

Conferences

This week we are going to review the various *Conferences* that take place before, during, and after a game. Specifically, our parking lot *Pre-Game Umpire Partner Conference*, the *Pre-Game Ground Rules Coaches Conference*, the in-game *Defensive Conference*, the in-game *Offensive Conference*, and our *Post-Game Umpire Partner Conference*.

Our Parking Lot Pre-Game Umpire Partner Conference

As the Home Plate Umpire, it's hard to have a meaningful pre-game preparation conference if your partner doesn't show up at least 30 minutes before game time. This 30 minutes gives you both time to dress and talk before you need to start walking to the field 15 minutes before game time.

There's no guarantee your game will go well even if you have a good pre-game discussion, but one sure-fire guarantee is that if you don't have a meaningful pre-game discussion you increase the probability of having a poor game. It is especially important to have a thorough pre-game discussion if you are working with a partner for the first time, or if you haven't worked with your partner for a few years. In addition, this year being our first year using the NFHS Rules, you should remind each other of some of the more frequent situations that have a higher probability of happening which have different rulings between NFHS and MLB rules.

Follow our **"Teaching Standards"** for what needs to be discussed in our pre-game. Our **Standard** Items that must be covered in every pre-game meeting with your partner are as follows.

- The Plate Umpire is responsible for running our pre-game meeting
- Review our signals
- Discuss coverage for Foul/Fair, catch/no catch
- Discuss coverage of Tag Ups, appeals, and coverage of resulting plays at each relative base. Especially discuss responsibilities when runners are on first and second with less than two outs.
- Discuss coverage of third base when there is either a runner on first, or runners on first and third, for a base hit or error ball on a ball that travels into the outfield. Our Standard is that the Plate umpire will cover third.
- Discuss who will cover third base when there is either a runner on first, or runners on first and third for a ball that stays in the infield, such as a slow roller infield base hit, error, or bunt. Our Standard is that the Plate umpire will not cover third on an infield hit, but rather watch for the potential swipe play, or pulled foot at first base. The Base Umpire will be responsible for all calls at all the bases.
- Discuss how you will verbally communicate certain live in-play situations, such as, the Base umpire going out for fly balls, coverage of third base with a runner on first, or first and

third when the Plate Umpire must make a Fair/Foul, catch/no catch call down the right field line.

Head to the field 15 minutes before game time.

The Pre-Game Ground Rules Coaches Conference

Start your conference five minutes before game time.

The Plate Umpire should stand behind the plate facing the field, with your mask tucked under your left arm, not on the ground, or hanging on the fence. The Base Umpire in a 2-Man crew should stand facing the plate umpire on the infield side of home plate. Coaches, and captains, if any, should be on their respective sides of the plate

MLB/OBR pro rules dictate taking the home team's lineup first. Under MLB rules the umpires' jurisdiction starts when you receive the home team's lineup (MLB 4.03e). Under NFHS rules, the umpires' jurisdiction starts when you arrive within the confines of the field (NFHS 10-1-2). The NFHS doesn't specify whose lineup you should receive first, but it is a good practice to take the home team lineup first.

In NFHS games, once the umpires have jurisdiction, they cannot call the game for unsuitable playing conditions until the game actually begins. Therefore, by NFHS rule, the plate umpire must get all players in position to start the game and call "Play", before he can suspend the game (NFHS 4-1-1, 4-1-5).

When reviewing each lineup card, verify there are nine starters listed, or ten players listed when a ten-player DH is used. If only nine are listed, and it's an NFHS game, then look if one of the starters is listed as a position Player/DH. For a position Player/DH verbally state to the coach to verify the number of the player and his position. For a ten-player DH verbally state to the coach the number and name of the DH, and verify who the tenth player (defensive starter) is who the DH is batting for. The NFHS does not require that all substitutes be listed on the lineup card, but some summer leagues do require. So, if substitutes must be listed, verify to the coach the number of subs he has listed. For example, "coach, you have a DH, # 12, batting for your pitcher, # 4, and you have four subs listed." If the league you are working has a pitch count rule, which the NFHS does, then ask the coach if any of his players are not eligible to pitch today. Mark your lineup card accordingly if a player is ineligible to pitch.

