

Simplifying the Pitching Regulations in Fast Pitch Softball

ABSTRACT

Pitching is arguably the most important aspect of the game of fast pitch softball. It is also the aspect that tends to generate the most controversy with respect to the correct, consistent enforcement of its rules. As a result, many experts argue that offensive production suffers at the hand of dominant, overpowering, and often illegal pitching, which makes for a less interesting spectator sport.

We propose a change to the fast pitch pitching regulations that will produce a number of significant benefits:

1. **Leveling of the playing field among pitchers** – There will no longer be an advantage gained by taller pitchers, pitchers with longer strides, or borderline illegal pitchers who “bend” the rules.
2. **Easier, more consistent enforcement of the rules** – Judging of illegal footwork becomes a simple matter of observing the location of the non-pivot (stride) foot at the time of release of the pitch.
3. **Opening up of the game offensively** – The scales between pitching and batting become more balanced.
4. **Increased player safety** – Because the pitcher’s plate now effectively becomes the *ending* point of the pitch (rather than the *starting* point), the pitcher is 3-8 feet (0.91 – 2.44 m.) farther from the batter at the time of release, resulting in increased time to react to batted balls.

Our proposed changes do not require pitchers to “relearn” their craft. To the contrary, not only do all currently legal techniques remain legal, but many pitching styles that were previously illegal (involving rocking, leaping, and crow-hopping, to name a few) now become legal as well. In fact, even techniques that were previously only used during instruction or warm-ups (such as the “walking long toss”) are also legal under the new, more liberal pitching rule.

The only foreseeable objection to the new rule is likely to be the increase in pitching distance. We feel that the benefits cited above, plus the added velocity from the increase in forward momentum that results from the “walking start” that will now be allowed, more than compensate for the slight increase in pitching distance.

Introduction

Consider for a moment the game of cricket. In many respects, cricket is strikingly similar to softball. A defensive player analogous to the pitcher in softball (the **bowler**) throws a ball toward a stationary batter (the **batsman** or **striker**), who tries to strike the thrown ball with his bat. Cricket bowlers, like softball pitchers, have a number of different styles – some rely on power and speed, while others get by on finesse, deception, and pinpoint accuracy.

The major differences in cricket bowling styles deal with footwork. “Power” bowlers take advantage of the long running start that is allowed in cricket to generate additional momentum and velocity at the time of release. “Spinners”, as some of cricket’s finesse bowlers are known, use a far shorter moving start, so as not to impede their accuracy. The common thread for both power bowlers and spinners is the point of release – in all cases, at the time of release, the forward (stride) foot must be in contact with the ground behind a line (the **popping crease**) that is 62 feet from the batsman’s **wicket** (analogous to home plate in softball). So, regardless of pitching styles or physical attributes, all cricket bowlers deliver the ball from the same minimum distance – 62 feet. For the umpire, the legality of the bowler’s footwork is very easy to judge – he only needs to observe the **position** of the stride foot at the point of release of the ball.

Now consider the footwork involved in fast pitch softball pitching. We have a pitcher’s plate, which is the **starting point** of the pitcher; both feet must be in contact with the pitcher’s plate prior to the start of the pitch. The pitcher is not allowed to step back off the pitcher’s plate at any time during the pitch. In addition, the pitcher is neither allowed to lift the pivot foot off the pitcher’s plate and replant it nor permitted to step forward (crow hop) and replant the pivot in front of the pitcher’s plate. Only one step with the non-pivot is allowed, which must be forward toward the batter and simultaneous with the release of the ball. During the push-off with the pivot foot, the pivot foot must remain in contact with the ground – leaping (having both feet airborne simultaneously) is illegal. The forward stride with the non-pivot foot can be as long or as short as desired – in this respect, taller pitchers can enjoy a significant advantage because their inherently longer strides place them as much as 8 feet (2.44 m.) closer to the batter at the time of release.

