

THE BALK REFERENCE

.... By Jim Booth (bio on last page)

This document will not attempt to cover everything regarding balks. It will cover the most frequently asked questions. First, a bit about the basics of the balk rule. The purpose of the rule is to limit what the pitcher is allowed to do in an attempt to pick off a runner. Basically, it is pretty simple: He cannot fake one thing and then do another. He cannot fake a pitch and then throw to a base, or fake a throw to a base and then pitch. If he starts either action, he must finish that action without hesitation or alteration. The rule specifies many specific actions, but it is a judgment of the umpire as to whether one action was started and not completed or not.

- The pitcher does **not** have to step off the rubber to throw to a base. (You don't want to throw to a base after stepping off. If the throw goes out of play it is a 2 base award. If the throw goes out of play when throw is from the rubber it is a 1 base award.)
- The pitcher may throw from the rubber to a base from the windup position. (It must be done before **any** movement that is part of the normal motion that is part of his windup.)
- The pitcher may fake a throw to second or third base from the rubber, but not to first base. This may be done from the windup or the set position. (You do **not** have to step off the rubber to fake to 2nd or 3rd. Only if you fake to 1st.)
- A jump turn is legal and considered being in contact with the rubber.
- The pitcher may place his hands in a different set location before each pitch. He must come to a set before pitching to the batter, but not before throwing to a base. He may not set twice before the pitch.
- A stretch move prior to the set is optional.
- He must disengage the rubber with his pivot foot first.
- He must step in the direction of the throw and prior to the release of the throw.
- A left handed pitcher can raise the leg (non pivot foot) and throw to first and a right handed pitcher can raise the leg (non pivot foot) and throw to third, provided there is no pause in the motion.

Once he is on the rubber he may do one of three things:

1. Throw to a base
2. Deliver a pitch
3. Disengage the rubber (pivot foot first)

In (1) and (2) above, the move must be completed without interruption or alteration, except for a fake to 2nd or 3rd.

The ball is not immediately dead if a pitch or throw is completed after the umpire yells "That's a balk."

Example play:

A runner is on second, 2-2 count. The pitcher stretches, but doesn't come to a set before delivering the pitch. The umpire yells "Balk!", but the pitch is thrown and the batter hits a grounder to shortstop. F5 looks the runner back and throws to first too late to get BR. What's the call? Where do you place the runners?

Answer: R2 is awarded third and the batter returns to the plate with the count 2-2.

In Pro rules, and Little League®, the ball is not immediately dead when a balk is called. If the pitch is thrown or a pick-off attempt is made the ball is still live. (Sometimes called delayed dead ball.) The ball becomes dead when all play has ended after the balk call or when the pitch or pick-off throw is caught.

Rule 8.05 - PENALTY: The ball is dead, and each runner shall advance one base without liability to be put out, unless the batter reaches first on a hit, an error, a base on balls, a hit batter, or otherwise, and all other runners advance at least one base, in which case the play proceeds without reference to the balk.

APPROVED RULING: In cases where a pitcher balks and throws wild, either to a base or to home plate, a runner or runners may advance beyond the base to which he is entitled at his own risk.

It took me a long time to understand the wording in this rule. What it means in simpler terms is: When the play ends, the ball is dead. When a balk is committed and a pitch is thrown, if all offensive players advance at least one base on the play; ignore the balk. If ANY runner is put out BEFORE he advances one base or does not advance during the play; put everyone back where they were before the play began and then award all runners one base. If a runner is put out after all runners have advanced one base, the out stands and the balk is ignored.

The ball becomes dead when the catcher catches the pitch. If it is a passed ball or wild pitch, the ball remains alive until all play ends. When the balk is made in a pick-off attempt, the ball is dead when the fielder catches the throw. If the throw is wild, play continues.

