

Oregon School Activities Association

Baseball SRI Bulletin – #2

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(Thanks to Darin Rutledge of the Klamath Falls Umpires Association for writing this bulletin.)

A More “Timely” Experience

Quite a bit of effort has recently been spent speeding up the game of baseball at all levels. While it is still a popular spectator sport, guardians of the game have recognized that there is an opportunity to improve the experience of players, umpires, and fans through improving the pace of play.

In considering the “speed” of the game, it is important for officials to recognize that their role **should not** be to shave every possible minute off of the game’s total time; after all, is there really much of a difference between a game that lasts one hour and fifty minutes and a game that lasts one hour and forty-two minutes? However, it should absolutely be a goal of the game officials to maintain a good flow to the game and to minimize unnecessary downtime.

The best way to speed up the game is to effectively employ provisions that already exist in the rules: one minute for warm-up pitches, 20 seconds between pitches, and keeping batters in the box. While the language of those rules is very specific, the best umpires manage them without actually counting seconds ... and without having to actually invoke penalties.

Warm-ups

For mid-inning replacements, help the coach to make their change quickly by meeting them at the mound and focusing his attention on the line-up card. Never rush the coach along, but do not allow them to dally.

Between innings, remember that the pitcher only has one minute to complete his warm-up tosses. Keep in mind that there is no penalty for not completing the pitches in one minute. Having said that, use positive language to reinforce a sense of urgency in getting the warm-ups completed.

Pitch Delivery

Most pitchers will want to establish a flow just as much as you. Batters, however, still like to linger. In doing so, the hitters provide the single biggest threat to your efforts to efficiently manage the game. Do not allow the batters to arbitrarily leave the box. Do not grant time to the batter without good reason. Do not allow the batter to justify refastening his gloves every other pitch simply by keeping a toe in the box. If the pitcher is ready to deliver and constantly has to wait for the batter, do not be afraid to encourage the batter to move it along. “Here we go batter” or “We’re all waiting on you #21” are some good phrases to use.

Unnecessary Down Time

The biggest culprit here is when “time” is called. Certainly, there are times when it is necessary by rule, but it’s the other times when we can move the game along without unnecessarily taking the ball out of play. We addressed “time” from the batter above, but be prepared to manage the following situations.

- When a ball comes in from the outfield, don’t let players dictate the pace of the game. They will want the base umpire to grant “time,” and you should be judicious in granting it. Know when there is a legitimate reason for taking the ball out of play and when they simply want to stop the action so they can walk the ball safely in to the pitcher.
- Use natural down time to brush off the plate without taking the ball out of play. For example, when a player hits a stand up double, and you have no other runner responsibilities, you may be able to brush the plate without having to call time.
- If we use solid mechanics, there is rarely a need to take the ball out of play after a rotation. Doing so slows down the game and indicates a lack of trust between crewmates. At the end of a play following a rotation, there should be a clear “handoff” of runner responsibilities. Once that handoff has occurred, the umpire(s) who rotated can safely move back to their position without taking the ball out of play.
- Conferences. Be aware of the reasons coaches use defensive conferences: to give a reliever more time to warm up, to slow down the game, break momentum, and sometimes even to encourage a plate umpire visit to the mound so they can “chat.” There are no time limits on offensive or defensive conferences, but a good guideline is one minute. If the conference is continuing past what is reasonable, umpires should encourage the team to wrap it up. Use discretion in your words and body language in breaking up conferences. You want to maintain control of the game’s pace without appearing like a bully. Depending on game situation, the bar for “reasonable amount of time” will be different.

Many games drag on simply because teams or individuals are not hustling. Do not let this dictate the pace of the game. Everyone who has been around baseball would agree that a game with a good flow and a consistent cadence is a better game for all involved. Remember that, as an umpire, you have plenty of tools in your bag to establish and maintain that flow without artificially impacting the game.

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