

The Complete Beginners Guide To Umpiring Rookie League

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Rookie League is a mixed gender U13 junior softball grade. Little League is for the same age but the teams are single gender. U13 means the players have to be *under* 13 at the *31st of December* of the playing year. So they can be 10, 11 or 12, as long as they don't turn 13 until after January 1st of the second half of the playing season.

As with all junior softball rule number 1 in Rookie League is: **It is a game kids play to have fun.** This unwritten rule is the single most important thing for any umpire to remember.

At this age the kids will have a wide range of ability and experience. Most will have only a small knowledge of the rules, and often what they think they know is based on what adults have told them, some of which is right and some of which is wrong.

Umpires in Rookie League will sometimes find themselves having to coach players so they play within the rules. As long as you are impartial and give the same advice to both sides this is fine.

Junior softball umpires are volunteers with varying degrees of experience. Some know nothing about softball (great, this guide is going to help you), and some have been senior players who need to lower *down* their expectations. As long as you are:

- Fair
- Impartial
- Consistent
- Familiar with the applicable rules
- Doing your best

Then that is all the players and coaches can expect of you.

Umpiring at this level is a fun way to get involved in the game without the added pressures that come from umpiring at higher levels. You might feel nervous at first, everyone does, but once you have a few games under your belt you'll wonder what you ever worried about!

The Rules

It is important to remember that the rules you need to know are the *Otago Softball Association Junior Softball Rules*. If you choose to read the full SNZ rulebook it won't do any harm but the vast majority of it is not applicable in this grade. The full rules read like a committee of lawyers wrote them so you could end up more confused than when you started!

Take the time to read the junior rules and become familiar with them. It's only one page after all. Not everyone can remember every rule with instant recall, but if you take the time to study the rules you increase your chances of making the right decision.

In summary these are the rules you need to understand to basically umpire a fair game:

- The strike zone
- 6 basic ways someone can be out
- Fair and foul
- Obstruction and interference

When you find yourself in a situation where you don't know the applicable rule you can either:

- Make the best call you can from your understanding and check out the situation after the game so you'll know what to do next time.
- Call "time", bring both coaches in, explain what you plan to do and you can choose to listen to their advice on that and change your decision if you want to.

There is a difference between your *judgment* and how you *apply a rule*.

Some parts of the game are down to the umpires' *judgment*. These include:

- Whether a pitch is a strike or a ball.
- Whether a ball is fair or foul.
- Whether the throw beat the runner to the base.
- Whether a runner was tagged or not.
- Whether a ball was held long enough to constitute a catch.

Players and coaches need to accept your judgment and live with the result. You can only call what you see and if they saw it differently they may not be happy with your decision, but they need to accept it and move on. You should be open to hearing from coaches, especially if they are experienced and giving constructive feedback, but you should not reverse a call just because a coach says you should.

When you *apply a rule* there will be instances where a coach might question your decision. If you are unsure of a rule you can check your rule sheet and change a decision if you were wrong. If you are unsure it is acceptable to bring both coaches in and have a quick talk about what happened and what you think should be the result. Admitting you don't know something is fairer and more responsible than just guessing or making something up.

As long as you are consistent in your decisions and play the rules as best you understand them you are doing all you can.

Before The Game

Once you know you are going to be umpiring a game do a little checking before hand.

Make sure you know:

- What time is the game?
- What diamond is it on?
- What teams are playing?

It's a good idea to get to the game ten minutes beforehand so you are not rushing at the start.

Getting Ready For The Game

At this grade the only protective equipment you need is a facemask with a throat guard. Whilst the pitching isn't usually that fast a hit off the bat into your face can still do some real damage. You may want to get a counter (about \$10 from the OSA gear shop) to track balls and strikes but it's not essential. Remember your own sunscreen and water bottle too.

When you get to the diamond find the coaches and introduce yourself. Check both teams have 9 players. Get the captains together and toss a coin (or paper-scissors-rock, or something random like that) to determine who bats first.

Take a quick walk around the diamond to make sure the bases at 1st, 2nd and 3rd are safely pegged down and get rid of any dangerous objects like rocks and sticks.

If one doesn't have 9 players they may still want to play the game but they automatically lose by default. 7 is about the fewest who can play a reasonable game. The team with more may choose to lend players to get the other side to 9 but the team short of numbers still loses by default because they don't have 9 *of their own players*. After the game just write on the scorecard "Blue Team win by default"; where Blue Team is the side that had enough to play.

