

Infield Fly Rule: Protect the Offense

EDITOR'S NOTE: Donna McGuire is the SSUSA's Central Region Umpire-in-Chief and Chair of the National Rules Committee.

The bases are loaded with no outs when the batter lofts a pop fly that soars 30 feet high. It will descend about 10 steps behind second base.

The umpire starts to call "infield fly" but hesitates because no infielders are moving to catch the ball.

Should that matter?

Players, managers and sometimes even umpires disagree on the answer.

Unfortunately, "infield fly" arguments pop up often. That's because the rule is one of the least understood in softball.

Yet, if you know the rule's guiding philosophy, as well as its many nuances, you can make the call fairly easily.

For starters, visualize how **NOT** having an infield fly rule affected baseball long ago. Picture, for example, bases loaded with no outs. The batter hits a pop fly that easily can be caught near the fair side of third base.

The runners hesitate. If they stay put, the third baseman will let the ball drop, snatch it off the ground, tag the runner at third, tag third base and throw to sec-

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ond for a triple play.

If the runners take off, the fielder will catch the ball and touch third. He might get a triple play by throwing to another bag.

Major League Baseball's rule-makers implemented the infield fly rule in 1895 to protect the offense from such situations.

Remember that phrase: protect the offense. It is the guiding principle behind the rule, which saves the offense from guessing how the defense will handle a pop fly with fewer than two outs, and with runners on first and second, or first, second and third bases.

Some players think the rule exists to give the defense an easy out. Not so. A fielder must be able to catch the ball – and catch it with "ordinary effort."

As such, wind conditions, sun conditions and defenders' abilities **MUST** be taken into account.

Consider two pop flies. One happens in our 50+ division, and a fielder moves quickly enough that he can camp under the ball as it descends. An identical pop fly happens in the 80+ division, but the closest fielder can't get there quickly enough to get camped.

He either will catch the ball on the run or not at all.

Two identical pop flies. The first absolutely is an infield fly. The second absolutely is not.

Well-trained umpires hesitate on calling "infield fly" when they must gauge a catch's difficulty, such as when a shortstop backpedals on a ball that might tip off his or her glove. The ball could fall. All runners might advance safely. In that case, no infield fly should be called.

Remember these nuances, too:

- The ball can descend in the outfield and still be an infield fly, if a defender can get camped under it and create that "guessing game" situation for the offense.
- If an untouched ball rolls foul, it becomes a foul ball, which cancels the infield fly. On fly balls near the foul lines, the umpire should call, "Infield fly, if fair."
- When an umpire calls "Infield fly" on a fair ball, the batter is out and the ball remains live. Runners can advance at their own risk. If the ball is caught, the runners need to tag up. If it's not caught, no tag is necessary. Force plays go away because the batter is out. So runners must be tagged out – something even Major-Leaguers sometimes forget.

Now, back to the situation at the top of this article. Neither middle-infielder moves to catch a tall fly ball that will land behind second base with the bases loaded.

Therefore, neither defender can catch the ball with "ordinary effort."

This is **NOT** an infield fly.

If needed, the SSUSA umpire still can protect the offense by calling an intentional drop. The batter would be out, the play dead and the runners would return to their original bases. However, that call is not needed if after the defense picks up the ball, it can record no outs or just one.

Remember, the infield fly doesn't take away potential base hits. And it doesn't protect the defense from bonehead plays.

It protects the offense from guesswork.

Now, you make the call.

Heard in the Dugout

"The way some people drive you'd think they were late for their accident." - Eddie Cantor



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