If a team has more than one coach attend the Ground Rules, ask "who is the head coach".

For an NFHS game, ask each coach to verify that all his players are properly equipped, and all his bats and helmets are legal. When he says "yes", make a mark of some type on your lineup card. I plan to mark a "V" next to the team's name on the top of the card. That way, I know I asked, and the coach might see that I recorded it, enforcing that we are serious about his verification.

Now it's time to turn over the ground rules to the home team coach to give. The home team coach should start by reviewing the back stop area and proceeding outward to the dugout on one side of the field and then proceeding outward to the outfield on that side explaining the out of play boundaries. The coach should then do the same for the other side of the

field. The umpires should only interject if something isn't clear, or if the home team appears to be changing a playing rule, or if something appears to be unsafe. Don't allow anything that you consider might be unsafe, and don't allow anything that goes against the rules by which the game is being played, i.e. NFHS/MIAA, MLB, JLS, Babe Ruth, etc.

If the visiting coach disagrees with a ground rule, the plate umpire will make the final determination.

NOTES:

1. If something regarding the playing field happens during the game, that wasn't covered in the *Ground Rules Conference*, the home plate umpire should consult with his partner, and then make a ruling. The home plate umpire, as umpire-in-chief, has authority to rule. (NFHS 10-2-2, 10-2-3g; MLB 8.01c)
2. The following items should Not take place in the *Coaches Ground Rules Conference*.
 - Do NOT get into a rules discussion, unless asked a specific question that can be answered quickly.
 - Do Not bring up certain past circumstances, or issues, nor should you let the coach bring one up.
 - Do Not explain how you plan to adjudge certain situations, for example, the Force Play Slide Rule, or the Collision Rule.

Make sure you get paid, or have already signed your paperwork to be paid, before the ground rules conference has ended.

For MIAA/NFHS games, if you haven't already seen & met the Site Administrator, ask the Home Team Coach who the Site Administrator is. If he doesn't know, or says there isn't one present, then inform the coach that he is now considered to have both duties as Coach and Site Administrator; and mark your lineup card that he has been informed.

The Home Plate umpire must make sure you have an adequate number of baseballs to start the game. Typically, that will be five baseballs – three that the home team has given you, and one from each pitcher, which he used to warmup. Most leagues require that the balls be marked with their approved stamp. This year, 2020, for NFHS games Massachusetts has been given a one-year waiver for having the SEI/NOCSAE/NFHS stamp of approval.

After the Ground Rules Before the Start of Play

When the base umpire is going to his "A" position he should use a brisk jog, not a walk. Watch the infielders warmup and watch how the first baseman receives the throws. Use the time to get mentally ready. Watch the fielder field the ball, watch his release of his throw, turn your focus to have your eyes ahead of the ball towards the first baseman to hear the sound of the ball hitting his glove and shifting your sight to his foot and first base when the sound is heard. Get mentally ready for the game.

The home plate umpire should watch the pitcher warmup. You might consider getting setup behind the catcher and watching a couple pitches from each side of the plate. Introduce yourself to the catcher. Remind him that in between innings he needs to make his throw to second base after the fifth warmup pitch, unless he has a new pitcher taking the mound for the first time, in which case that new pitcher gets no more than eight warmup pitches.

The In-Game Offensive Conference

Per NFHS Rule, the offensive team gets one Offensive Conference per inning. A conference is considered to have taken place when a coach, or other designated person, **delays the game** by conferring with the batter, the on-deck batter, a base runner, or any other offensive team personnel (NFHS 3-4-2). When these happen, the umpire (plate or base) should call "Time", and notify the offensive coach that it is considered to be his one offensive conference for the inning.

There is no penalty for the offensive team requesting, and being mistakenly granted an extra timeout, which is why both umpires should be vigilant in keeping track of Offensive, as well as Defensive, conferences; and should deny any subsequent offensive team requests for the inning.

