

SCMAF Softball and Game Safety

Changing Softball Rules with the Evolution of Bat Technology



For many years now, the SCMAF Officials Education & Certification Committee has been hard at work, making yearly changes to the Adult Softball Rulebook and Umpire Mechanics Manual, to keep these publications useful and relevant to SCMAF's participants, officials, and agencies. In the softball world, there has been focus in recent years on bat technology and alteration, and specifically enhanced bat performance that can reduce reaction time on sharply batted balls.

In response to this growing concern, SCMAF has implemented a number of adult softball rules over the past several years to give pitchers, defenses and umpires more tools to help reduce the "batter's advantage" gained through bat enhancements. Such changes include:

□ **Field Dimensions**

For several years now, SCMAF has recommended a distance of 65-feet between bases, over the old 60-foot base paths. This seemingly insignificant difference actually provides more reaction time for all infielders on sharply batted balls. SCMAF has moved the pitching distance back to 50-feet, from 46-feet, and also provides more distance options to the pitcher in the form of a pitcher's box, as described below.

□ **SCMAF/ASA Alliance**

SCMAF has aligned itself with the Amateur Softball Association (ASA), as it pertains to bat certification. ASA is very similar to SCMAF on a national level, and as such, shares a similar philosophy on recreational softball. ASA tests every new bat product manufactured to ensure that it meets national standards for safety. If ASA doesn't approve of the bat, neither does SCMAF.

□ **Suspected Bat Rule**

Of course an ASA certification stamp does not address the issue of bat alteration. This evil "science" has reached the point where detecting altered bats is nearly impossible for umpires. As a result, SCMAF implemented the "suspected bat rule," which allows umpires to remove any bat(s) that they suspect might be altered. This discretion is left entirely to the umpire, and he/she needs no more evidence than a suspicion to remove a bat for the remainder of a game. League directors and umpires should be proactive in using this rule during ballgames.

□ **Softball Control**

Don't underestimate your ability to help control batted balls through softball selection. Most agencies provide the game balls for their leagues, and SCMAF has continued to work with ball manufacturers to produce softballs that better serve our recreational leagues. Softball technology has come a long way over the past several years. In the past, lower performance softballs came with the distasteful side effect of softening, or losing their shape during the game. Nowadays however, softballs can be purchased with lower compression and COR ratings, that will still hold their shape and structure for a 7-inning game, reducing player complaints. These softballs come off of the bat a significantly lower speed than higher-performance balls.

□ **Pitcher's Box**

SCMAF has implemented the pitcher's box, which allows a pitcher to stand up to 6-feet behind the 50-foot pitching rubber to deliver the pitch. With this rule in place, the pitcher can release the pitch at a distance roughly equivalent to the distance from home plate to first or third base. By the time the pitched ball reaches the batter, many pitchers can back up near second base, creating much more distance between themselves and the batter. In many cases, using this rule, pitchers end up farther from the hitter, at time of contact, than the first or third baseman.

□ **16-foot Arc Limit**

Last year, SCMAF raised the upper pitching arc limit, on a trial basis, from 12-feet to 16-feet. This change has been embraced by most agencies, and the change has been incorporated as a permanent rule change. The new rule provides another significant advantage to the pitcher, making sharply batted balls more infrequent. It also allows the pitcher even more time to back up after making a pitch. Higher arc limits also provide other indirect benefits, including speeding-up play, limiting lost softballs, better-balancing leagues for talent, and reducing umpire input into individual pitches. Of course there is always some resistance to new rules, but increased arc limits are the way of the future in recreational leagues, and in time players will become accustomed to the change.

NEW IDEAS

Many other leagues are being even more creative in their approach to ensuring that the playing field is level and safe. Some of these recent ideas include:

□ **Further Limiting Approved Bats**

Some leagues have further limited which bats may be used during league play. Some adopt their own approved bat list, while others further limit composition or number of walls. Many leagues are also experimenting with wood-bat leagues, which are becoming popular in some jurisdictions.

□ **League-Provided Bats**

One new strategy, which has been very successful in a few locations, is league-provided bats. In this instance, agencies acquire a number of off-the-rack bats, which are consistent with the latest technology, but are likewise guaranteed not to be altered. These leagues then require that all players use one of these bats during the game. Some leagues have even received donated, new bats from manufacturers that want to showcase their equipment. This strategy of providing not only the balls, but also the bats for your league, is extremely effective in controlling the “technology advantage” on the field. The feedback from those agencies with this practice in-place has been overwhelmingly positive.

□ **Bat Challenge Rules**

One of the newest ideas out there is allowing for a bat “challenge” during a ballgame. Under this scenario, a team may “challenge” a bat used by the other team, say once per game, at any time. This challenge simply removes the bat for the remainder of the game, without further penalty.

□ **Closing the Pitcher’s Box**

Another new idea out there is to actually close the pitcher’s box, disallowing batted balls through the pitcher’s box, within certain guidelines. If the batter bats a ball through the pitcher’s box, within those guidelines, he/she is out and the ball is dead. This rule is somewhat radical, and reviews so far are mixed. While achieving its purpose, the rule does add a significant, and somewhat subjective, judgment call to the responsibilities of the umpire. SCMAF at this point does not endorse effectively “closing” an area of the field in fair territory, but this controversial new rule does further illustrate the heightened awareness of sharply batted balls.

The SCMAF Softball Rulebook is a living document, evolving each year in an effort to meet the needs of SCMAF member players, officials and agencies. Don’t forget that as a SCMAF member, your input matters! Look for your yearly rule change proposal sheet, which is available in June of each year. The Officials Education & Certification Committee considers all such proposals, from all sources, at its annual meeting in September. Can’t wait until June? Always feel free to contact the SCMAF Office, or your Officials Education & Certification Committee representative.

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