The Problems

As observed above, the current pitching regulations present a number of problems:

1. The current regulations are inherently unfair in terms of the actual distance between the batter and the pitcher at the time of release of the pitched ball. This is attributed to physical characteristics (some pitchers are taller than others and are thus capable of longer strides) and pitching styles (some pitchers choose to make a longer stride than others).
2. It is difficult for umpires to accurately and consistently judge the legality of a pitcher’s footwork. Umpires are routinely required to judge whether a pitcher’s foot is in contact with the pitcher’s plate or is just an inch or two or three in front of or behind it. Similar problems occur in judging whether or not a pitcher leaps during his delivery – in other words, how high off the ground is too high? The result is a lot of controversy, which takes away from the game itself.
3. Pitchers (and pitching coaches) have strong incentives to bend (if not break) the rules. Because pitching is such an important part of the game, so much of the pitching rule is open for interpretation, and so many umpires are reluctant to penalize violations, pitchers (like young children with their parents) “stretch” the rules - they know that they have little to lose and a lot to gain by violating the rules.
4. The safety of pitchers is in jeopardy. Players are now bigger and stronger. Every year, the technology of bats and balls improves dramatically – currently, the velocity of a batted ball can approach 100 mph (162 kph) at initial contact. These factors, combined with a batter-pitcher distance of as little as 30-33 feet (9.14 – 10.06 m.) at the point of release, make the pitcher extremely vulnerable to serious injury.
5. Because of the advantages enjoyed by pitchers, batters are placed at a disadvantage, which has caused offensive production to suffer. Many would argue that this makes for diminished spectator interest.

Over the years, there have been many discussions about how best to address this matter. One frequent proposal, lengthening the pitching distance by several feet, is a partial solution at best, but it would introduce other

problems; *e.g.*, existing playing fields would have to be modified to comply with the new distance, which in many cases would render them unusable by other games that share the same playing field.

The Solution

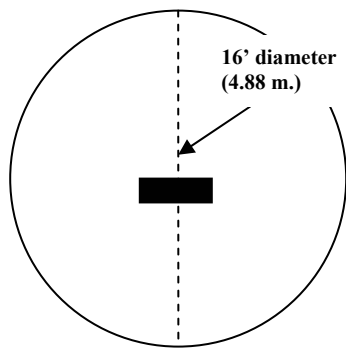
So, how do we fix the problems? If we look to cricket as a model, we can focus on the pitcher's footwork to simplify enforcement of the regulations, equalize the distance that the ball is thrown (regardless of a pitcher's height, length of stride, or pitching style), make the game safer for the pitcher, and bring offense back into the game. To do this, it is simply a matter of changing the way that we treat the pitcher's plate:

The pitcher's plate should be viewed as an ending point, rather than a starting point.

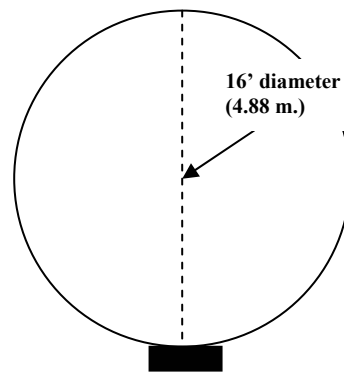
This simple change in perspective solves all the problems listed above, yet does nothing to alter the fundamental techniques of fast pitch pitching. The delivery remains the same. The basic footwork remains the same. Mechanically, nothing changes as far as the pitcher is concerned.

What changes, then? First, most of the various types of violations involving footwork (rocking, leaping, crow hopping, etc) become irrelevant and, in fact, can now be taught as legal techniques. Enforcing the rules regarding footwork becomes a simple matter of observing the placement of the stride foot relative to the pitcher's plate at the point of release – *if the stride foot is on or in front of the pitcher's plate at release, a violation has occurred*. Notice that no change in the position of the pitcher's plate is required (43 feet [13.11 m] for women, 46 feet [14.02 m] for men, 40 feet [12.2 m] for Youth Girls). Notice also that stepping on the plate is a violation – pitchers will be discouraged from trying to be too precise with their final stride, since making contact with the plate is likely to disrupt their delivery. This makes enforcement by the base umpires far easier.