You're ready to umpire!

The Strike Zone

Most people who have any history in softball will know the strike zone as “arm-pits to knees, width of the plate”. In junior softball you will need to apply a much more open strike zone than that. Pitchers of this age do not have the kind of control that allows them to get into such a small space.

The key question on whether a ball is a strike is: “**Could the batter have hit the ball with reasonable effort?**” You can still apply a rough guide of “arm-pits to knees” to help you judge the height.

To get set up start with your eyes at the height of the strike zone and your body between both the batter and left of the catcher (for a right hand batter, mirror the same position for a left hand batter), with the eye closest to the batter on the edge of home plate.

Some pitches are always a ball:

- If it bounces before reaching the batter.
- If it lands on home plate.
- If it passes over the batters head.
- If it goes behind the batters back.
- If it passes through the opposite batters box.

An aim of this grade is to get the kids to hit rather than take walks. As long as your strike zone is fair and consistent you are doing the best you can.

Strike Foul

A ball that is hit by the batter into foul territory (that is not caught) is an additional strike to their count, *up to strike 2*. After that any fouls do not add to their strike count.

Exception: a batter who bunts foul *on a bunt* on the 3rd strike will be out. If you don't know what a bunt is, or are unsure if it was a bunt, err on the side of caution and call a foul and don't add another strike.

Three Strikes And You're Out

At this grade we do not play the “dropped third strike” rule. This means that after three strikes (called or swung at) the batter is *automatically out*. Some senior players will tell their batter to ‘run to first to beat the throw’. This is a rule that starts at U15 level and does not apply to U13.

Exception: As the rule starts in U15 coaches may want to play this rule (and another called “infield fly”) in the later games of the season. See appendix 1 for what these rules are and how they are applied.

Four Balls Is A Walk

If a batter gets four balls before striking out they are allowed to advance to 1st at no risk.

More experienced players will know that they do not have to stop at 1st *as long as the pitcher does not have the ball* and will run on to 2nd. This is legal. If the pitcher had the ball they had to stop at 1st. For a first violation of this rule send them back to 1st with a warning. If it's repeated call the runner out.

Six Common Ways To Be Out

There are lots of ways you can go out in the game but at this level you should focus on the six most common ones.

Strike Out: three strikes (called by you or swung at) and the batter is out.

Caught: a fielder catches the ball before it touches the ground. Such a catch can be taken in either fair or foul territory. It is your judgment call on whether the fielder held the ball long enough for it to be a catch. If they catch it in their glove and drop it while moving it to their throwing hand that is still caught and is *not* a dropped catch.

Forced Out: a runner must run to a certain base because it is the only option they have. If the fielder has possession of the ball and is touching the base before the runner arrives the runner is out. Whether the ball beat the runner is your judgment call. The most common example of this is batters going to 1st. The 1st base doesn't need to tag the runner, just have the ball and be in contact with the base.

Tagged Out: a runner is advancing by choice and could opt to go back to the base they came from if they wanted to. The fielder must have possession of the ball and tag the runner whilst the runner is not in contact with a base. If this happens the runner is out. The fielder must tag the runner with the hand the ball is in, i.e.: they cannot have the ball in their glove and tag with their empty throwing hand. Whether a runner was tagged before making a base safely is your judgment call.

Leaving Early: runners must stay in contact with the base they are on *until the ball leaves the pitchers hand*. At this level some players don't have the skill to time their run well and will leave well before the pitch is released. Usually if you can actually see them off base they will be ahead by a wide margin. Good practice early in the season would be to warn both coaches not to allow it and call out any players still breaking the rule. Post-Christmas a warning need not be given (they should know the rule) and you would call the runner out.

Tagging Up: if a ball is hit in the air any runners on the bases must wait until the ball is either caught or hits the ground *before they leave their base to advance*. This is called 'tagging up'. If they leave a base and the ball is caught they must return to the base they were on *at the time the pitch was made* and touch that (and any intervening bases) before they can advance. If the fielders get the ball back there before the runner gets back they are *out*. No tag is required, it's a force play. If it hits the ground they can just run (at risk) as usual. In practice this can be hard to see when you're one person umpiring the whole game, just do the best you can and call it as you see it.

Fair And Foul

Let's start with a definition of the terms:

Fair: the ball is in the live part of the playing area, which includes being on or touching the foul ball line. Runners must advance if forced to or may choose to advance at their own risk. The ball remains live until it is controlled by the pitcher, within the pitchers' circle.

