



Third Strike Fun

Understanding “Dropped” Third Strikes

Umpires, managers and coaches working upper levels of baseball and softball are likely familiar with the ins and outs of Rules 6.05(b) and 6.09(b), otherwise known as the “dropped third strike” rules. In the past few years, however, Little League has expanded this rule downward into the Majors, first in softball and, more recently, in baseball. In addition, during All-Star play this rule applies in both the 11/12 division (“Majors” or just “Little League”) and also in the 10/11 division. Since at least some of the 10/11 division players, managers, coaches and, yes, umpires may have been doing Minor ball during the regular season, not everyone is up to speed on the rule.

So let’s fix that!

Let’s begin with the key rule itself:

6.09(b) - The batter becomes a runner when ... **Major/Junior/Senior/Big League only:** the third strike called by the umpire is not caught, providing (1) first base is unoccupied or (2) first base is occupied with two out (NOTE: A batter forfeits his/her opportunity to advance to first base when he/she enters the dugout or other dead ball area);

As we all know, if the batter becomes a runner, he/she must be put out by being tagged, or by throwing to first before the batter reaches first. Thus, when this rule comes into play, the batter’s “situation,” and that of all other runners, is just as it would be if the batter had hit a fair ball.

The related rule is:

6.05(b) - A batter is out when ...

Little League (Majors)/Junior/Senior/Big League:

- (1) a third strike is legally caught by the catcher;
- (2) a third strike is not caught by the catcher when first base is occupied before two are out.

Minor League and Tee Ball:

A third strike is caught or not caught by the catcher.

This is just the opposite of 6.09(b), covering the cases where the third strike creates an automatic out on the batter instead of turning him or her into a runner.

The first thing you need to notice in the text of these rules is that nowhere does it use the word “dropped.” The term “dropped third strike” is a common phrase that is used to describe what might happen, but it is not technically accurate. The actual phrasing is “not caught,” or “not legally caught.” So what’s the difference, you say? Let’s look back at section 2.00 for the definition of “catch:”

2.00 A **CATCH** is the act of a fielder in getting secure possession in the hand or glove of a ball in flight and firmly holding it

before it touches the ground providing such fielder does not use cap, protector, pocket or any other part of the uniform in getting possession. ...

The definition of “catch” goes on from there, but this first sentence contains the magic words for our purposes. Those magic words are “in flight.” Thus, for a pitch to be legally caught, (a) it must make it to the catcher in flight, and (b) the catcher must secure it before it touches the ground. If the catcher drops the pitch, we’ve obviously not satisfied the second half, but we also have to worry about the first half as well.

Situation #1: There is an 0-2 count on the batter. The next pitch bounces in front of the plate, but goes directly into the catcher’s glove, and is securely held by the catcher.

Ruling: Because the ball touched the ground before it reached the catcher, it was no longer “in flight” when the catcher secured it. Thus, for the purposes of our discussion, this ball has not been legally caught. If it happened that the batter swung at this pitch, this was a “third strike not caught” for the purposes of this rule.

The pro rule and the Little League rule are identical on this subject. The next time you watch a pro baseball game, check out the catcher on that strike three curve ball in the dirt. The first thing he’ll typically do, after gloving the ball, is to pop up and tag the batter. He knows that the batter might run, because he hasn’t legally caught the pitch.

Thus, in “ump speak,” we try to always refer to this situation as an “uncaught third strike” (sometimes abbreviated U3K) or a “third strike not caught,” and not as a “dropped” third strike, because a pitch might be “uncaught” even if it isn’t “dropped.”

Situation #2: There is an 0-2 count on the batter. The next pitch goes cleanly to the catcher’s glove, however he fumbles with it momentarily, eventually pinning it between his glove and his chest.

Ruling: Here, the ball reached the catcher in flight. The catcher did secure it without it touching the ground, thus this has been legally caught, even if the catch wasn’t particularly clean.¹

Thus, just as with a fly ball, the “catch” doesn’t have to be clean or pretty. If it reached the catcher in flight, he just has to secure it without it touching the ground for it to be “legally caught.”

This establishes the first of three things that are required under this rule for the batter to run – a pitch that is not legally caught. If the catcher legally catches a third strike, the batter is always out, as indicated in 6.05(b).

The second thing we need, of course, is a third strike on the batter. This can be a called strike, or a swinging strike. It could even technically be a foul tip, if the bat nicks a ball that has already bounced and then the ball goes directly to the catcher’s glove. That would be pretty odd, but could

¹ Technically, of course, the catch is not complete until the catcher actually has the ball in the glove or hand. Also, note that the comment in 2.00 CATCH about not using the “protector” in the course of a catch is not intended to apply to this play – it’s actually intended to apply to a situation where the ball goes between the chest protector and the fielder’s body and is trapped there. A ball being smothered between the catcher’s hand or glove and his chest protector is thus not considered “using the protector to get possession.” You can easily see that the catcher would still have been able to secure the ball if he had not been wearing the chest protector – that’s the criteria that is actually applied.

theoretically happen. We've certainly all seen Little Leaguers swing at, and sometimes contact, pitches that have bounced.