The most significant change involves allowing the pitcher to have forward momentum (a **run-up**, so to speak) prior to the delivery, as in cricket. The length of the run-up will be limited by the diameter of the **pitcher's circle**, which is currently 16 feet (4.88 meters). This will require repositioning the pitcher's circle so that the pitcher's plate is at the **front edge** of the circle, rather than in the center of the circle. Previously, the pitcher's circle came into play only for making judgments about the so-called "Look-Back Rule." Under the proposed new rule, the pitcher's circle will limit the pitcher's run-up distance prior to delivery of the pitch. The following diagrams illustrate the current and proposed positioning of the pitcher's circle.



Current pitcher's circle – pitcher's plate in center



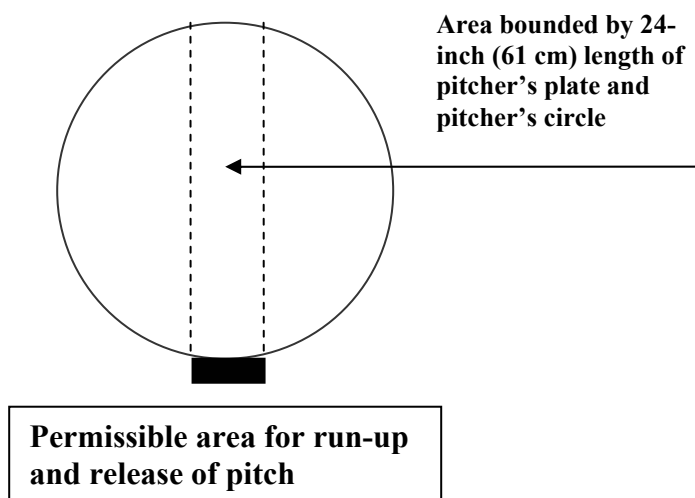
Proposed pitcher's circle – pitcher's plate at front edge

It is important to understand that the only change that is proposed here involves footwork. Specifically, no other aspect of the pitching rule will change – the rules dealing with the windup, the arm motion, the follow through, etc. are unchanged.

Under the proposed change, the pitcher may start the delivery anywhere within the pitcher's circle and within the 24-inch (61 cm) length of the pitcher's plate. After the preliminaries (*i.e.*, taking the signal with the hands separated, bringing the hands together, and then separating the hands prior to delivery), the pitcher may take as many forward steps as desired before releasing the pitch, subject to the following constraints:

1. **The forward steps must be within the area bounded by the pitcher's circle and the 24-inch (61 cm) length of the pitcher's plate.**
2. **At the time of release, the forward (stride) foot must be on the ground behind and within the 24-inch (61 cm) length of the pitcher's plate.**

The following diagram illustrates the areas described above:



To implement this proposed change, the following changes must be made to the text of the Fast Pitch Pitching Regulations (Rule 6):