Example: Runner on first. The pitcher balks during his throw to first and the ball gets away from the first baseman. The runner attempts to get to third and is thrown out. The out stands. He made the one base he would have been awarded and went beyond it at his own risk. If he had been thrown out at second the out would not count and he would be awarded second because of the balk

Rule 8.05 BALKS RULE

In this section the text from the rule book will be stated and then I will provide explanations and/or examples which describe the "real" world intent of the rule. My comments start and end with *** and are in *italics*. Also, take note of the phrases that are in **bold** type.

First, a bit about the basics of the balk rule. The purpose of the rule is to limit what the pitcher is allowed to do in an attempt to pick off a runner. Basically, it is pretty simple:

He cannot fake one thing and then do another. He cannot fake a pitch and then throw to a base, or fake a throw to a base and then pitch. If he starts either action, he must finish that action without hesitation or alteration. The rule specifies many specific actions, but it is a judgment of the umpire as to whether one action was started and not completed or not.

8.00 The Pitcher.

8.01 Legal pitching delivery. There are two legal pitching positions, the Windup Position and the Set Position, and either position may be used at any time. *** *The technical differences are described below, but simply stated, the difference between the Windup and the Set is based upon the position of the non-pivot foot. If it is in contact with the rubber or behind it, the pitcher is in the Windup position. If the non-pivot foot is in front of the rubber and not in contact with it, the pitcher is in the Set position.****

Pitchers shall take signs from the catcher while standing on the rubber. *** *If the pitcher violates this you simply tell him to do it right. If he continues to violate the rule, eject him. This statement is just a re-enforcement of the no quick-pitch rule. It doesn't much matter who the pitcher gets the signs from. As long as he doesn't try to quick-pitch.****

Pitchers may disengage the rubber after taking their signs but may not step quickly onto the rubber and pitch. This may be judged a quick pitch by the umpire. When the pitcher disengages the rubber, he must drop his hands to his sides.

Pitchers will not be allowed to disengage the rubber after taking each sign. ****This is to prevent delaying the game. Just tell them to stop it****

(a) The Windup Position. The pitcher shall stand facing the batter, his entire pivot foot on, or in front of and touching and not off the end of the pitcher's plate, and the other foot free. *** ***The pivot foot is the foot that matches the hand that the pitcher pitches with. He can't stand on the rubber with just the non-pivot foot.*** ***From this position **any natural movement associated with his delivery of the ball to the batter commits him to the pitch without interruption or alteration.** ****Note this bolded phrase. It is important in later discussion of a balk.**** He shall not raise either foot from the ground, except that in his actual delivery of the ball to the batter, he may take one step backward, and one step forward with his free foot. ****The pitcher can raise his pivot foot off the ground if it is simply to clear his cleats and step into the usual hole that is in front of the rubber.****

When a pitcher holds the ball with both hands in front of his body, with his entire pivot foot on, or in front of and touching but not off the end of the pitcher's plate, and his other foot free, he will be considered in the Windup Position.

The pitcher may have one foot, not the pivot foot, off the rubber and any distance he may desire back of a line which is an extension to the back edge of the pitcher's plate, but not at either side of the pitcher's plate.

With his "free" foot the pitcher may take one step backward and one step forward, but under no circumstances, to either side, that is to either the first base or third base side of the pitcher's rubber. ****Youth league pitchers have a habit of stepping sideways rather than backwards during their windup motion. Technically, this is illegal. If the*

bases are loaded and a pitcher does this sidestep toward first or third, it is a balk. However, in real life, if this is his natural windup motion, no balk is usually called. If he winds-up like this normally, a balk should be called if he ever throws to a base from the wind-up. Otherwise, it is ignored. ***

If a pitcher holds the ball with both hands in front of his body, with his entire pivot foot on or in front of and touching but not off the end of the pitcher's plate, and his other foot free, he will be considered in a windup position.

From this position he may:

(1) deliver the ball to the batter, or

(2) step and throw to a base in an attempt to pick-off a runner, ****this is where that sidestep motion comes into play. That initial sidestep could be judged as an initial move prior to making a pickoff attempt. In both (1) and (2) the move must be done without interruption or alteration.**** or

(3) disengage the rubber (if he does he must drop his hand to his sides).

