

# Obstruction and Interference

One of the most confusing and controversial aspects of baseball is a situation where a defensive and offensive player collide or otherwise “interfere” with each other. This paper offers an explanation of some of the relevant rules for these situations.

## Obstruction

Section 2.00 of the Little League Rule Book defines Obstruction as: “the act of a fielder who, while not in the act of fielding the ball, impedes the progress of any runner.” Note that there does not need to be contact between the players for there to be obstruction. A fake tag which convinces a runner to slide into a base when he could have reasonably been expected to advance is explicitly defined as obstruction by the rule book. There is no requirement of intent, either. A player who dives unsuccessfully for a ground ball and remains on the ground, delaying the progress of a runner, could be guilty of obstruction, as could a first baseman who stands at the inside corner of first base despite it being clear that no play will be made at first, causing the batter to adjust his/her path to second base.

Rule 7.06 addresses the consequences of obstruction. If a play is made at the point of obstruction, the ball is immediately dead and all runners are permitted to advance to where the umpire judges they would’ve reached if obstruction did not occur. If no play is made at the point of obstruction, play is allowed to continue until the play otherwise ends, and then the umpire calls time and adjusts the positions of any runners to where he judges they would’ve reached if obstruction did not occur.

## Interference

There are many forms of interference – this discussion focuses on offensive interference where a runner interferes with a fielder making a play. Rule 7.09(1) states it is interference when “the runner fails to avoid a fielder who is attempting to field a **batted** ball, or intentionally interferes with a thrown ball ...” Note that **unintentionally** interfering with fielding a **thrown** ball is not interference. The penalty for interference is generally that the ball is immediately dead and the runner is out, although there are several special cases.

## Summary

So, how does this all boil down?

First, a fielder **always** has the right to any place on the field to field a **batted** ball – no exceptions. (Note, however, that once he drops it, it is no longer a batted ball.)

Second, the runner **always** has the right to the base path, except when required to avoid a fielder in the act of fielding a batted ball, or if a fielder is in possession of the ball and is waiting to make a tag,. (The base path is not restricted to a straight line between the bases, either, but shall be interpreted by the umpire as a path reasonably taken by a runner in advancing in such a situation, such as “rounding” a base when advancing to the next, or trying to advance to second after running through first when an overthrow occurs.)

## Examples

1. Catcher sets up 3 feet up the third base foul line in the base path to receive a throw and tag a runner advancing from third. Runner slides short of plate and is tagged out. This is obstruction if, in the judgement of the umpire the catcher was not waiting with the ball to make the tag, and the umpire would immediately call time and permit the runner to advance to home. (Note that it is not an automatic run – the runner must still advance to home for the run to count, unless the defense fails to appeal.)
2. Batter hits to the infield and sprints to first. The throw to first is wide, and the first baseman steps to the home side of first and catches the throw in the base path and the players collide. This is not interference since it was not a batted ball. It is also not obstruction according to a note in the definition of obstruction which says “If a fielder is about to receive a thrown ball and if the ball is in flight directly toward and near enough to the fielder so he/she must occupy his/her position to receive the ball, the fielder may be considered in the act of fielding a ball.” The contact in this case is inconsequential and normal rules determine safe or out at first.
3. Batter gets a hit to the outfield. A runner on second rounds third to head for home, but the third baseman holds his position on the inside corner of third, causing the runner to run around him before heading for home. The ball is thrown home and the runner is tagged in a close play at the plate. This is obstruction by the third baseman, even if he tried to get out of the way, and the umpire would call time and permit the runner to advance to home.
4. Batter gets a hit to the outfield. A runner on second rounds third to head for home, but the third baseman holds his position on the inside corner of third, causing the runner to run around him before heading for home. The ball is thrown home and the runner is easily tagged at the plate. This is not obstruction if, in the umpire’s judgement, the runner wouldn’t have been safe anyway even if the hindrance at third had not occurred. Runner is out.
5. A runner at first runs into the first baseman, who is fielding a ground ball. This is interference, since the first baseman is fielding a batted ball (it does not matter if it is in the base path or not). The runner would be out, the ball would be dead at the time of interference, and the batter would be awarded first.
6. A runner at first runs more than 3 feet out of the base path to avoid the first baseman, who is fielding a ground ball. This is legal, and in fact, would be required to avoid interference. The runner is not out for running out of the base path because he is required to avoid a fielder fielding a batted ball, and he is not running out of the base path to avoid a tag.
7. A runner advances to second standing up and collides with the shortstop who is attempting to catch the ball and tag him out. This would normally be inconsequential. If the umpire judges that the shortstop had the ball and was waiting to make the tag,

and the contact was a result of the runner's action, he could call the runner out for failing to avoid the contact if he is not otherwise out (note that he is not required to slide, but to attempt to avoid contact (which is best done by sliding!)).

8. A runner on second runs into the shortstop while the shortstop and third baseman attempt to field a ground ball hit between them. If the umpire judges that the shortstop had the more reasonable chance to make the play, then this would be interference on the runner, and he would be out. If the umpire judges that the third baseman (or neither fielder) had the more reasonable play, then it would not be interference, but could be obstruction on the part of the shortstop, depending upon, if in the umpire's judgement, it hindered the runner in advancing.
9. A runner on first advances to second on a ground ball to the second baseman. After the second baseman fields the ball cleanly and stepping on second, the runner runs towards the second baseman waving his arms, but does not touch him. This is a different form of interference, even though there is no contact, and according to rule 7.09(f), the runner would be out by the force play, and the batter-runner would be called out for the interference by the runner put out at second. (Remember – there are many forms of interference, and contact is not required for all of them.)
10. A batter hits to an outfielder, who attempts to put out a runner at home. The batter-runner rounds first in an obvious attempt to advance to second, but runs into the first baseman who is holding the inside corner of first. The runner gets up from the ground, and decides that it is too late to continue to second and returns to first. No play is attempted to put out the batter-runner. This would be obstruction on the part of the first baseman, even if it was unintentional (it could be grounds for ejection if it was deemed intentional by the umpire!). In this case, play continues until no further action is evident, at which time the umpire calls time, and would normally award the runner second base.

### **A few notes:**

Obstruction and interference almost always require a judgement on the part of the umpire. Remember also that obstruction often happens “away from the ball”, and that the umpires are trained to primarily watch the ball, so they often may not see the obstruction. Field umpires often watch base runners for leaving before a fly ball is caught, or missing a base while running bases, but they do this by quickly scanning the bases when there are multiple runners, and unless something happens at the time they happen to be watching that base, or if it is obvious, it can easily be missed. Also remember an umpire not seeing an incident, or his judgement in deciding if there is or is not obstruction or interference, or his judgement in where the runners would have ended up if not for the obstruction, are all judgement calls, and are not grounds for protest.