- Sec 1.a – “May not take the pitching position ~~on or near the pitcher's plate~~ without having the ball in his possession” [*The deleted wording is irrelevant under the new rule.*]
- Sec 1.c – “Must have both feet on the ground ~~behind and~~ within the 61 cm (24 in) length of the pitcher's plate ~~and inside the 4.88 m (16-foot) circle. The hips shall be in line with first and third bases and both feet must be in contact with the pitcher's plate~~” [*The deleted wording is not really relevant, and the added wording reflects the new constraints described earlier.*]
- Sec 1.d – “Must, ~~while standing on the plate and~~ with the ball in either the glove or the pitching hand, take the signal, or appear to be taking a signal, from the catcher with the hands separated.” [*The signal must now be taken behind the pitcher's plate.*]
- Sec 1.e – “Must, after taking the signal, bring his whole body to a full and complete stop with the ball held in both hands in front of the body. This position must be held for not less than **two (2)** seconds and not more than **five (5)** seconds before **starting the pitch.**” [*Although not directly related to the changes proposed in this document, the modified text is a recommendation for reducing the permissible delay before the pitch is started.*]
- Sec 2 – “The pitch starts when one hand is taken off the ball, ~~or the first forward step is taken.~~” [*The new wording clarifies when the pitching process can be interrupted without penalty.*]
- Sec 3.g – “~~Both feet must remain in contact with the pitching plate at all times prior to the forward step.~~” [*No longer relevant. Note that all subsequent items in Section 3 are renumbered to reflect this deletion.*]
- Sec 3.h – “In the act of delivering the ball, the pitcher must take **one or more steps prior to or** simultaneous with the release of the ball. The steps must be forward toward the batter and within the 61cm (24 in) length of the pitcher's plate. **NOTE: It is not a step if the pitcher slides his foot across the**

~~pitcher's plate, provided contact is maintained with the plate. Lifting the pivot foot off the pitcher's plate and returning it to the plate, creating a rocking motion, is an illegal act. [This is now renumbered as Sec 3.g. The modified text reflects the now permissible run-up prior to release. The note can be removed because it is no longer relevant.]~~

- ~~Sec 3.i – “The pivot foot may remain in contact with, or may push off and drag away from, the pitcher's plate prior to the stepping (non-pivot) foot touching the ground, provided the pivot foot remains in contact with the ground.” [This section is no longer relevant.]~~
- ~~Sec 3.j – “Pushing off with the pivot foot from a place other than the pitcher's plate before the stepping (non-pivot) foot has left the plate is considered a “crow hop” and is illegal.” [This section is no longer relevant.]~~
- ~~Sec 3.h – “At the time of release of the pitch, the non-pivot (i.e., forward or stepping) foot must be on the ground behind and within the 61cm (24 in) length of the pitcher's plate.” [This is a new section that describes the legal foot position at the time of release – this can be considered the essence of the modified pitching rule!]~~
- ~~Sec 4 – Although not part of the proposed rule change presented in this document, this section needs to be changed to reflect the recent change to the procedure for intentional walks.~~
- ~~Sec 8 – “The pitcher, after he has taken the pitching position, shall not throw to a base during a live ball while his foot is in contact with the pitcher's plate. If the throw from the pitcher's plate occurs during a live ball appeal play, the appeal is cancelled. NOTE: The pitcher may remove himself from the pitching position by stepping backwards off the pitcher's plate prior to separating his hands. Stepping forward or sideways constitutes an Illegal Pitch.” [This section is no longer relevant, as the pitcher will no longer be standing on the pitcher's plate.]~~

Other Considerations

There is an element of the pitching procedure that will require some additional clarification under the proposed changes. Specifically, it concerns when a pitcher is or is not permitted to “interrupt” the pitching process by stepping off the pitcher's plate prior to delivering the pitch, which is currently addressed by the note in Section 8.

Under the current pitching rules, Section 2 states that “*The pitch starts when one hand is taken off the ball.*” The implication of this statement is that, subject to the time constraints in Section 3.m, the pitcher may request time out or step backwards off the pitching plate any time prior to separating the hands after bringing them together following the taking of the signal. This is the essence of the note in Section 8.

Under the proposal described in this document, the signal is not taken while standing on the pitcher's plate. As a result, it will not be possible to interrupt the pitching process after the hands have been brought together by stepping backwards off the pitcher's plate. Therefore, the only way to interrupt the pitching process after the hands have been brought together will be by verbally requesting time out from the umpire *before* separating the hands or taking the first forward step.