In disengaging the rubber the pitcher must step off with his pivot foot and not his free foot first. *** *Because the movement of the free foot first indicates the start of something and it was not completed.* ***

He may not go into a set or stretch position. If he does it is a balk. ****They mean switching to the set position without disengaging the rubber first because the movement to switch is the start of the windup motion.****

(b) The Set Position. Set Position shall be indicated by the pitcher when he stands facing the batter with his entire pivot foot on, or in front of, and in contact with, and not off the end of the pitcher's plate, **and his other foot in front of the pitcher's plate**, holding the ball in both hands in front of his body and coming to a complete stop. From such Set Position he may deliver the ball to the batter, throw to a base or step backward off the pitcher's plate with his pivot foot. **Before assuming Set Position, the pitcher may elect to make any natural preliminary motion such as that known as "the stretch." But if he so elects, he shall come to Set Position before delivering the ball to the batter.** After assuming Set Position, **any natural motion associated with his delivery of the ball to the batter commits him to the pitch without alteration or interruption.**

Preparatory to coming to a set position, the pitcher shall have one hand on his side; from this position he shall go to his set position as defined in Rule 8.01 (b) without interruption and in one continuous motion. ****The pitcher may throw to a base prior to coming to the Set position.****

The whole width of the foot in contact with the rubber must be on the rubber. A pitcher cannot pitch from off the end of the rubber with just the side of his foot touching the rubber. ****Umpires normally do not enforce this until the opposing team complains.****

The pitcher, following his stretch, must (a) hold the ball in both hands in front of his body and (b) come to a complete stop. This must be enforced. Umpires should watch this closely. Pitchers are constantly attempting to "beat the rule" in their efforts to hold runners on bases and in cases where the pitcher fails to make a complete "stop" called for in the rules, the umpire should immediately call a "Balk."

(c) At any time during the pitcher's preliminary movements and **until his natural pitching motion commits him to the pitch**, he may throw to **any** base provided he **steps directly toward such base before making the throw.** ****This is where judgment and clarification is necessary. The judgment of stepping toward the base means the non-pivot foot must be lifted off the ground and the entire foot must return to the ground in a place other than its original position and in a spot that is in the direction of the throw and must land prior to the release of the throw. This is sometimes called "distance and direction"* ***

The pitcher shall step "ahead of the throw." A snap throw followed by the step directly toward the base is a balk. ****Remember "distance and direction."****

(d) If the pitcher makes an illegal pitch with the bases unoccupied, it shall be called a ball unless the batter reaches first base on a hit, an error, a base on balls, a hit batter or otherwise. ****An illegal pitch is a quick pitch or a pitch made while not in contact with the rubber. Defacing the ball or a spit ball is illegal but not an illegal pitch by this definition.****

A ball which slips out of a pitcher's hand and crosses the foul line shall be called a ball; otherwise it will be called no pitch. This would be a balk with men on base.

(e) If the pitcher removes his pivot foot from contact with the pitcher's plate by stepping backward with that foot, he thereby becomes an infielder and if he makes a wild throw from that position, it shall be considered the same as a wild throw by any other infielder.

The pitcher, while off the rubber, may throw to any base. If he makes a wild throw, such throw is the throw of an infielder and what follows is governed by the rules covering a ball thrown by a fielder.

8.02 The pitcher shall not

(a) (1) Bring his pitching hand in contact with his mouth or lips while in the 18 foot circle surrounding the pitching rubber. EXCEPTION: Provided it is agreed to by both managers, the umpire prior to the start of a game played in cold weather, may permit the pitcher to blow on his hand.

PENALTY: For violation of this part of this rule the umpires shall immediately call a ball. However, if the pitch is made and a batter reaches first base on a hit, an error, a hit batsman or otherwise, and no other runner is put out before advancing at least one base, the play shall proceed without reference to the violation.

