



Home / Resources / Sports / Softball Points Of Emphasis 2026

Softball Points of Emphasis - 2026

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Obstruction

Obstruction is defined as the act of a defensive player who hinders or impedes a batter's attempt to make contact with a pitch or interferes with the legal progress of a runner or batter-runner advancing on the bases. This interference may be intentional or unintentional, and it can be either physical or verbal. However, obstruction does not apply if the defensive player is in possession of the ball or is making the initial play on a batted ball.

The central element in identifying obstruction lies in whether the runner's progress is actually impeded. If the runner or batter-runner is not affected—if there is no delay, no forced alteration of their path, or no hesitation—then by rule, obstruction has not occurred. A defensive player's mere presence or positioning, even if questionable, cannot be ruled as obstruction unless it results in an actual impediment to the runner. An exception exists only for a fake tag, which in itself constitutes obstruction, regardless of whether physical impediment occurs.

Impeding a runner means creating a negative effect on their ability to run the bases. This might include a runner slowing down, altering their intended path, stopping altogether, retreating to the previous base, or making contact with a fielder that disrupts their movement. These examples underscore that the umpire must rely on judgment to determine both whether the runner was impeded and to what extent their progress was affected.

Unlike many rule violations in softball that carry standardized penalties—such as awarding two bases for a thrown ball that goes out of play or one base for a pitched ball entering dead ball territory—obstruction rulings are situational and vary based on the specifics of each play. The purpose of the obstruction award is not to penalize the defensive team arbitrarily, but to nullify the negative effect of the obstruction. The runner is not being granted an advantage; rather, they are being restored to the position they would have achieved had the obstruction not occurred. This could mean advancing the runner or, in some cases, returning them to a previous base—whatever is necessary to correct the disruption caused by the obstruction, based on the umpire's judgment.

Maintaining an Unobstructed View of the Play

There are times when an umpire must move from their primary position to maintain an unobstructed view of a play. This is mentioned several times in the NFHS Softball Umpire Manual but, until now, there has not been any guidance for the umpire in the manual. Information has been added to the Umpire Manual to explain aspects of the play that should be considered when moving from the primary position to maintain an unobstructed view of the play.

There are key interactions of the four elements (offense, defense, ball, and base) on each play that need to be viewed clearly in order to make a judgment call. On tag plays:

- Defense contacting the offense with the ball (tagging the runner)
- Defense controlling the ball through the process of applying the tag
- Offense contacting the base.

All three of these key interactions must remain within the umpire's view in order to make an accurate judgment call on the play. Also, when adjusting, an umpire needs to maintain proper distance as to ensure no key interactions of the play are missed.

Details of each play like:

- Defensive positioning
- Direction, height and timing of the throw
- Path of the runner
- Timing of the ball and runner arriving near the base

All these items need to be evaluated in each particular play prior to moving from the primary positioning as each play develops slightly differently. Understanding how these items are going to come together on a particular play allows the umpire to determine where the key interactions will occur, allowing them to adjust, when necessary, to maintain an unobstructed view of the play.



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