Conclusion

To summarize, the benefits that will result from the implementation of the proposed changes described in this document are:

1. Elimination of advantages that result from a pitcher's height or length of stride by changing the pitcher's plate from a **starting point** to an **ending point**.
2. Simplification of the enforcement of rules involving pitchers' footwork.
3. Increased safety for pitchers by effectively increasing the distance between pitcher and batter at the time of bat-ball contact.
4. Balancing of the scales between offense and defense

In conclusion, consider an anecdote from the 2003 ISF congress held in Nanjing, China. During the meeting of the Umpires Commission, Mr. Julio Hellberg (Regional UIC for Latin America) reported on significant

problems in enforcing the pitching rules, especially in the men's game. His observation was that a large percentage of pitchers were guilty of using various types of illegal footwork, particularly leaping and crow-hopping. Umpires who enforced the rules as written merely exposed themselves to abuse at the hands of irate pitchers and managers; consequently, they quickly found themselves ignoring the violations in order to survive. Mr. Hellberg's point was that, if we cannot achieve consistency among all umpires in the enforcement of marginally effective pitching rules, then why have the rules at all? The proposal outlined in this document is a significant step toward solving Mr. Hellberg's observed problems and is worthy of approval by the ISF's Rules Commission at its meeting in October.

The remainder of this document contains a full, edited version of the fast pitch pitching regulations that incorporates all the changes discussed in this proposal. Elements that can be removed from the current regulations are shown in red with a strikethrough, as in this ~~example~~. New text or modified text is shown in red.

RULE 6. PITCHING REGULATIONS (Fast Pitch Only).

N.B. The EFFECT for all Sections 1 - 7 follow at end of Section 7:

Sec. 1. PRELIMINARIES.

Before commencing the delivery (pitch), the pitcher

- a. May not take the pitching position ~~on or near the pitcher's plate~~ without having the ball in his possession.
- b. Shall not be considered in the pitching position unless the catcher is in position to receive the pitch.
- c. Must have both feet on the ground ~~behind and~~ within the 61cm (24 in) length of the pitcher's plate ~~and inside the 16-foot circle. The hips shall be in line with first and third bases and both feet must be in contact with the pitcher's plate.~~
- d. Must, ~~while standing on the plate and~~ with the ball in either the glove or the pitching hand, take the signal, or appear to be taking a signal, from the catcher with the hands separated.
- e. Must, after taking the signal, bring his whole body to a full and complete stop with the ball held in both hands in front of the body. This position must be held for not less than **two (2)** seconds and not more than **five (5)** seconds before **starting the pitch**.

Sec. 2. STARTING THE PITCH.

- a. The pitch starts when one hand is taken off the ball, ~~or the first forward step is taken~~.

Sec. 3. LEGAL DELIVERY.

- a. The pitcher must not make any motion to pitch without immediately delivering the ball to the batter.
- b. The pitcher must not use a pitching motion in which, after having the ball in both hands in the pitching position, he removes one hand from the ball, takes a backward and forward swing, and returns the ball to both hands in front of the body.
- c. The pitcher must not use a windup in which there is a stop, or reversal, of the forward motion.
- d. The pitcher must not make two revolutions of the arm on the windmill pitch. However, he may drop his arm to the side and to the rear before starting the windmill motion. This allows the arm to pass the hip twice.
- e. The delivery must be an underhanded motion, with the hand below the hip and the wrist not farther from the body than the elbow.
- f. The release of the ball and follow through of the hand and wrist must be forward and past the straight line of the body.

~~g. Both feet must remain in contact with the pitching plate at all times prior to the forward step.~~

g. In the act of delivering the ball, the pitcher must take **one or more steps** prior to or simultaneous with the release of the ball. The steps must be forward toward the batter and within the 61cm (24 in) length of the pitcher's plate.

