

Make the Call: Interference and Double Play

Runner on first, no outs. Batter hits a grounder to the second baseman, who throws to the shortstop covering. The shortstop tags the base and cocks his arm to throw to first.

A lot can happen next. But for the purpose of this article, consider these four situations and decide what call the umpire should make:

A) A thrown ball hits the runner while he is three steps from second base and in the base line.

B) A thrown ball hits the runner while he is only three steps from first base, in the base line.

C) The second baseman appeals to the umpire that he couldn't throw because the runner, halfway between bases, was in his way.

D) The runner veers right and ducks. The shortstop keeps running and collides with the runner about three steps to the right-field side of the base but never throws the ball.

Do you rule interference and a double play in each case? In some of them? Or in none of them?

Gather a group of players and umpires for this discussion, and it will last a long time while likely never reaching a consensus.

For guidance, first realize that Senior Softball USA defines interference as "the act of an offensive player or team member that impedes or confuses a defensive player attempting to execute a play. A base runner must avoid a fielder making a play." (Rule 1.45.)

The rule leaves to the umpire's judgment what constitutes "impedes or confuses." As such, two umpires can view the same play and draw different conclusions.

A runner may not wave his arms, scream at the fielder, or step in front of a thrown ball to block it. Those calls are easy ones for umpires. But many others are not.

We drafted our rules many years ago based on ASA rules (now USA Softball). Though our rules have been rewritten many times since then, the interference

Umpire's Corner

By Donna McGuire

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rule has remained constant. Today, it differs only slightly from USA Softball, which defines interference as "the act of an offensive player or team member, umpire or spectator that impedes, hinders or confuses a defensive player attempting to execute a play. Contact is not necessary."

Be careful what you read into the rule.

Just a few months ago, USA Softball posted on its "rules clarifications" page three plays involving runners hit by thrown balls. USA stressed the need to see each play unfold before determining whether interference happened.

"Just because a runner is hit with a thrown ball while the defense is turning a double play does not constitute interference," USA Softball wrote. "You must always ... consider, did the retired runner do something to impede, hinder or confuse the defense from making a play. You cannot take a play and say what interference is always and what is not."

In example A above, the author of USA's posting wrote: "I do not find any impedance, hindering or confusion in the description of this play."

And in B above, the author wrote, "Based on description of the play, the runner stayed in the base line to impede the throw and we have interference. Again have to see the play to say for sure."

Now, on to situations C and D above.

In C, the runner is not anywhere close to second base. But the fielder didn't throw the ball. Most SSUSA umpires will not call interference because the runner might have yielded had the ball been thrown. (And no, managers shouldn't tell their players to throw at the runner to get the interference call. We don't condone hurting someone on purpose.)

In D, we have a defender trying to draw interference on the runner, who has yielded. This is not interference. This is a defender creating contact trying to get a cheap out. No umpire should fall for that one.

Overall, when the question of interference arises, remember that judgment from umpire to umpire can vary. So don't be surprised to see nearly identical plays called different ways in different games – and have both calls defended as correct. They well could be.

When interference is ruled, the ball is dead. Runners who are between bases must return to the last one touched.

In some other associations, including USA Softball, when a retired runner causes the interference, the runner closest to home is out for the second out.

When the situations described above happen in SSUSA play, the umpire should call the batter-runner out for a double play.

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

Heard in the Dugout

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