



NFHS 2014 Baseball Points of Emphasis

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 2014 high school baseball season, attention is being called to: malicious contact, coaching attire, and umpire authority and enforcement. When a topic is included in the Points of Emphasis, these topics are important enough to reinforce throughout the academic year because they are not being given the proper attention.

MALICIOUS CONTACT

While this is not a new topic, there have been significant inquiries as to the interpretation of malicious contact. In fact, over the years, various NFHS rules committees have attempted to define what malicious contact looks like. After numerous attempts, the committees in the past took a current functional rule and turned it into a page and a half definition that still did not capture every possible scenario. Therein lies the problem. For every word or phrase used to describe malicious contact, you have to define that word or phrase as well.

There is a difference between malicious contact and incidental contact. Players risk serious injury anytime a runner purposely tries to run over another player. There is rules support in Rules 2, 3, 5, 8, in the Dead Ball Table and the Base Running Awards Table that substantiates the importance of malicious contact. Fortunately, umpires have the flexibility to determine when they witness contact whether it is of a malicious nature. That judgment should not be removed by rule, but it should be bolstered by education, game experience and field mechanics/location.

The majority of intentional collisions occur at home plate where the catcher is blocking the plate anticipating a play. Runners should be instructed to slide or attempt to avoid making contact with any defensive player. Malicious contact is penalized whether committed by an offensive or defensive player. So that focus can be given to the parameters surrounding malicious contact, the following suggestions are offered: contact or a collision is considered to be malicious if (1) the contact is the result of intentional excessive force, (2) the contact occurred above the waist of the receiving player, and/or (3) there was intent to injure. It should not be misconstrued that the absence of these three conditions would automatically remove the presence of something malicious, but these suggestions certainly provide a starting point for consideration.

That is why it is imperative that umpires should work hard in understanding the NFHS rules book and the various situations that might occur dealing with contact. Head coaches must also be knowledgeable in the rules and proper techniques of how to teach and instruct their athletes in the nuances of the game to ensure a safe and educational experience for everyone.



COACHING ATTIRE

Baseball is a tradition-rich sport. One of those traditions involves the coach's uniform being identical to the player's. The coach is part of the team unit. Baseball is one of the few sports where the coach is on the field and has an active role with the players during a live ball. The coach's attire supports the uniformity and camaraderie of the team. In addition to being an advocate, being dressed like the team offers visual security. One can readily identify those who do not belong because they are not dressed the same as the rest of the team. In today's world where every school and program is under tremendous scrutiny as to how they spend resources for their students, schools have opted out of not requiring a coach to wear a uniform like the players and use that money to provide a uniform for an additional player. Schools are allowing their coaches to dress similarly to their players by wearing a team baseball cap, wind shirt, jersey or jacket of the school colors with grey baseball pants or athletic coaching slacks.

Officials have to be more discerning and open-minded when it comes to the attire of the coaching staff. In today's budget-conscious society, the age-old tradition of dressing everyone alike is slowly giving way to a new tradition. Identification of the head coach is the primary focus and function of wearing similar attire; umpires have to be flexible in their approach and interaction with these educators.

UMPIRE AUTHORITY and ENFORCEMENT

The game official has a multifaceted role that is unenviable and often misunderstood. The official is a teacher, an encourager to players and coaches, an arbiter of rules, which will ultimately disappoint one of the two teams involved. Officials make sure that the game conditions are suitable for both teams to perform to the best of their ability. They ensure that the players are properly uniformed and equipped according to the NFHS playing rules, and that coaches understand and acknowledge the local ground rules and ultimately manage a contest that maintains a balance between offense and defense while minimizing risk.

In order to conduct their business, they need many willing and cooperative partners. The head coach of each team is responsible for the behavior and conduct of his players and to a certain extent the behavior and conduct of the team's fans. The coach is the leader and role model for each school's team. If he is belligerent and uncooperative, typically his players will follow his lead, which makes for a challenging ballgame. However, if he works with the umpires in a collaborative effort and grasps his role as a positive influence, his players will benefit greatly by playing for him and all involved will have a better experience.

Umpires are given the authority to make decisions based on the rules. Anything or anyone who interferes with that duty has no place at the ballpark. Without rules there would be total chaos, and without game officials, there would be no games played. As part of that authority, game officials have to enforce the rules of the game. At times, players, coaches and fans will not agree with the ruling of an umpire and have the right to not agree. However, their disagreement with a decision should not affect their ability to accept the decision of the umpire. Disputing the umpire's calls, failing to comply with an umpire's command, exaggerating the time for offensive conferences, gamesmanship, and challenging the umpire's authority (to name a few instances) cannot be tolerated in education-based athletics.

The positive effect of activity/athletic participation is well documented as a positive experience and is a determining factor for future successes in life. If inappropriate behavior is allowed to become the norm, we are doing a disservice to the young people we serve.