~~NOTE: It is not a step if the pitcher slides his foot across the pitcher's plate, provided contact is maintained with the plate. Lifting the pivot foot off the pitcher's plate and returning it to the plate, creating a rocking motion, is an illegal act.~~

~~i. The pivot foot may remain in contact with, or may push off and drag away from, the pitcher's plate prior to the stepping (non-pivot) foot touching the ground, provided the pivot foot remains in contact with the ground.~~

~~j. Pushing off with the pivot foot from a place other than the pitcher's plate before the stepping (non-pivot) foot has left the plate is considered a "crow hop" and is illegal.~~

h. At the time of release of the pitch, the non-pivot (i.e., forward) foot must be on the ground behind and within the 61.0cm (24 in) length of the pitcher's plate.

i. The pitcher must not continue to wind up after releasing the ball.

j. The pitcher shall not deliberately drop, roll or bounce the ball in order to prevent the batter from hitting it.

k. The pitcher has 20 seconds to release the next pitch after receiving the ball, or after the umpire indicates, "Play Ball."

NOTE: An additional ball is awarded the batter.

Sec. 4. INTENTIONAL WALK.

If the pitcher desires to walk a batter intentionally all pitches must be legally delivered to the batter.

NOTE: A "pitch out" for the purpose of intentionally walking a batter is not considered an illegal pitch.

[Note: This section should be changed to reflect the new procedure that has been implemented for intentional walks.]

Sec. 5. DEFENSIVE POSITIONING.

a. The pitcher shall not deliver a pitch, unless all defensive players, except the catcher who must be in the catcher's box, are positioned in fair territory.

b. A fielder shall not take a position in the batter's line of vision or, with deliberate unsportsmanlike intent, act in a manner to distract the batter.

NOTE: A pitch does not have to be released. The offending player shall be ejected from the game.

c. With a runner on third base trying to score by means of a squeeze play or steal, no defensive player may

1. Step on, or in front of, home plate without the ball, or
2. Touch the batter or bat.

PENALTY: The ball is dead. The batter shall be awarded first base on the obstruction *and all runners shall advance one base on the Illegal Pitch.*

Sec. 6. FOREIGN SUBSTANCE.

a. No member of the defensive team shall, at any time during the game, be permitted to use any foreign substance on the ball.

NOTE: If any defensive team member continues to place a foreign substance on the ball, the pitcher shall be ejected from the game.

b. Applying resin to the ball, or into the glove and then placing the ball in the glove, is an illegal act. Resin must be kept on the ground behind the pitcher's plate when not in use.

c. Under the supervision and control of the umpire, powdered resin may be used to dry the hands.

d. The pitcher shall not wear tape on his fingers, or a sweatband, bracelet, or similar type item on the wrist or forearm of the pitching arm.

NOTE: If a pitcher needs to wear a sweatband on the pitching arm as a result of an injury, both arms should be covered with an undershirt.

Sec. 7. THE CATCHER.

a. Must remain within the lines of the catcher's box until the pitch is released.

b. Shall return the ball directly to the pitcher after each pitch, including after a foul ball.

NOTE: An additional ball shall be awarded to the batter.

EXCEPTION: This does not apply

1. After a strikeout, or
2. When the batter becomes a batter-runner, or
3. When there are runners on base, or
4. When a foul ball is fielded close to the foul line and the catcher throws to any base for a possible out, or
5. When, on a checked swing on a dropped third strike situation, the catcher throws to first base to retire the batter-runner.

~~**Sec. 8. THROWING TO A BASE.**~~

~~The pitcher, after he has taken the pitching position, shall not throw to a base during a live ball while his foot is in contact with the pitcher's plate. If the throw from the pitcher's plate occurs during a live ball appeal play, the appeal is cancelled.~~

~~NOTE: The pitcher may remove himself from the pitching position by stepping backwards off the pitcher's plate prior to separating his hands. Stepping forward or sideways constitutes an Illegal Pitch.~~

~~[Note: Sec. 8 is no longer relevant under the proposed new pitching rule.]~~

THE FOLLOWING IS THE EFFECT FOR ALL SECTIONS 1 - 7 ABOVE:

EFFECT - Sections 1-7:

Any infraction of Sections 1-7 is an Illegal Pitch. (EXCEPTION: Rules 6, Sec. 3k and Sec. 7b)

1. The umpire shall give a delayed dead ball signal.
2. If the illegal pitch is not hit
 - (a) An extra ball is awarded to the batter (first base if ball four), and
 - (b) Runners are advanced one base.