The third and final thing that we need is the proper game situation:

1. If first base is occupied and there are fewer than two outs, the rule is not in effect. A third strike, caught or uncaught, on a batter in this situation is always an out.
2. If first base is not occupied, or there are two outs (first base occupied or not), the rule is in effect. In this situation, a batter is not out if the third strike is not caught.

There is sometimes confusion on exactly what "occupied" means in this situation. For the purposes of this rule, a runner is considered to be occupying whatever base he/she had last legally touched at the time the pitch begins. Thus, consider the following situations:

- Major baseball or softball – the runner on first takes off for second after the ball reaches the batter.
- Junior softball and above – the runner on first takes off for second after the ball leaves the pitcher's hand
- Junior baseball and above – the runner on first leads off
- Junior baseball and above – the runner on first attempts to steal as the pitcher begins his/her windup

In all of these cases, first base is considered to be occupied, since the runner on first had not actually reached and touched second base before the pitch was begun.

Situation #3: There is an 0-2 count on the batter, with two outs and bases loaded. The batter swings through the next pitch, but the catcher fails to catch it cleanly.

Ruling: Even though first base is occupied, because there are two outs the batter is not out, and may run to first. Because the batter became a runner on this play, all the other runners are forced to advance. Thus, if the catcher secures the ball and steps on home plate before the runner from third touches it, this is a force out at home.

If you think about this play for a minute, you will see why the U3K rule is not normally in effect if first base is occupied. If it were, a catcher could deliberately drop a third strike, setting up a fairly easy double (or triple) play. When there are two outs, however, there is no incentive for the defense to try to pull this stunt, since catching the third strike (assuming the catcher can do this) is a certain out, while playing the U3K is less certain.

Situation #4: 0-2 count on the batter, with no outs and a runner on first. The batter swings through the next pitch, but the catcher fails to catch it legally. The batter takes off for first base, and the runner takes off for second. Instead of throwing to second, the catcher throws to first base. The defense manager comes out and asks for an interference call against the batter for "drawing a throw when already out."

Ruling In this situation, the required conditions for the U3K rule have not been met – first base is occupied with fewer than two outs. Thus, the batter was automatically out when the third strike happened. The fact that the batter took off for first base, however, is not considered grounds for an interference call. The defense is responsible for knowing the rule, and thus knowing that the batter is already out. If they make the mistake of attempting to play on the batter anyway, this is their fault. At the end of this play, the

batter must obviously be removed from the bases; however any advance by the runner originally at first base is legal.

The rule under which the manager is trying to get help (whether he/she knows it or not) is:

7.09(e) It is interference by a batter or runner when ... any batter or runner who has just been put out hinders or impedes any following play being made on a runner. Such runner shall be declared out for the interference of a teammate.

In the pro rules, from which Little League rules are derived, the “interference” rule includes the following:

Comment: If the batter or a runner continues to advance after he has been put out, he shall not by that act alone be considered as confusing, hindering or impeding the fielders.

This comment is not explicitly in the Little League rule book, however Little League uses this same interpretation, and this comment is repeated word-for-word in the Little League Umpire School Rules Instruction Manual. In addition, the fact that the batter ran did not actually hinder or impede the catcher from making a play - the catcher simply chose poorly in terms of where he/she threw the ball.

Stepping away from U3K for a moment, suppose that R1 (legally) attempts to steal on a pitch in the dirt. The catcher takes a moment to recover the ball, and then launches the ball toward second when the runner is only a few feet away. The second baseman fails to catch the ball, it goes out into center field, and the runner ends up on third. We would probably all agree that this was an ill-advised throw - the catcher had little or no chance of getting an out, and thus making the throw was a poor decision. Our U3K situation with the batter already out is identical - if the catcher chooses to throw to a base at which he/she has no chance of getting an out, the fault is with the catcher.

Having said that, this doesn't give the offense license to have every batter run on every U3K, even with first base occupied and fewer than two outs. These interpretations are intended to cover honest mistakes, not deliberate attempts by the offense to deceive. If the umpire believes that the offense is deliberately violating the rules by consciously instructing batters to run when they are already out, then Rule 4.15 may come into play:

4.15(5) - A game may be forfeited by the umpire-in-chief of the game in progress to the opposing team when a team ... after warning by the umpire, willfully and persistently violates any rules of the game

One place where the pro rules and the Little League rules do differ is on when a batter is considered to have abandoned his/her right to advance on a U3K. As you can see from the last sentence of 6.09(b), in Little League this does not happen until the batter actually steps into the dugout or other dead ball territory.

