

Umpire Bill Miller, Aptos, Calif., observes St. Louis Cardinals catcher Yadier Molina get hit on the head by the follow-through swing of Boston Red Sox designated hitter David Ortiz in the fifth inning during Game 1 of the MLB World Series at Fenway Park in 2013. Since it did not hinder action at home plate, it was not follow-through interference.

## IN THE SWING OF THINGS

### Follow-through Interference in Three Codes

By George Demetriou

The topic of follow-through interference came into the spotlight during 2017 MLB postseason play. Before we get into that, it's important to note that much to the dismay of the golfing world, MLB does not use the term "follow-through interference." Instead, it is referred to as "backswing" interference.

The *backswing* is a preparatory movement that involves just what it says — movement of the bat backward. The batter does that

just before he prepares to swing. The *follow through* is the continuing movement of the bat after the ball is struck or missed — the completion of the swinging motion. The distinction between those terms (both are used in NFHS and NCAA rules) is significant as the two acts are treated very differently. Except where noted, the material applies equally to NFHS, NCAA and pro rules.

The batter is entitled to swing at any pitch without being hindered by the catcher, but once he does, he is responsible for not interfering with any attempt by the catcher to make

a defensive play. If the bat contacts the catcher's glove, hand, head or any other part of his body, and either hinders action at home plate or the catcher's attempt to play on a runner, it is follow-through interference. Plays at home plate include the obvious: attempting to field a batted ball in front of the plate, attempting to tag out or throw out a batter or runner, e.g., stolen base or pickoff, or another similar action that the catcher performs in the plate area. Thus, the follow-through is the batter's responsibility without exception. So unless the catcher jumps up and

moves into the swing, if the bat hits the catcher on the follow through, it's the batter's fault.

If no play is in progress when the contact occurs, there cannot be interference. The pitch is called a strike, the ball is dead and no runner shall advance on the play. Batter interference is a delayed dead ball, but because there is no play, the ball becomes dead immediately (NFHS 2-21-4, 5-1-2a; NCAA 6-2d1; pro 6.03a3 Cmt., MiLB 7.14).

If there are two strikes on the batter and the follow through causes an uncaught third strike, the ball is dead, the batter is out and no runners can advance (NFHS 7.3.5F; NCAA 6-2d1; pro 6.03a3 Cmt., MiLB 7.14).

If the follow-through contact occurs while the catcher is in the act of making a throw to retire a runner, or a runner is able to advance on the play, the codes differ. In NFHS, the batter is out and the runner returns. In NCAA and pro, time is called at the end of playing action, the batter is only out on a third strike and runners return unless the catcher's initial throw retires the runner (NFHS 7-3-5c; NCAA 6-2d1, 6-2d2; pro 6.03a3 Cmt., MiLB 7.14).

**Play:** With a runner on first and a 1-0 count, B1 swings and misses the pitch. His follow through on the swing comes around and hits the ball out of F2's glove immediately after he securely catches the pitch. R1 then goes safely into second base. **Ruling:** In NFHS, B1 is out and R1 returns to first base. Under NCAA and pro rules, a strike is called on B1 and R1 returns to first base.

We can now address the MLB play mentioned earlier. In the top of the fifth inning of Game 5 of the Cubs-Nationals 2017 NLDS played Oct. 13, Cubs batter Javier Baez swung and missed at an 0-2 slider from Nats pitcher Max Scherzer, inadvertently striking catcher Matt Wieters' mask during his backswing. Replays indicate that prior to Baez's bat making contact with the catcher's mask, the pitched ball snuck underneath Wieters' mitt and rolled to the backstop for a passed ball. The sequence was kept live. The passed ball allowed runners to advance, and

Chicago scored a crucial run when Wieters subsequently threw the ball away during his ill-fated attempt to throw out Baez. The Cubs went on to win the game, 9-8, and the series, three games to two.