EXCEPTION: If a runner legally advances on the illegal pitch (passed ball or wild throw by the catcher), any extra bases obtained may be retained.

3. If the illegal pitch is hit, the manager of the offensive team has the option of taking
 - (a) The award for the illegal pitch, or
 - (b) The result of the play.

EXCEPTION: If the batter hits the ball and reaches first base safely, and if all other runners have advanced at least one base on the batted ball, the illegal pitch is nullified. All actions as a result of the batted ball stand and no option is given.

4. If the manager does not take the result of the play, the Illegal Pitch is enforced by awarding a ball to the batter (first base if ball four) and advancing all runners one base. The ball is dead.

5. When an illegal pitch hits the batter, the ball is dead, the batter is awarded first base and all runners are

advanced one base. No option is given.

Sec. 8. WARM-UP PITCHES.

a. At the beginning of each half inning, or when a pitcher relieves another, not more than one minute may be used to deliver not more than **three** pitches to the catcher or another team member.

EXCEPTION: This does not apply if the umpire delays the start, or resumption, of play due to substitution, conference, injuries, etc.

EFFECT – Sec. **8a**:

For excessive warm-up pitches, a pitcher shall be penalized by awarding a ball to the batter for each pitch in excess of **three**.

b. Play shall be suspended during this time.

c. A pitcher returning to pitch in the same half inning will not be entitled to warm-up pitches.

EFFECT – Sec. **8c**:

A ball shall be awarded to the batter for each pitch taken.

d. There is no limit to the number of times a player can return to the pitching position provided he has not:

1. Left the batting order, or
2. Been declared an Illegal Pitcher by the umpire.

Sec. 9. NO PITCH.

No pitch shall be declared when

a. The pitcher pitches during a suspension of play.

b. The pitcher attempts a quick return of the ball

1. Before the batter has taken his position, or
2. When the batter is off balance as a result of a previous pitch.

c. A runner is called out for leaving a base prior to the pitcher releasing the pitch.

d. The pitcher pitches before a runner has retouched his base after a foul ball has been declared and the ball is dead.

e. A player, manager, or coach

1. Calls "Time", or
2. Employs any other word or phrase, or
3. Commits any act while the ball is alive and in play for the obvious purpose of trying to make the pitcher commit an illegal pitch.

NOTE: A warning shall be issued to the offending team, and a repeat of this type act by any member of the team warned shall result in the offender being ejected from the game.

EFFECT - Sec. **9a-e**:

The ball **is** dead, and all subsequent action on that pitch is cancelled.

Sec. 10. DROPPED BALL.

If the ball slips from the pitcher's hand during his delivery:

1. A ball is declared on the batter, and
2. The ball will remain in play, and
3. The runners may advance at their own risk.

Sec. 11. ILLEGAL PITCHER.

A pitcher, who has been declared an Illegal Pitcher *as a result of the team exceeding the charged conference limit*, may not return to the pitching position at any time for the remainder of the game.

EFFECT - Sec. **11**:

If the Illegal Pitcher has returned and has thrown one pitch, either legal or illegal, he is ejected from the game. If he is discovered prior to the next pitch, the manager of the offensive team has the option of

1. Taking the result of the play, or
2. Having the play nullified, with runners returning to the last base held at the time of the play.

EXCEPTION: If the play was the result of the completion of the batter's turn at bat, that batter resumes batting, assuming the ball and strike count he had prior to the discovery of the Illegal Pitcher, with each runner returning to the base held at the time of the pitch.