and it would not be counted as a strike. This was changed in 1894.
- In the 1870's, umpires were allowed to confer with spectators to seek assistance in making a ruling.
- Up until 1950, umpires in the major leagues had the authority to levy fines.
- Full swing fouls, unless caught on the fly, simply didn't count.
- The pitcher was required to deliver the ball by tossing it underhand.
- Prior to 1950, the home team had the option of batting first or last.
- The strike zone used to be defined as being from the knees to the shoulders of the batter.
- The bases didn't start out as being bags, but wooden stakes. They were replaced by less pointed objects due to the number of injuries they caused.
- Pitchers used to have to pitch from within the pitcher's box, the dimensions of which were adjusted several times.
- Numbers on uniforms did not become mandatory until the 1930's.
- The rulebook was recodified and reorganized into the ten chapters that exist today in 1949, rather than the random order that existed before that date.
- Gloves and other equipment used to be left lying on the field while a team was at bat.
- Since 1920, a ball that hits an umpire has been considered to be in play.

Gradually, rules makers had to define the terms used in the game, so that clear understanding could be maintained as to what each term was intended to mean. The result of this process is the definitions section of the rules that clearly defines what is meant by terms such as a catch, foul tip, foul ball, and many others. In addition, the dimensions of the game had to be clearly expressed, so that uniformity could be reached. The diagrams found in the rulebook prescribe the dimensions of almost everything found on the diamond.

Before baseball as we know it today could even be possible, several basic concepts had to gradually evolve. These concepts changed the entire face of the game through their implementation, and now form central core of the game. These included such principles as:

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The tag play - The force out or force play - The baseline as it applies to avoidance of as tag - Obstruction or the right to travel the bases unimpeded - Tagging up on fly balls - Third out, all out - Fair ball and foul ball - The strike zone - Legal pitching delivery - Infield fly rule - Batting order and batting out of order rule - Whether or not runs score - Live ball, dead ball

The modern rulebook contains other rules that go way beyond the basics to delineate proper procedures for handling a variety of complex situations. These include such things as:

Option plays - Time plays - Appeal plays - Rundowns - Awarding of bases - Interference and obstruction

It is not good enough to just know the rules; we need to have an understanding not only of what the rules are, but why they exist. This is particularly where the historical aspect of the rulebook comes into play. Situations that arose and plays that happened in the past spawned many of the rules we have today. Some of these situations need rules simply for common sense reasons, particularly to ensure fair play, and so infractions are penalized in order to negate any possible benefits that may arise from those actions. The answers to most of the following questions are almost self-evident:

Why is runner interference illegal?

Why do we need a batting out of order rule?

Why is only a certain pitching delivery legal?

Why do we need an obstruction rule?

Why is it illegal for a batter to interfere with the catcher?

There is even a rule covering anything that is not specifically covered in the rules, just in case.

Why do we have an infield fly rule? Simply put, it is to prevent the defense from intentionally allowing a ball to drop and protecting the runners from being caught in a probable double (or even triple) play. Similarly, the intentionally dropped fly ball rule, which covers pop flies and line drives, prevents the defense from gaining an advantage, and awards an out on a ball that was not "caught". It is, however, smart ball, if the fielder allows a batted or bunted ball to fall untouched, then attempts to turn the double play in non-infield fly situations such as a bunt.

The practice of substitutions having to be announced and only being allowed while the ball is dead came about as a result of a play at the turn of the century in which a player came off the bench to catch a foul pop-up and announcing his own substitution to the umpire as the ball was in the air. At one time before the advent of public address systems, announcements of substitutions were made by way of cupped hands or megaphone either by the umpires or club officials.

We all know that the rules demand that a base runner wait until a ball is touched by a fielder before the runner can legally leave his base to advance on a fly ball or a line drive. Why is the word "touched" used rather than the word "caught"? The rule was changed many years ago, as smart fielders used to deliberately juggle the ball, never securely holding it for a catch until they had run the ball back into the infield. A runner could never score from third on a sacrifice fly. Indeed, the rule, as it was written then, totally eliminated the sacrifice fly.

The intentionally dropped fly ball rule used to have the ball remaining alive and it pertained to any fielder. This rule was changed in 1975, to a dead ball situation, and it was made to apply only to infielders, although it almost got sent out with the words "any fielder", which would have taken the sacrifice fly right out of the game because an outfielder could drop the ball, get an out, and no runners could advance. An alert student at a winter umpires' school spotted the erroneous logic and it was changed in time for publication.

Why is it illegal to run the bases in reverse order in order to confuse the defense? This rule arose because a player named Germany Schaefer stole first from second in an attempt to draw a throw and allow a his teammate from third to score. It didn't work, so he then stole second.

When you watch, play in or umpire a game of baseball or softball today, be conscious of the fact that the game would not be what it is today if it were not for its past. The baseball's present and its past are inseparable intertwined through the playing codes found in the rulebook.