Situation #5: With no runners on and no outs, the batter swings through a third strike that the catcher fails to catch. Thinking that the catcher has caught the pitch, the batter begins to walk toward his dugout, which is on the third base side, while the catcher tosses the ball back to the pitcher. When the batter is about three-quarters of the way there, the base coach realizes what has happened, and tells the batter to run. The batter drops his bat and runs directly across the diamond toward first base.

Ruling: This is perfectly legal. The batter had not yet entered the dugout when he (belatedly) took off for first base. He/she is also not out for “running out of the baseline,” because that rule only applies if the runner is doing so to avoid being tagged, and the defense is not (yet) making an attempt to tag the runner. Even if the defense now does try to tag him, the runner’s “baseline” is now a direct line from where he began to run to first base, not the chalk line from home to first. (See the full text of Rule 7.08(a)(1), which emphasizes this point.)

It used to be that the pro rule was the same as the Little League rule (or the other way around). In 2007, however Major League Baseball changed their rule so that the batter forfeited the right to advance if he left the dirt area around home plate before trying to advance. To date, however, Little League has kept the older version of the rule.

So what should umpires who are new to this rule be aware of?

1. If you haven’t done so already, stop automatically saying “Strike three, you’re out.” Because of this rule, the batter may not be out on the third strike. “Strike three” is quite sufficient, thank you.
2. Be aware of the situation. When there are two strikes on a batter, make sure you know whether there are two outs or whether first base is unoccupied. If either of these are the case, you may have a U3K play coming up.
3. Little League has not, to my knowledge, published an official mechanic related to the U3K. The one I have been taught at other levels of ball, however, is to first call or signal the third strike and then, if the batter is not out because of the U3K, to make a “safe” signal. This tells everybody in the park who is paying attention that you have seen the pitch not caught, and that the batter is not yet out.
4. While not required, it is good “preventative umpiring,” when a batter who is actually out takes off toward first, to signal the out and say loudly “Batter’s out! Batter’s out!” Note that this is not an automatic thing to do after every strikeout – reserve it for situations when the batter runs and should not. If you do this, the defense has no cause for complaint if they then try to play on the batter and throw the ball away. Of course, as we discussed before, even if you do not do this, the defense is responsible for knowing the situation and the rule.

One final situation:

Situation #6: Two balls, two strikes, bases empty, no outs. The pitcher winds up and fires the next pitch wildly into the backstop. The quick-thinking batter flails at the wild pitch as it sails by, then takes for first base, reaching it before the catcher can retrieve the ball. Do you allow the play to stand?

Ruling: Give the batter credit for his quick thinking. Since the catcher did not catch “strike three” the batter may advance in this situation. Of course, this assumes that the batter actually swings as the ball is passing him/her – swinging when the ball is already well past doesn’t count.

Historical Note

If you’re anything like me, you may be wondering why such a weird and wonderful rule is in the book to begin with. According to Jim Evans’ *Official Baseball Rules Annotated*, the original Major League Code of 1876 indicated that a batter who struck at and missed a third strike, or took a called third strike, was still obligated to run to first base, just as if he had hit a fair ball. Remember that,

back in those days, catchers did not have the protective equipment that they do today and thus stood well back behind the plate, and frequently caught pitches “on the hop.” Given the difficulty of securing a pitched ball without a glove (or much of one), it was still quite possible for the batter to advance safely under these circumstances. This rule actually persisted into the 1940’s. In 1942, the rules were amended to call the batter out when first base was occupied with fewer than two outs. The rules then included the explicit note “This rule was adopted to prevent the catcher from dropping the ball purposely to ensure a double play.” With first base empty, however, the defense still had to explicitly put the batter out, following a third strike, by tagging him or throwing to first.

In 1950, MLB did some significant rework of the rulebook. By then, catchers were wearing reasonably modern equipment, and were positioned in essentially the position they occupy today. Thus, when a third strike was caught, the out, either by tagging the runner or throwing to first, was pretty much a foregone conclusion. Thus, when the rules were rewritten in that year, a provision was added making the batter automatically out if the third strike was caught. The provision that the batter was not out if first base was unoccupied or first base was empty was preserved, however.

The rule was “cleaned up” somewhat in 1956, reaching the wording that is used by Little League today. As mentioned earlier, MLB then amended their version of the rule again in 2007.

Happy umpiring!

Sincerely,

Kevin Hunter
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