

Fair or Foul: Ball Position is What Counts

Fair ball. Foul ball. Telling the difference seems easy enough. The fair and foul ball definitions in the Senior Softball USA rule book are clear and precise – and mirror ones used throughout baseball and softball.

Yet arguments still arise.

In at least four SSUSA tournament games this past season, players questioned umpire rulings on fly ball plays that happened near outfield foul lines. Each time, players pitched the same mistaken argument.

In addition, this past summer, players involved in a Kansas City 50+ senior league game argued over a foul call on a ball that never traveled far enough to pass a defender. The discussion centered on at what point the sideways spinning, bouncing ball became foul. Believe it or not, a pitcher who has played this game forever got the rule wrong but insisted he was right.

So, I ask: How well do you know the fair/foul rules?

Consider these six cases:

Situation One: An outfielder in fair territory races to catch a fly ball hit down the left-field line. As his glove touches the ball, the fielder's feet are in fair territory, but the ball is over foul territory. The ball glances off his glove and lands several feet away.

Some players contend that if the player was in fair territory when he or she touched the ball, the ball is fair.

Not hardly.

What matters is the ball's position.

As our rule book states: "A batted ball shall be judged according to the relative position of the ball and the foul line, including the foul

Umpire's Corner

By Donna McGuire

pole, and not as to whether the fielder is on fair or foul territory at the time he touches the ball."

This situation is one I mentioned earlier, the fair vs. foul argument I most often hear at tournaments. Too many players mistakenly think the fielder's in-bounds or out-of-bounds position matters, as if we were playing football instead of softball

Situation Two: A batter hits a smoking line drive that drills a runner standing on third base. Part of the runner's body is in foul territory, part in fair territory.

Some players argue that this should be a fair ball because the runner is touching the base, which is fair. But remember, what matters is the ball's position – either fair or foul -- at the time it contacts the runner. If the ball is over foul territory, the ball is foul. If the ball is over fair territory, the ball is fair.

Situation Three: A batted ball skips hard on the infield in fair territory several feet in front of third base before continuing down the line. When

it touches the ground a second time, about 15 feet behind third base, it hits six inches left of the foul line, clearly in foul territory.

Some players insist this is a foul ball, as it landed foul behind third base.

Not necessarily.

Once the ball touches fair ground in front of the base, the umpire must track the ball's flight path. The key is where the ball is the moment it reaches third base.

If it bounds over any part of the base, even a tiny corner, the ball is considered fair no matter where it lands behind the base. But if the ball curves or drifts foul before reaching the base, and stays foul as it passes the base, the ball is foul.

Situation Four: A batted ball hits the strike zone mat before rolling fair and staying there.

This one is simple. By rule, the ball is fair.

Situation Five: A batted ball hits a few feet in front of the batter and spins backward onto the strike mat. It is touching the rear corner of the mat when the catcher picks it up.

Fair ball.

Yes, it is possible that

the ball may be outside the foul lines at this point. But by SSUSA rule, the entire strike zone mat is considered fair territory.

Situation Six: This brings us back to the Kansas City senior league game.

A batter slices a ball off the end of his bat. The ball arches 10 feet into the air, hits between the pitcher and the first base line and spins hard left. Its giant sideways bounce carries it toward the first base dugout.

Before the ball touches the ground again, the pitcher grabs it and throws to first base. At the time it was caught, the ball was above foul territory but had not touched foul ground.

The pitcher argued to that umpire, and to a new umpire the next week, that such a batted ball should be considered fair until it touches foul ground.

Not hardly. We aren't playing basketball here, folks.

In softball, the ball's position is what counts.

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