

21 Myths About Baseball Rules

Think you know the game? FCKLL Chief Umpire Mike Wetmore put together these 21 myths about baseball rules that fool many an experienced coach



1. You can't slide into first base.

I don't know the origin of this one, but I've heard it my whole life. It may be a twist on the old coach's advice that you shouldn't slide into first base because it's faster to run through the base. There are very few occasions where it is advantageous for the runner to slide. An obvious one is when the first baseman is pulled off the bag and tries to swipe tag the runner. However, there is no rule against sliding into first base. (You can even OVERSLIDE first base without being out....)

2. A foul ball caught by the catcher has to go over the batter's head for it to be an out.

A ball that is fouled by a batter and caught by the catcher can fall into one of two categories... a foul tip, or a caught foul ball. The definition of a foul tip is, "...a batted ball that goes sharp and direct from the bat to the catcher's hands and is legally caught." The operative words are "sharp and direct", indicating pretty much a straight line. If there is any looping of the ball as it travels to the catcher, then it is a foul ball regardless of whether the ball went over the batter's head or not. Of course, a caught foul ball is an out.

3. If there's a play at home, the runner must slide

I actually saw this one called at a Minor League Championship game a few years back. The player crossed home plate standing up as the throw from the outfield went over the catcher's head and into the backstop. The runner was called out for not sliding. The actual rule that covers sliding on a play is 7.08(a)(3), which states, "Any runner is out when the runner does not slide or attempt to get around a fielder who has the ball and is waiting to make the tag." Clearly, a runner does not have to slide...he can instead attempt to get around the fielder, and this is only required if the fielder is waiting with the ball.

4. A batter is out if he throws his bat

Rules 6.05, 6.06, and 6.07 list all of the ways a batter can be called out, and throwing the bat is not one of them. The umpire may remove the batter from the game if it becomes a safety issue, but the batter should be warned first. If the batter is removed from the game because the bat was thrown after the batter reached base safely, a replacement runner will take the batter's place on base.

5. A batter in the batter's box cannot be called out for interference

Nowhere in the rules does it say that the batter's box is a safehaven for a batter. The batter is subject to the same rules of interference whether in the batter's box or not. Rule 6.06c does say, "A batter is out for illegal actions when interfering 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 at home base." So, stepping out of the box can lead to interference, but that doesn't mean that remaining in the box protects the batter from interference. Of course, the umpire can't expect the batter to magically "disappear" when a bang-bang play happens at home plate. However, the batter must make no movements that would interfere with a play or he risks being called out.

6. Once the pitcher steps on the pitcher's plate (the "rubber") with the ball, runners can no longer advance

Rule 7.13 says, "When a pitcher is in contact with the pitcher's plate and in possession of the ball and the catcher is in the catcher's box ready to receive delivery of the ball, base runners shall not leave their bases until the ball has been delivered and has reached the batter." So, when both the pitcher and the catcher are in a position to immediately deliver a pitch, runners cannot leave their bases. This rule is written to ensure runners are on base when the ball is pitched. It does not give the pitcher the ability to stop runners from advancing during a play by rushing to the pitcher's plate with the ball.

7. If a batter turns to bunt and leaves the bat out over the plate during the pitch, it's a strike

This is only true if the ball actually passes through the strike zone, but then it would be a called strike. For it to otherwise be a strike, the batter would have to actually attempt to strike the ball. There is no requirement to pull the bat back. Instead, the umpire must determine that the batter attempted to strike the ball with the bat. If no obvious attempt was made, and the ball is not in the strike zone, it's a ball.

8. If the bat goes through the strike zone during a pitch, it's a strike

Usually true, but not always. Again, for it to be judged a strike, the umpire must determine that the batter attempted to strike the ball with the bat. If a batter is twisting to his left to avoid an inside pitch (admittedly not the smartest move, but I've seen it done), and the motion of this causes the bat to incidentally go through the strike zone, it is not a strike.

9. A batter is out if he's caught using an illegal bat

As in number 4 above, this case is also not one of the ways a batter can be called out. The rule that covers bats is 1.10, and the action for discovering an illegal bat is simply, "An illegal bat must be removed." However, if the umpire was doing his job correctly and inspected the players' equipment prior to the game, he would have discovered this bat and had it removed prior to the game. Then, if the batter is caught using it (or sneaks it in after the umpire's inspection), both the batter AND the bat can be removed. However, the batter cannot be called out.

10. A fly ball has to be in the infield for it to be called an infield fly

A similar myth is that an infield fly has to be caught by an infielder. Neither of these conditions are in the definition of an infield fly. Instead, the definition says, "An infield fly is a fair fly ball (not including a line drive nor an attempted bunt) which can be caught by an infielder with ordinary effort." So, a high pop-up into the short outfield could also be called an infield fly, even if the outfielder actually catches the ball. The determining factor is if the umpire believes that an infielder could get under the ball and catch it without extraordinary effort.

11. Runners can't advance on an infield fly

The only difference between an infield fly and any other fly ball is that the batter is automatically out and, thus, no runners are forced to advance on the play. Runners can still try to advance, but they do so with the same risks as any other fly ball.

12. A ball fielded near the foul line is considered "fair" or "foul" depending on the position of the fielder's feet

Unlike basketball or football, the position of a player's feet with respect to the foul line has absolutely no impact on whether the ball is called fair or foul. The determining factor is the position of the ball when it is first touched. If the ball is over fair territory when first touched by a fielder, it's a fair ball. If the ball is over foul territory when first touched by a fielder, it's a foul ball. One other big difference between baseball and many other sports... the foul line is considered in fair territory (it should actually be called the "fair line!")

