



## Baseball Points of Emphasis – 2024

The NFHS Baseball Rules Committee and the NFHS Board of Directors believes there are areas of the game of interscholastic baseball that need to be addressed and given special attention. These areas of concern are often cyclical – some areas need more attention than others, and that is why they might appear in the rules book for consecutive editions. These concerns are identified as “Points of Emphasis.” For the 2024 high school baseball season, attention is being called to: Malicious Contact, Profanity (Direct or Indirect) and Pace of Play. When a topic is included in the Points of Emphasis, these topics are important enough to reinforce throughout the academic year because additional attention is warranted.

### **Malicious Contact**

While not a new topic, malicious contact registers as the third most discussed Point of Emphasis (POE) behind good sporting behavior and pitching restrictions. Malicious contact was a POE in 2006-2008 and also in 2014. The frequency of emphasis is not surprising. It is a topic that begs for a complete and understandable definition, but is unable to find one that captures every possible scenario. The majority of intentional collisions occur at home plate when the catcher is attempting to make a play on a base runner. Conventional wisdom from past NFHS Baseball Rules Committees would say that malicious contact can be initiated (and penalized) by either the offensive or defensive player(s), and that incidental contact is expected in baseball. An example is the infrequent but dramatic “train wreck” play, where the thrown ball, the fielder and the runner meet at the same time. It is always a violent convergence, but not intentional, nor is anyone trying to hurt the other. It is just a normal baseball play.

Contact or a collision is considered to be malicious if (1) the contact is the result of intentional excessive force, and/or (2) there is intent to injure. The absence of these two conditions does not preclude the presence of malicious contact but would provide a reasonable starting point for proper interpretation. Rules guidance can be found in Rules 2, 3, 5, 8, Dead Ball Table and Base Running Awards Table. The NFHS rules code is education-based not only for the coaches and players, but for the umpires as well. Umpires should have the flexibility to judge witnessed contact as malicious or not. Their judgment should not be removed by rule but enhanced by education, video review, umpire board/chapter training, game experience and field locations/mechanics.

### **Profanity (Direct or Indirect)**

Education-based athletics is a direct extension of the classroom. When the educational component is removed, then everything changes, and it becomes a completely different game, devoid of accountability and structure. A student who blurts out a profanity either toward someone or simply out of frustration in school would be disciplined by the classroom teacher or the building principal. There is no excuse for foul language in school or on the baseball field. Regardless of what is portrayed at other levels, this is not acceptable and should be addressed by the umpire(s). The rule support for this behavior is clear, the penalties are: (1) a verbal warning to the offender, (2) issuance of a written warning to the offender which warrants being restricted to the bench/dugout for the remainder of the game, or (3) eject the offender for a major offense. The Bench and Field Conduct Section (NFHS Rule 3-3-1f1-4) provides several sub-articles addressing profanity and harmful behaviors. High school sports and other activities exist to lift people up, positively challenge them and their abilities, not to demean or tear people down. The goal is to treat everyone fairly and treat each other with respect. Any language that is profane, intimidating, insulting, demeaning or hurtful will not be tolerated. Coaches, school administrators and parent groups should work together to ensure that the game creates a positive environment for all involved. Profanity spoken loud enough to be heard is profanity that needs to be dealt with immediately.

### **Pace of Play**

High school athletics is education-based for an age group that ranges from 14 to 18 years of age. Baseball is an extension of the classroom. Unlike other sports, baseball is not “clock” driven. The average time of a high school varsity baseball game is around 2 hours and 9 minutes. At other levels of the sport, time is more crucial and has been the focus of those rules-writing organizations. At the advanced levels, some longtime existing plays and practices have been eliminated to shorten the

game and in-part enhance the fan experience. High school baseball does not have these same issues and does not share the same challenges of production costs, satellite time, throngs of network media or maximizing the entertainment value or offerings for the fans. These goals are very simplistic. The NFHS encourages students to participate in high school activities, learn from play and be better citizens from playing. While high school baseball does not have overall game-time restrictions, the NFHS is cognizant that extended games are part of baseball. Baseball games can be more efficient with a focus on time and time management. Pace of play involves several factors, and the NFHS believes that giving special attention to these five areas will assist with the flow and pace of our game.

### **20-second Time Limit Between Pitches/Plays (6-2-2c)**

This rule has been in our rule book since the late 1970s as a tool to use when the pitcher is prolonging the delivery of the pitch because of gamesmanship or overall lack of game efficiency. Past rule committees did not intend to negatively impact a game that is being played at a reasonable pace and rhythm. The rule was meant to be utilized when preventative officiating fails to provide the necessary outcome. When talking to the pitcher regarding the length of delay between each pitch, or speaking with the catcher to “nudge” the other half of the battery to pitch in a more timely manner, or mentioning to the coach at the half-inning that the game is being affected by the pitcher’s delay does not change the pitcher’s behavior, then this is a problem and would result in the penalty being applied.

### **Time Between Half-Innings (6-2-2 EXCEPTION)**

There are a lot of moving pieces in between half-innings. By rule, the time from the last out to the next pitch is 1 minute and 20 seconds. The role of the umpire is to facilitate the defense getting into place, the pitcher warming up and start the inning. There is no place for visiting with the fans or having an extended discussion with the other umpire(s).

### **Batter Repeatedly Stepping Out of the Batter’s Box (7-3-1)**

The NFHS Rules Book is clear when the batter is allowed to step out of the batter’s box and when they cannot. It is understandable and part of the game for the batter to step out of the batter’s box to get the signal from the third base coach on how to approach the next pitch because it is very situational. The batter needs to be encouraged to get back in the batter’s box with a sense of expediency. However, repeatedly stepping out to alter the rhythm of the pitcher or delay the game is not acceptable and the penalty needs to be applied by the umpire.

## **Umpire's Time Management**

Time management is crucial to how the game progresses. If the umpire is not consistent in motivating both teams to get off and on the field, expedite conferences, encourage the batter from excessively stepping out of the batter's box, this will add unnecessary delay to the contest. The umpire cannot control the skill level of the players of both teams; however, there are other areas that the umpire can positively impact the pace and speed of the game. The players' abilities will affect the speed of the game, but the other areas that the umpire has direct control over should be monitored and utilized in creating a sense of urgency during the contests.

## **Excessive Player Conferences**

A player conference is very different than a charged conference. The NFHS supports teammates encouraging each other and developing that camaraderie. That is part of the lesson one learns from playing a team sport. However, when team bonding becomes excessive and it begins to delay the game, then the umpire needs to step in and expedite the conclusion of the meeting.