Foul: the ball is in the dead part of the playing area, *not on or touching* the foul ball line. Runners must return to the base they held at the time of the pitch. Play becomes dead and everyone goes back to where they were.

The complication is that the ball and the fielders will cause all sorts of fair/foul situations to happen. A ball might land foul but roll back into fair territory. A fielder might attempt a catch and in foul territory and tip the ball back into fair territory. So how can a Rookie umpire get a handle on fair and foul?

In the infield (the area enclosed by the bases): use the rule of thumb that fair/foul is determined by *where it is first touched, or settles*. For example:

- A ball is hit onto the ground in foul territory but rolls over home plate into the diamond and stops. **Fair**.
- A ball that is hit towards 3rd base person (standing in fair territory) and deflects it into foul territory attempting to catch it. **Fair**.
- A hit lands between 1st and home and spins backwards out of the diamond before a fielder can touch it and stops. **Foul**.

In the outfield (the area past 1st and 3rd bases): imagine there is a pane of glass running along the foul line out to the edge of the field. The rule of thumb is: *if it breaks the glass before hitting the ground it's a foul*.

The most common outfield foul is a hit that lands on the ground outside the foul line past 1st or 3rd base. As long as it is not caught (remember that would be out) it's a **foul**.

For those really close ones, on the line is **fair**.

Remember that all fair/foul calls are based on your judgment and you can only call what you see. Do the best you can and if you get a curly situation feel free to ask one of the umpires (or email them your question) for some advice for next time.

Obstruction

Obstruction is where a fielder *who is not in possession of the ball* directly does something that causes a runner to get out before reaching their next base. For example, standing right on the running line and making the runner go around them, or blocking the base with their body so the runner cannot touch it.

Obstruction doesn't come up a lot in Rookie League so let's look at how it works and some examples.

If *in your judgment* the runner would have reached a base safely if that fielder had not blocked or hindered them, you will call 'obstruction' and award the runner the base you rule they would have reached. Note that you will award them 'the base you believe they would have reached', so you may judge this to be more than one base.

For example, a runner rounds first and trips over the 2nd base person who is standing (without the ball) directly on the running line. When the catcher throws the ball it goes wildly into deep right field. The runner gets up and keeps going but is tagged out by the catcher coming home. If you judge that the runner would have reached home safely if they were not obstructed you will award them home and the run would score.

But, the runner is only protected by the obstruction up to the base *you believe they would have reached*. So if the above example you believe he would have reached 3rd, but the runner tried to stretch it and come home and was tagged out, *they are still out*.

It is important to remember a runner cannot be out between the bases they were obstructed on. For example, a runner pushed over by a fielder when going from 2nd to 3rd will not be able to be out before they reach 3rd.

Generally obstruction at this age is unintentional and you just need to judge that it has happened and how far the runner should be advanced as a result. The best way to prevent obstruction is to communicate through the coaches directly to the player concerned before or during the play, and instruct them to move off the base or running line.

Interference

Interference is like obstruction except, it will be done by a runner, batter runner or batter and causes the fielding team to miss an obvious out. In the Rookie League interference is almost always unintentional and a result of not knowing what to do rather than malice.

The most common example is running straight down the 1st base line preventing the catcher throwing to 1st. Sometimes runners will stand blocking home plate preventing a throw to tag them out; usually while they decide what to do.

A runner that causes interference is out. Practically in this grade it is fairer early in the season to bring in the coaches and warn them once and give an out on any subsequent interference. Post-Christmas a warning wouldn't be required, as they should know the rules by then. Do still warn the coaches about close situations that you judge to be close to interference so they can inform the players.

Running The Game

Let's put all that together now and run a game!

The teams need to line up past the dead ball line. The coach/parents should keep them back there for their own safety.

The fielding team takes their positions and the pitcher and catcher warm up. Let the pitcher have 4 pitches then tell the fielders to throw in any other balls they are warming up with. After the 5th pitch get the pitcher to hold the ball and be ready to play.

The first batter should be in the on-deck circle warming up. The on-deck batter **must** wear a helmet. **All batters and runners must wear helmets.**

When you're ready call the batter in and once they're settled call "play ball!"

What happens next is up to the players. You will call strikes and balls; determine who is safe and who is out, what's fair and foul, etc, until the innings ends. Remember to also remind the teams about housekeeping of bats on the ground and to keep them way from the field of play.

