

Pickoffs...

On occasion, pitchers attempts to pick-off a runner at first are greeted with the cry of balk." Repeated throws draw a chorus of boos. If the throw is in accordance with rules, a pitcher can attempt a pick-off at any base as often as he wants. It's also possible for him to throw to an unoccupied base.

"Balks" were part of the original baseball rules. If the pitch was not delivered underhanded, it was a balk. That later became a "foul balk" and other acts which were violations of the pitching rule were balks." The foul balk disappeared by 1884. The current pro balk rules were written in 1950 and are used by almost in their entirety by the NCAA. The NFHS rule on balks is significantly different, but is related to the pre-1950 pro rule. Except where noted, the material applies equally to NFHS, NCAA and pro rules.

First base. The vast majority of pick-off attempts are to first base, simply because of the predominance of runners there. Despite possible fan frustration with pick-offs, especially those by the opponents, MLB data from 2002-09 indicates the stolen base percentage of a runner decreases from 75 to 64 if at least one throw is made over to first by the pitcher. Repeated throws do not significantly make a difference, perhaps because the runner gets to see the pitcher's pick-off move and can therefore get a bigger lead.

Under NCAA and pro rules, a pitcher may attempt a pick-off at first from either the windup or set position. A pick-off from the windup position is a balk in NFHS. The pitcher is required to step directly to first. The step must be in advance of the throw. A "step" requires the heel of the free foot to get at least as close to first base as the toe was when he started. The pitcher is prohibited from prematurely flexing his leg before stepping. He is not expected to step with a stiff leg, but if the flex is deceiving the runner, it is a balk.

Directly" means that his foot comes down more towards first than home. In NFHS it runs from the center of the rubber to a point halfway between home and first, where the three foot lane begins. NCAA states it as a 45-degree angle measured from the pivot foot toward first base. A good rule of thumb for right-handed pitchers is for the plate umpire to watch the free foot. If he can see the sole of the shoe, it is a balk. It indicates the pitcher rocked back as if to pitch and did not step directly to first (NFHS 6-2-4b, 6.2.4B; NCAA 9-1a6, 9-3c; pro 8.01c).

A jump turn is ... legal. A jump turn is where the pitcher alights with both feet simultaneously and gains ground toward first with his non-pivot foot. On the surface, this move may appear illegal because the pitcher disengages the rubber

forward, but it is an accepted practice (NFHS 6-1-3, 6.1.31; NCAA 9-3c5; proMLBUM 7.5ag).

Disengaging Rubber. A pitcher may attempt a pick-off as an infielder by stepping off the rubber. To do this legally, he must move his pivot foot first and it must touch the ground behind the rubber before the hands are separated. Many pitchers move their hands and foot simultaneously. That move should be ruled/ legal/ unless the pitcher breaks his hands and then moves the foot as an afterthought (NFHS 6.2.4D; NCAA 9-1a1c, 9-1b; pro 8.01e).

The jump turn and the "31" move are exceptions to disengaging the rubber by stepping forward. Additionally, the pitcher cannot disengage the rubber by first moving the free foot. Such movement is considered the start of either a pitch or pick-off attempt. When the pitcher's free foot moves forward, the runner is entitled to view it as the start of a pitch. Pro rules further require the pitcher to drop his hands to his side after disengaging, but as long as he does that before reengaging, there is no violation (NFHS 6-1-2, 6-1-3; NCAA 9-1a1c, 9-1b; pro 8.01a).

Feints. Under no circumstances can a pitcher feint to first without first stepping off the rubber. He may feint to any other occupied base. He may also feint or throw to an unoccupied base for the purpose of making a play i.e., a runner who has advanced prematurely (NFHS 6-2-4a, NCAA 9-3a, pro 8.05b).

Shoulder Turn. Although the restrictions on the pitcher begin when he intentionally engages the rubber, any shoulder movement by a pitcher before he comes to a stop is not an infraction unless it is abrupt. Subtle movement due to breathing, fidgeting, etc. should be ignored. Any shoulder movement after the stop, constitutes a feint if it is not followed immediately by a throw. The purpose of the rule is to keep the pitcher from bouncing the runner back and forth merely by twitching his shoulder.

Back Edge of Rubber. Once the pitcher swings his entire free foot past the plane of the back edge of rubber, he is committed to pitch and cannot pick to any base other than second. His foot must pass the back edge of the rubber for him to step toward that base. The base umpire should use the sole of the shoe as a guide. If he can see the sole of the free foot as the pitcher kicks back, the pitcher has probably put his entire foot past the back edge of the rubber. Under NCAA rules, the above restriction also applies if any part of the stride leg (knee) breaks the plane (NFHS 6-2-4F; NCAA 9-1 b3, 9-3L; pro 8.05a Cmt).

"31" Move Another popular pick is the "31" move. With runners on the corners, the pitcher bluffs a throw to third and then either throws or feints to first. The move must begin with a step towards third. If he then only bluffs to first, his foot must be off the rubber. What the 31 play allows, which is not ordinarily permissible, is disengaging the rubber by stepping forward. If the pitcher

follows through and throws to first, he may keep his foot on the rubber in high school play, provided he stepped towards first. In NCAA and pro, he must have disengaged the rubber.

Fielder off base. If a pitcher throws to a fielder who is not on the base, it is legal under NFHS rules if the fielder is in "proximity" of the base and it is allowed under NCAA rules if the fielder "moves toward the base in an attempt to retire the runner." Under Pro rules, the fielder must be at the base which includes immediately in front of it (NFHS 6.2.4J, NCAA 9-3c1 AR, pro MLBUM 7.5a).