- (2) Apply a foreign substance of any kind to the ball;
- (3) expectorate on the ball, either hand or his glove;
- (4) rub the ball on his glove, person or clothing;
- (5) deface the ball in any manner;
- (6) deliver what is called the "shine" ball, "spit" ball, "mud" ball or "emery" ball. The pitcher, of course, is allowed to rub the ball between his bare hands.

PENALTY: For violation of any part of this rule 8.02 (a) (2 to 6) the umpire shall:

- (a) Call the pitch a ball, warn the pitcher and have announced on the public address system the reason for the action.
 - (b) In the case of a second offense by the same pitcher in the same game, the pitcher shall be disqualified from the game.
 - (c) If a play follows the violation called by the umpire, the manager of the offense may advise the plate umpire that he elects to accept the play. Such election shall be made immediately at the end of the play. However, if the batter reaches first base on a hit, an error, a base on balls, a hit batsman, or otherwise, and no other runner is put out before advancing at least one base, the play shall proceed without reference to the violation.
 - (d) Even though the offense elects to take the play, the violation shall be recognized and the penalties in (a) and (b) will still be in effect.
 - (e) The umpire shall be sole judge on whether any portion of this rule has been violated.
- *** Rule 8.02 (a) (2 to 6) are illegal pitches, but they are **NOT** balks. ***

All umpires shall carry with them one official rosin bag. The umpire-in-chief is responsible for placing the rosin bag on the ground back of the pitcher's plate. If at any time the ball hits the rosin bag it is in play. In the case of rain or wet field, the umpire may instruct the pitcher to carry the rosin bag in his hip pocket. A pitcher may use the rosin bag for the purpose of applying rosin to his bare hand or hands. Neither the pitcher nor any other player shall dust the ball with the rosin bag; neither shall the pitcher nor any other player be permitted to apply rosin from the bag to his glove or dust any part of his uniform with the rosin bag.

- (b) Have on his person, or in his possession, any foreign substance. For such infraction of this section (b) the penalty shall be immediate ejection from the game.
- (c) Intentionally delay the game by throwing the ball to players other than the catcher, when the batter is in position, except in an attempt to retire a runner.

PENALTY: If, after warning by the umpire, such delaying action is repeated, the pitcher shall be removed from the game.

(d) Intentionally Pitch at the Batter.

If, in the umpire's judgment, such a violation occurs, the umpire may elect either to:

1. Expel the pitcher, or the manager and the pitcher, from the game, or
2. may warn the pitcher and the manager of both teams that another such pitch will result in the immediate expulsion of that pitcher (or a replacement) and the manager.

If, in the umpire's judgment, circumstances warrant, both teams may be officially "warned" prior to the game or at any time during the game.

To pitch at a batter's head is unsportsmanlike and highly dangerous. It should be, and is, condemned by everybody. Umpires should act without hesitation in enforcement of this rule.

8.04 When the bases are unoccupied, the pitcher shall deliver the ball to the batter within 20 seconds after he receives the ball. Each time the pitcher delays the game by violating this rule, the umpire shall call "Ball."

The intent of this rule is to avoid unnecessary delays. The umpire shall insist that the catcher return the ball promptly to the pitcher, and that the pitcher take his position on the rubber promptly. Obvious delay by the pitcher should instantly be penalized by the umpire.

8.05 If there is a runner, or runners, it is a balk when -

(a) The pitcher, while touching his plate, makes **any motion naturally associated with his pitch** and fails to make such delivery; *** *This means any movement whatsoever. If the hands make a move and then stop, or the non-pivot foot moves and then stops or the pivot foot leg bends and then stops, the shoulder turns toward a base and no throw is made, etc. These are actions that fake one thing and do another.* ***

If a lefthanded or righthanded pitcher swings his free foot past the back edge of the pitcher's rubber, he is required to pitch to the batter except to throw to second base on a pick-off-play.