An innings in Rookie League will end either with three outs or because the batting team has scored ten runs. There is no time limit on an individual inning.

Once one of these things has happened the teams will change over and the whole process repeats.

Half Way Pitcher/Catcher Rule

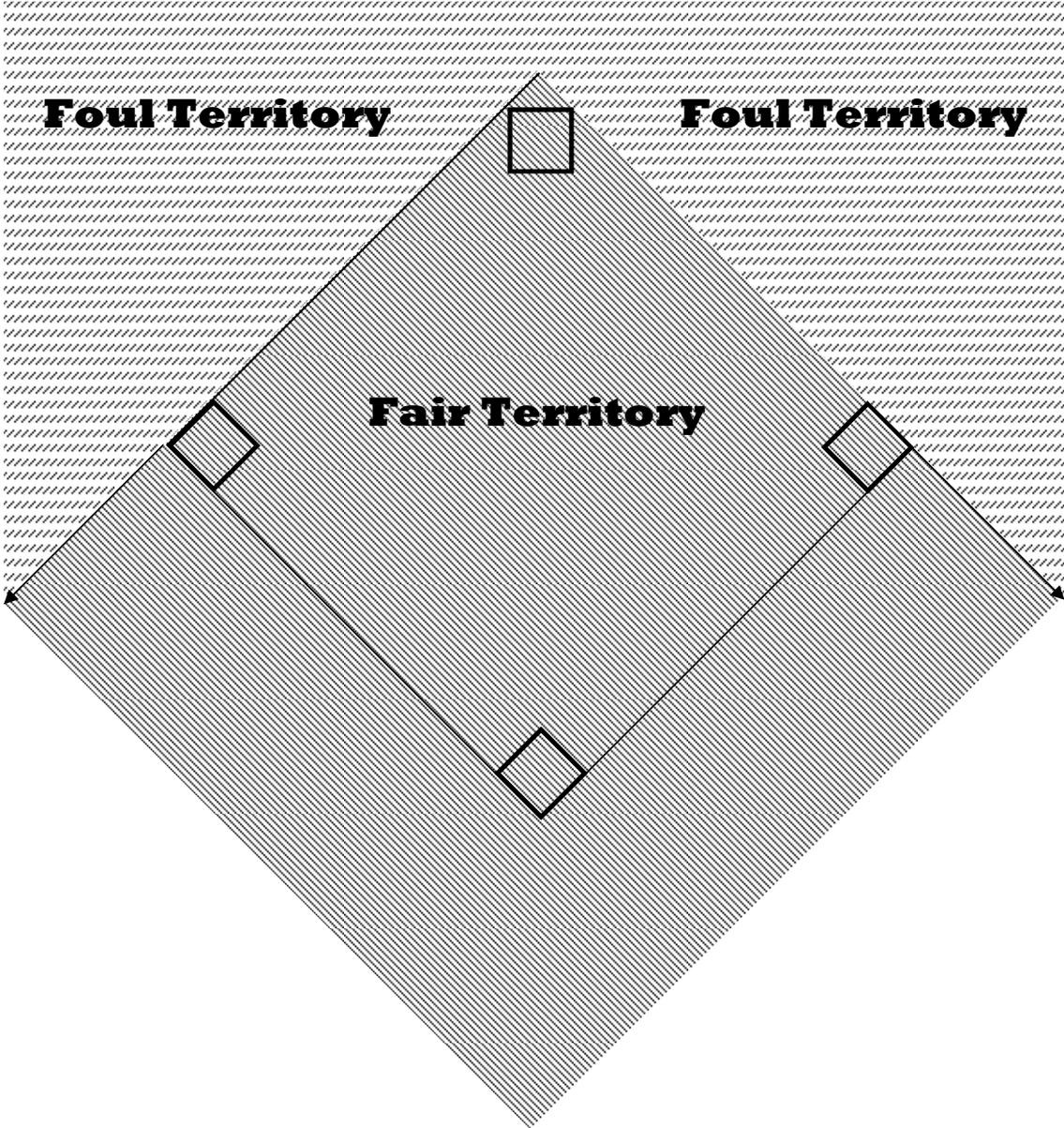
No player who is the pitcher or catcher in the first half of the scheduled playing time of the game (60 minutes at this level) may pitch or catch in the second half. Once you reach 30 minutes of playing time, players in these positions must change. If you reach 30 minutes and a batter is in the box, finish that batter out and then change.

