

To Play? Or, Not To Play?

This week we are going to review the various *Conditions* that can affect play, such as, darkness, weather, and field/bases.

Too Dark? Too Wet?

When to stop a game because of darkness or weather can be among the toughest, most contentious calls to make. With weather and darkness, it will never be an exact science. But, what follows are a few guidelines that might help you. The main issue is player safety.

First, remember that your jurisdiction as to whether or not to start a game doesn't take place until you receive the home team's lineup card during the *Pre-Game Coaches Ground Rules Conference*. Beforehand, the home team coach or home field administrator decides.

One team may pressure you to start or keep a game going, while the other team may pressure you to stop because they are concerned about won-loss record, pitcher availability, or concerned about make-up dates, etc. You can't be concerned about their pressure, especially in today's world, when everyone is at risk of being sued if a game continues longer than someone thinks it should have and someone gets hurt.

If, on game day, you think the weather may be a factor, do some pre-game planning before you arrive to the game site. Go online and check the projected hourly forecast. What are the chances of rain? Is it supposed to be light, or a cloudburst? If storms are predicted, when? What do you or your partner know about the ability of the field to hold or drain water? In sum, don't just waltz in unprepared; think of what-ifs beforehand.

If the question is whether to start in a drizzle, one suggestion is to get the two coaches together during the ground rules and try to talk them into a delay. But it is the home team's call, and sometimes we can't delay because of available lighting or the visitor's travel issues, and the like. If the home team coach insists he wants to start, then inform him that you expect him to have at least ten baseballs available and ready, and at least two towels available. In a steady drizzle, the norm of five baseballs and one towel will probably only be good for about three innings at best. Steady, light drizzle is a nightmare. Again, some pre-game homework may help. Is drying agent available? Is someone there to spread it during the game? Are rakes on hand?

Once we start, we have to play on unless the rain gets much heavier, or it gets so that players start slipping; or, all the baseballs get "water-logged", or get too slippery for the pitcher to adequately grip. Of course, the decision then is in our hands. A downpour might settle the matter, but there will be games where, when the rain stops, there will be pressure to resume although parts of the field have puddles. Again, get the coaches together to try to get a mutual agreement as to whether to resume, but always keep player safety as the overriding issue when making your decision.

First focus on the condition of the mound and batter's boxes, the infield base paths, and then the rest of the infield, and finally the outfield.

Thunder and lightning are another concern. If you hear thunder and see a lightning strike, no matter how far off you might think it is, Get the Players Off the Field! You can't restart for thirty minutes after a lightning strike; and for every lightning strike you see, restart your thirty minute timing. At some point during the delay you may have to decide if the playing field is beyond recovery, or if you will have enough daylight to resume and get in the required innings for an official game.

Darkness

We can more easily plan for darkness than bad weather. If you will be working on a field with no lights, confirm the sunset time for that day. During the game factor in clouds, hills, trees, and anything else that might obscure the sun sooner than usual. Your main concern is whether the batter can adequately see the ball out of the pitcher's hand quick enough to react to the inside fastball. Another big concern is if the pitcher can adequately follow the ball off the bat quick enough to see the hard line drive coming at him. Can the outfielders follow the ball off the bat to adequately read the fly balls?

It typically gets dark about 15 minutes before sunset, and the closer to sunset the riskier it becomes, and earlier if it's cloudy. So, if you know that sunset is at 7:25 pm, you can work backward to determine whether to start an inning. Don't start an inning unless you can expect to finish the entire inning; and Not just the visitor's half-inning, but the entire full inning, regardless of whether the home team is ahead at the end of the inning you just finished. Why? Let's take an example. Assume you know sunset is at 7:25 pm and that the fourth inning just ended at 6:55 pm with the home team ahead by five runs. You decide to play on because there's pressure from the home team to get in the next half inning to make the game official. You decide why not, you figure you'll probably only need to get three more outs and there will be daylight enough for another half inning. But the visitors score six runs in the top of the 5th to take the lead and now they are pressuring you to get the bottom half of the 5th inning played, but there is very questionable light remaining and the darkness now makes it risky to continue. Neither team is going to be satisfied that you played that top of the 5th inning and if you play the bottom half you are putting the players at risk, not to mention that you put you and your partner at risk of a law suit if someone gets hurt. What should have gone through your mind at the bottom of the 4th inning was *'it's 6:55 and we only have about 15 minutes to safely complete the next full inning. It took an average of 20 minutes per inning to complete four innings. We can't reasonably expect to finish, so why start?'*

My point is to look ahead, have a discussion with your partner and together do some reasonable planning, keeping in mind: 1) Never risk safety, 2) never assume things will go as expected, and 3) consider the what-ifs that may come into play if you continue. Not only do visiting teams unexpectedly score, but games that have been whipping along may slow to a snail's pace at any time.

To carry the planning theme further, it would have been a good idea before the start of that 4th inning to have told both head coaches that barring the unexpected six-pitch inning, this 4th inning will most likely be the last. If you tell them ahead of time there should be less grumbling when you do pull the plug.

Unusual Field or Base Conditions

The best place to deal with unusual field conditions is in the ground rules. Here are some issues that happen too often.

Crooked or non-existent foul lines can be a problem. The best way to deal with either is to visualize a straight line; and to make clear before the game that fair or foul is determined by rule and not by how the chalk is laid out.

Loose or Crooked bases: The rule book only addresses loose bases. If the impact of a runner causes a base to be dislodged, no play can be made on that runner at that base if he had first reached the base safely. Any following runner on the same play is considered to be touching or occupying the base if, in the umpire's judgement, he is touching the place originally where the base had been.

Crooked bases that don't have a side parallel to the foul line ... If a line drive or ground ball hits a corner of the base that is clearly in foul territory technically it is a foul ball. Don't cut hairs as to whether the corner is in foul territory, but if it clearly is and you call it foul when the ball hits that corner, expect the coach to have an argument.