An offensive charged conference is concluded when the coach initially starts to return to the coach's box or dugout/bench area.

The pro rules (MLB/OBR) do not cover Offensive conferences. Therefore, they should be permitted as long as they are not being called excessively to delay the game.

The In-Game Defensive Conference

Per NFHS Rule, the defensive coach can have three charged conferences per game, before he must remove the pitcher (NFHS 3-4-1). He can take all three charged conferences in the same inning, or even take them during the same batter. On the fourth charged defensive conference, and on each subsequent conference during the regulation (7 inning) game, he must remove the pitcher. In an extra inning game, each team shall be permitted one charged defensive conference per inning with no penalty, with no carry-overs (not cumulative). (NFHS 3-4-1-Penalty)

If the pitcher is removed during a defensive conference, that conference is Not considered a charged conference. For example, the defensive coach has called two charged conferences, and on the third conference he removes the pitcher. That third conference is not considered to be a charged conference, which means, he still has one charged conference (his 3rd) remaining before he must remove the new pitcher on his fourth charged conference.

A Defensive charged conference is concluded when the coach crosses the foul line if the conference was in fair territory. If the conference was in foul territory, the conference concludes when the coach initially starts to return to the dugout/bench area (NFHS 3-4-3).

Per pro rules (MLB/OBR): There is no limit of how many conference/trips the defensive coach can make in a game. However, a second conference/trip to the same pitcher in the same inning, requires that the pitcher be removed. A second conference/trip to the same pitcher while the same batter is at-bat is prohibited.

How To End a Defensive Conference

The Plate Umpire has primary responsibility for the administration of conferences. For timing, you can brush off the plate, which might take about 10 seconds. Then stand up just inside the plate, face the mound, and silently count to 15. Then, start to walk to the mound, which should give you about 30 seconds total once you get to the mound. Walk with a purpose to the mound. Go to a position at the base of the mound opposite of the coach, visibly facing the coach so he can see you. This could mean you might have to walk to the back side of the mound to be visible in the coach's sight. Give the coach a short chance to finish his thought and instruction to the pitcher. Your presence alone signals the end of the conference, and in most cases you won't have to say anything. However, if he lingers ask him "Coach, are you making a pitching change?" If he says "No" then tell him something like "ok, let's get back to playing now". When no change is made, do not leave the mound without the coach and the catcher. You don't head back until they both start to head back. Once you head back move briskly with the catcher and either beat him back to the plate or get there at the same time.

The Base Umpire, if in the "B" or "C" position will move to a position very near the second base bag while the coach is having his conference on the mound. If a pitching change is made, you have primary responsibility for counting the warmup pitches because the Plate Umpire is recording the lineup changes. When the Plate Umpire has finished his recordings flash him the number of warmup pitches that have been taken, or flash him the number of warmup pitches remaining. With 2 warmup pitches remaining notify the fielders and the base runners to return to their positions.

Additional NOTES regarding NFHS - Both Offensive and Defensive Conferences:

- 1) When either team has a charged conference, the other team may also have a conference, which is not charged, provided the conference concludes when the opposing team's charged conference concludes (NFHS 3-4-5).
- 2) There is no specified time limit for either an offensive, or defensive conference. The NFHS Rule says ... "the coach shall be given a reasonable amount of time for the charged conference as determined by the umpire-in-chief." A good Rule Of Thumb is limiting the conference to 30 seconds.
- 3) Once the conference has ended, the coach cannot return to the mound, or consult with defensive players without a second conference being charged.
- 4) If a coach who has been restricted to the bench is involved in a charged conference, that conference concludes when the players involved initially start to return to their positions on the field.

The Post-Game Umpire Partner Conference

As first, second, and third year umpires, you would be wise to initiate a post-game review with your partner while you are getting undressed in the parking lot. To get some insight I suggest you read the accompanying PDF file article titled "*Let's Talk About It*".