The game carries on until you have played for one hour. In some cases where the result is beyond doubt you may finish a little early (5 mins maybe) if the teams have had an even number of innings, but the kids have come to play so don't chop the game too short. If you started late for any reason try to finish on time so you don't make the next game on your diamond late.

Once you call time on the game just walk off the diamond. If you are approached by a coach asking about a decision a discussion can be reasonable provided it is civil. Do not get into arguing if you were right or wrong with coaches or parents. If you had a situation you were unsure about contact the development umpire (details at the end) and they will give you advice.

Congratulations ! You have successfully been a volunteer umpire and you have helped a bunch of kids have fun through an involvement in softball. Thanks for your contribution!

Fair and Foul



Appendix 1 – Extra Rules

The ‘Dropped Third Strike’

This rule (rule 8 section 1) says:

- b. When the catcher fails to catch the third strike before the ball touches the ground and
1. There are less than two outs and first base is unoccupied, or
 2. There are two outs.

This is known as the third strike rule.

EFFECT - Sec. 1a-b:

The ball is in play and the batter becomes a batter-runner with liability to be put out.

In Rookie League the Dropped Third Strike (DTS) does not apply automatically but coaches may agree to play it so their kids can get used to it. If both coaches are okay with playing it make sure they tell their teams before the game starts.

This is a situation where you need to look at the game before the play happens to know what is going to happen. If there are no outs or one out you will apply the DTS rule if *first base is vacant*. If there is already a runner on 1st base and the catcher drops the strike the DTS rule *does not* apply and the batter is out. (Note: such a ball is live unless it crosses the dead ball line. The runner already on 1st is entitled to advance at their own risk on a live ball.)

The difference for you is that if there is a third strike (called by you or swung at) you just call ‘*STRIKE*’ and give the strike signal, not the out signal.

If there are two outs it doesn’t matter if 1st base is occupied or not, *the DTS rule always applies*. Call ‘*STRIKE*’ and wait for the play to develop. Keep in mind runners already on base are forced to advance so there could be a force out possibility at any base.

When you first play this both the batter and the catcher will probably not be sure what to do and there will be a lot of adults pointing and shouting. Just let the play finish and then make a call. The possible outcomes are:

- Runner gets to 1st before the ball – SAFE
- Ball gets to 1st before the runner – OUT (no tag required, it’s a force play)
- Batter crosses the dead ball line to go back to their team – OUT
- Ball crosses the dead ball line while the batter is in fair territory – Batter is awarded 1st.

Because the kids won’t know what to do at first the best thing to do is step back and let the play unfold. Once you have seen something that makes the batter either out or safe make your call.

The ‘Infield Fly’

Let’s be honest about this one: this isn’t something that’s going to come up very often and it takes a bit of experience with it to be comfortable with the rule. Read this through and take it step by step. If possible you might want to practice this with the team so you can see how it works in action.

An ‘Infield Fly’ occurs when:

- There are 0 or 1 outs
- There are runners on 1st and 2nd or 1st, 2nd and 3rd.
- The ball is hit in the infield ‘with an appreciable arc’. Your interpretation but basically not a straight flat hit.
- You determine the ball could have been caught ‘with reasonable effort’.
- You will call “*INFIELD FLY*”. If it’s near the foul line you can add “*IF FAIR*”.
- If the ball lands in fair territory **the batter is out**.

After an infield fly the ball is *live* and runners can advance at risk if they choose to.

An infield fly doesn't have to come down exactly within the confines of the diamond. You are judging that an fielder could have caught it with *reasonable effort*. A couple of meters back into the outfield would be reasonable.

The potential catch doesn't have to have been gettable to someone playing an infield position (1st, 2nd, etc). An outfielder (LF, CF, RF) standing very shallow (like a couple of steps back from the diamond) who could have taken the catch *with reasonable effort* would count too.

If a runner came off a base while the ball was in the air they have to go back to the last base they were safe on, *before* they can advance again (that 'tagging up' rule). If the ball beats them back to that last safe base they will be *out*.

If you're thinking, "Good Lord, why do we need such a rule", think through what would happen without it. If the fielder caught the fly ball the batter would be out – 1 out. If they were clever and let it fall to the ground all the runners would have to advance and a quick throw to 3rd would be a force out, across to 2nd for another out, and if they were super quick, on to 1st for another – 2 out, maybe 3. The infield fly rule restores the balance and makes just the batter out again.