(b) The pitcher, while touching his plate, feints a throw to first base and fails to complete the throw; *** *Moving the shoulder toward first and then throwing to the plate is considered a feint.* ***

(c) The pitcher, while touching his plate, fails to step directly toward a base before throwing to that base; Requires the pitcher, while touching his plate, to step directly toward a base before throwing to that base. If a pitcher turns or spins off of his free foot without actually stepping or if he turns his body and throws before stepping, it is a balk. *** *Lifting the foot and placing it in a different location that is in the direction of the throw is all that is necessary to meet the requirement of stepping directly toward a base. "distance and direction"* ***

A pitcher is to step directly toward a base before throwing to that base but does not require him to throw (except to first base only) because he steps. *** *The latest ruling is that he must step ahead of a fake also.* *** It is possible, with runners on first and third, for the pitcher to step toward third and not throw, merely to bluff the runner back to third; then seeing the runner on first start for second, turn and step toward and throw to first base. This is legal. However, if, with runners on first and third, the pitcher, while in contact with the rubber, steps toward third and then immediately and in practically the same motion "wheels" and throws to first base, it is obviously an attempt to deceive the runner at first base, and in such a move it is practically impossible to step directly toward first base before the throw to first base, and such a move shall be called a balk. Of course, if the pitcher steps off the rubber and then makes such a move, it is not a balk.

(d) The pitcher, while touching his plate, throws, or feints a throw to an unoccupied base, **except for the purpose of making a play**; *** *This requires judgment as to what is "making a play". If a runner on first attempts to advance to second the pitcher may throw to second and this is not considered throwing to an unoccupied base. The umpire must judge that the runner was actually attempting to advance and not just bluffing. If the umpire judges that it was a bluff and the pitcher throws or feints to second, a balk is called.****

(e) The pitcher makes an illegal pitch;
A quick pitch is an illegal pitch. Umpires will judge a quick pitch as one delivered before the batter is reasonably set in the batter's box. With runners on base the penalty is a balk; with no runners on base, it is a ball. The quick pitch is dangerous and should not be permitted. *** ***For this paragraph "illegal pitch" is only a quick pitch or not being in contact with the rubber when the pitch is made. It is not a balk if a spit ball or other 8.02(a) item happens.*** ***

(f) The pitcher delivers the ball to the batter while he is not facing the batter;

(g) The pitcher makes any motion naturally associated with his pitch while he is not touching the pitcher's plate;

(h) The pitcher unnecessarily delays the game;

- (i) The pitcher, without having the ball, stands on or astride the pitcher's plate or while off the plate, he feints a pitch;
- (j) The pitcher, after coming to a legal pitching position, removes one hand from the ball other than in an actual pitch, or in throwing to a base; *** *This would look like the start of a pitch or throw. That's why it's a balk if not completed.* ***
- (k) The pitcher, while touching his plate, accidentally or intentionally drops the ball;
- (l) The pitcher, while giving an intentional base on balls, pitches when the catcher is not in the catcher's box;
- (m) The pitcher delivers the pitch from Set Position without coming to a stop.
- (n) Straddling the pitcher's rubber without the ball is to be interpreted as intent to deceive and ruled a balk.
- (o) With a runner on first base the pitcher may make a complete turn, without hesitating toward first, and throw to second. This is not to be interpreted as throwing to an unoccupied base. *** *Provided the runner on first was actually attempting to reach second. Umpire's judgment.* ***

ABOUT JIM BOOTH

I am a District Officer of California District 3, Little League Baseball, Inc." I have 20 years experience as a baseball and softball umpire. I have attended two professional training camps and the weekend rules camp and week long umpire training school at Western Region Headquarters, Little League Baseball, Inc. I am a certified Little League umpire and former Chief Umpire for California District 3. I am a member of the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO).

I study the rules year-round and I have an extensive library of books and materials on umpiring. It is my policy to only publish answers or interpretations that I have verified and proven to be correct. If I publish an interpretation that is my opinion only, I will state that fact.

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