13. If a fly ball hits the foul pole as it leaves the field, it's a foul ball

Just like the explanation immediately above, the foul pole lies along the foul line and, thus, is in fair territory. It, too, should actually be called the "fair pole" rather than the "foul pole." If a fly ball strikes it, it's a fair ball.

14. A ground ball is foul if it hits foul territory on its first bounce past the base

I think the reason for this myth is because a FLY BALL that first hits foul territory past the base is, indeed, a foul ball. However, the determination of fair or foul on a ground ball is the position of the ball as it passes by the bag. If the umpire determines it was over fair territory as it passes 1st or 3rd base, then it's a fair ball no matter where it hits past the bag. If not, then it's a foul ball. And remember.. the bases themselves are in fair territory.

15. A runner is out if he leaves the baseline

When we examine this myth, we must first decide what the "baseline" is. Many people envision a straight line between the bases as the baseline. If this were true, all players from Little League to the Majors would be out every time they legged out an extra base hit, because they all widen out their turns at the bases and leave the "baseline." The rule that covers this situation is 7.08(a)(1), and it doesn't even use the term "baseline." It says, "Any runner is out when running more than three feet away from a direct line between bases to avoid being tagged, unless such action is to avoid interference with a fielder fielding a batted ball;" The direct line is considered to be a line between where the player currently is and the base the runner is trying to obtain. In order to be out, the player must go more than 3 feet out of this direct line while trying to avoid a tag, and only if the runner wasn't originally outside of the direct line because he was trying to avoid interfering with a player catching a batted ball. I saw this one in a Pre-Minor Championship

game a few year ago. Bases were loaded, two outs. The batter hit a grounder to the shortstop who was playing where most pre-minor shortstops play (right in between 2nd and 3rd base.) The baserunner leaving 2nd base ran around the shortstop to avoid interfering with him as he fielded the ground ball. Even though the shortstop couldn't tag the runner because the runner was more than 3 feet out of the direct line, the "unless.." clause of the rule protected the runner.

16. A batter who bats out-of-turn is automatically out

This one is covered by rule 6.07. An out is not always the result of an out-of-turn batter, and the batter who batted out-of-turn is never the one called out. It sounds confusing, so let me explain... First, if a batter is discovered to be out-of-turn while he is at bat, the correct batter is placed at bat and he resumes whatever count the out-of-turn batter had. There is no further penalty. If the out-of-turn batter completes his time at bat (either reaches base or is put out), and it is discovered that he was out-of-turn BEFORE THE NEXT PITCH, then the batter who should have been at bat is called out and the batter following him is up to bat. If it is not discovered BEFORE THE NEXT PITCH, then the current (out-of-turn) batting order becomes the legal batting order and there is no penalty.

17. The umpire is part of the field and cannot cause interference Not completely true.

According to the definition of interference, "Umpires interference occurs (1) when an umpire hinders, impedes or prevents a catcher's throw attempting to prevent a stolen base, or (2) when a fair ball touches an umpire on fair territory before passing an infielder." Now, if properly positioned, a Little League umpire (Majors and below) should NEVER have (2) occur to him because he should always be positioned outside of the infielders before each pitch. However, (1) is a distinct possibility. If it occurs, the ball is dead and all advancing runners must return to their previous bases.

18. A batter-runner must "turn out" (toward foul territory) when overrunning first base or he can be tagged out

I think this myth grew from coaches instructing younger players on their baserunning. In actuality, rule 7.08(j) says the batter-runner is out when "failing to return at once to first base after overrunning or oversliding the base. If attempting to run to second the runner is out when tagged." So, the batter-runner can turn in (towards fair territory) after over running first base as long as he returns to first base at once and he doesn't make an attempt to run to second base. A caveat to this is that once the umpire believes a batter-runner has made an attempt to go to second base, no matter how slight, the batter-runner is in jeopardy of being tagged out. The attempt could be as subtle as a flinching of the shoulders toward second base.

19. The batter's hands are part of the bat

I don't know how it got started, but I've never seen anything in the rule book that remotely supports this one. The batter's hands are part of the batter (check any human anatomy book.) If a pitch hits the batter's hands, the ball is immediately dead. If the batter was swinging at the pitch, or if the pitch was over the strike zone when it hit the batter's hands, it's a strike. Otherwise, it's a "hit by pitch" and the batter takes his base.

20. A batter is out if she/he steps on home plate

Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. The key point is that home plate actually has nothing to do with whether the batter is out or not. Rule 6.06(a) says "A batter is out for illegal actions when hitting the ball with one or both feet on the ground entirely outside the batter's box." I haven't run into a Little Leaguer with size 14 shoes yet, but I'm sure they exist (recently, a team in the Little League World Series had a 6'5" player.) For players with big feet, it's possible to be touching the plate with your toe and still have your heel touching the inside line of the batter's box. In this case, the player is not "out." Also note that the batter has to actually hit a ball while his foot is entirely outside the box. It doesn't have to be a fair ball, though.

21. A runner hit by a batted ball is not out if he's touching a base

Rule 7.09(f) says, "A runner is out when touched by a fair ball in fair territory before the ball has touched or passed an infielder." There is no protection for being on a base. There IS, however, an exception: "If a runner is touching a base when touched by an Infield Fly, the runner is not out..." This exception only applies during an Infield Fly, not to every pop-up in the infield.