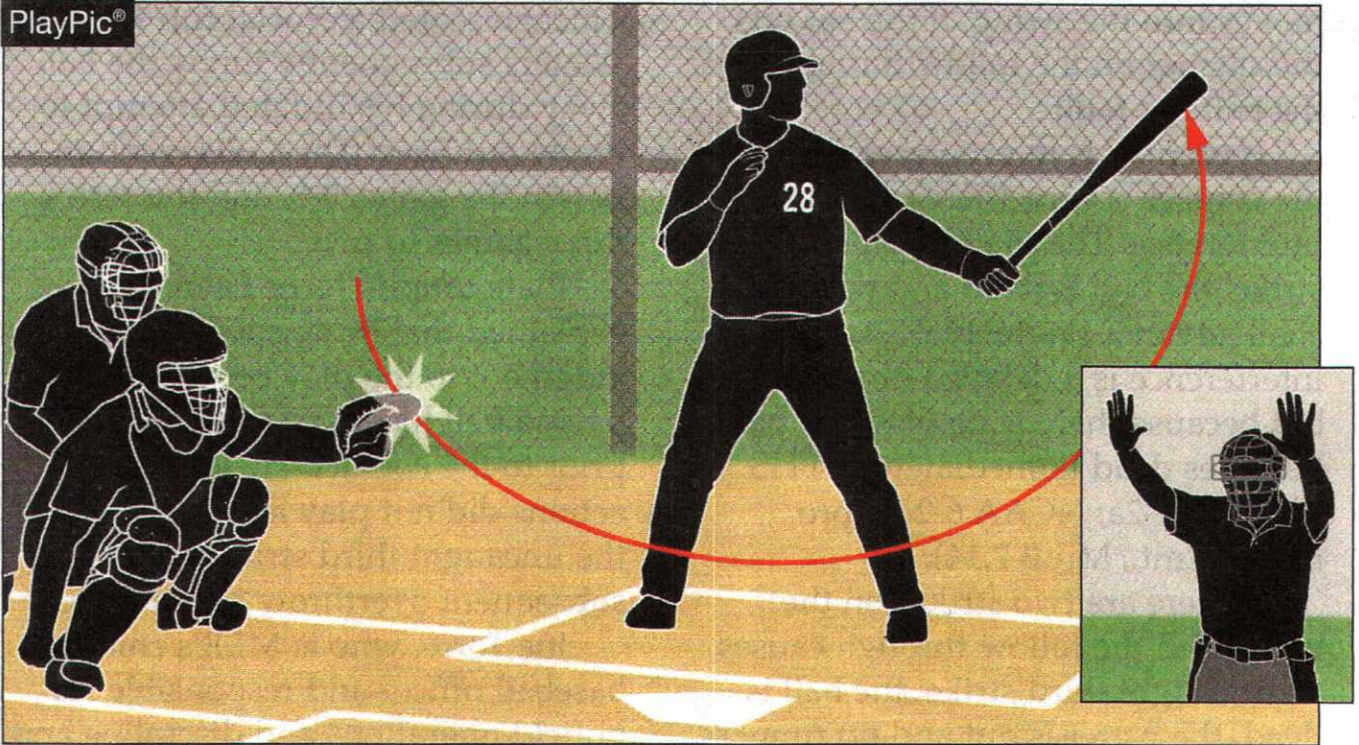
Plate umpire Jerry Layne explained that he applied his judgment to the play because the passed ball had already occurred prior to the contact. He felt Baez's actions did not play a role in the uncaught third strike or the subsequent overthrow at first base.

Joe Torre, who is MLB's chief baseball officer and responsible for onfield operations and discipline and umpiring, said the rule supersedes umpire judgment on that type of play. Torre emphasized the rule states when the bat contacts the catcher's mask, it's a dead ball and that should have taken precedence. The only exception for that is found in the MLB Umpire Manual, which states that if the catcher's initial throw directly retires the runner despite the infraction, the unintentional follow-through contact is ignored and the out stands.

In the NLDS game, there was no "initial throw" and no outs were recorded. Torre added Nats Manager Dusty Baker could have asked for a rules check if he felt Layne's call was wrong: "If you don't like what the umpire's telling you, ask him for a rules check. And they can do that. They can go to the replay center on the headset and check a rule."

So now the remaining question is: What would the correct ruling be if the NLDS play were to occur in an amateur game? Under NFHS rules, contacting the catcher with the bat does not automatically constitute interference; there has to be a hindering of the action. In the play at hand, one could argue the bat stunned the catcher and delayed his pursuit of the ball. The fact there was a play happening as opposed to no play at all is a distinction that should not be ignored. However, NFHS rules allow the umpire to make the judgment Layne made. The NCAA rule is similar to the pro rule and states if the bat hits the catcher, the ball is immediately dead.

PlayPic®



**Backswing.** As mentioned, the backswing is a different act. NFHS defines backswing interference as when a batter contacts the catcher or his equipment prior to the time of the pitch (2-21-5). If a batter, during his preliminary loosening-up swings, or when he cocks the bat to swing, hits the catcher or the catcher's mitt, the umpire should immediately call time,

and not interference (as shown in the PlayPic). The pitch or swing should not be allowed since the batter's concentration or rhythm could be affected (NFHS 5-1-1n, 8.1.1F; NCAA 8-2e AR; pro 5.05b3 Cmt. 3).  
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