Is it Time for this Baseball Rule to Change?

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BASEBALL SITUATION

This was not the first such incident and certainly would not be the last, but seldom were the stakes so high. Game 6 of the 2019 World Series between the Washington Nationals and Houston Astros at Minute Maid Park (Texas) was the setting. In the top of the seventh inning, Nationals’ shortstop Trea Turner hit a slow roller toward the left side of the infield. Although it was not a bunt attempt, the ball traveled as if it were. It was retrieved by the pitcher who threw toward first base, not where it could be caught, but rather at Turner’s back. In real time, it appeared that the ball, the first baseman’s glove, Turner’s back, his foot, and first base all made contact at about the same time. The ball ricocheted into foul territory as the glove was dropped by the fielder. The first base umpire indicated safe, but this was overturned by home plate umpire Sam Holbrook who ruled that the runner interfered with the throw to first base.

THE RULE

Mr. Holbrook cited Major League Baseball (MLB) Rule 5.09(a)(11) as the justification for the call. In essence, there is a three-foot wide area (aka, running lane/runner’s box) along the base path encompassing the last half of the distance between home plate and first base in which the runner must remain until reaching first base (Figure 1). [Note: The rule is only applicable when there is a potential force-out throw to first base.] The rule does not state that the umpire must call interference. It only states that he may, if in his judgment, interference has occurred. The fact that Turner violated this rule is likely not debatable, and whether or not it should have been enforced in this and in similar cases has been debated extensively. However, there has been comparatively little debate regarding the reasonableness of the rule itself.2

For the vast majority of the plays at first base, this rule is not enforced because it is almost never relevant. As an example,
for routine ground-outs by one of the infielders, the ball thrown to first base is nowhere near the runner. So, the fact that he is not in this running lane usually does not matter. As another example, even for routine sacrifice-bunts, the ball is deliberately thrown either to the left of first base, or over the runner’s head to ensure it can be caught without hitting the runner. It seems it is only when the call may be close that the ball appears to be thrown at the runner’s back, likely so that the home plate umpire will be influenced to call interference. And of course, the first baseman is very skilled at “dropping” his glove which probably serves no purpose except to add dramatic effect. How many times have you seen a fielder drop his glove after making contact with a person or object (e.g., the outfield fence)? It virtually never happens. Yet, during this so-called interference scenario, it happens often.

Hall of Fame pitcher John Smoltz, the Fox Sports analyst during that World Series TV broadcast, stated that “players are taught to make that throw” so that interference will be called. During the massive debate that followed this incident, Turner attempted to make his case that he ran where he had to run in order to reach first base. Although he did not claim to adhere to the rule, he may have been correct that he ran where he had to run. There is no doubt that he ran to first base in the most efficient manner possible.

**RUNNING A STRAIGHT LINE?**

As everyone knows, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Therefore, a right-handed batter will tend to be in fair territory the entire distance between home plate and first base (Figure 2). Even a left-handed batter will be to the inside of the foul line for most of the last 20 feet of that distance — an area where it is not permitted (Figure 3). A left-handed batter will typically enter the running lane in the actual spot which the rule dictates, although in his case, it is a matter of coincidence rather than intent since he leaves the batter’s box in foul territory. In order to affect his run in a straight line, he has to cross the foul line well before first base.

The phrase “...in the immediate vicinity of first base...” in the last sentence of “MLB Rule 5.09(a)(11) Comment” identifies a necessary condition before a shift to the base may be attempted by the runner. So, what exactly is meant by “immediate vicinity?” Literally, this could mean “an infinitesimal distance,” but of course, that is not the intent, but exactly what is intended?

**REACTION TIMES**

What if one wishes to give the MLB rules committee the benefit of the doubt and interpret “immediate vicinity” as loosely and as generously as possible? Is this rule at all practical? Consider the following thought experiment: One necessary data point would be the time duration required to move from the running lane to first base. For comparison purposes, Dr. Marc Green, about whom it has been reported to have studied the concept of human reaction time for many years, estimates that while driving a vehicle, the average duration required to move one’s foot from the accelerator to the brake pedal is 0.7 seconds with reaction likely 0.5 seconds and movement 0.2 seconds. This distance is probably much smaller than where a runner would be in the three-foot area, but considering that MLB players are professional athletes, let us assume he can move his foot toward first base in 0.1 second. The fastest MLB runners can approach 30 ft/s by the time they reach first base. At this speed, he would have to begin this effort about three feet before first base. Ideally, the runner would like to land with his heel in the dirt and the front of his foot on the base. This minimizes the distance needed to travel and also minimizes the chance of injury. The last place he wants to land is “hang five” at the back part of the bag. However generous one wants to interpret “immediate vicinity,” three feet would not seem to be what is intended by the wording. But wait, even that is not soon enough.

The runner will actually need to begin this effort to shift toward first base at the point where his right foot is planted at least one step before the bag. He cannot make this shift in the air. Since his center of mass will continue going straight when he moves his left leg toward first base, the rest of his body will move slightly to the right. Can you imagine what would happen if you landed on first base with your left foot while the rest of your body is shifting to the right while running? The mere thought of such an event is probably painful.

For short distances, the average running stride length for men is around 7 feet 9 inches. Intuitively, for tall MLB players, it is likely about 8 feet. Therefore, the average running step length for players is probably around 4 feet. So, if 3 feet before first base does not satisfy the rule, 4 feet will not either.
Even if it were permitted, making such a shift running at full speed may not be wise. There are enough injuries running in a straight line to first base. For example, on May 13 of last year, Atlanta Braves’ right fielder Ronald Acuña Jr. injured his ankle after landing on first base. Although this type of injury does not happen often, it certainly is not unheard of. So, MLB is proposing that the runner has to add lateral movement to this effort, another degree of motion, which would make injury even more likely.

But wait, what if the move cannot be accomplished in 0.1 second? What if the scenario of moving one’s foot from gas to brake while driving is analogous to shifting from the runner’s box to first base, and 0.2 seconds is the right duration? Now, that move must begin a full stride (8 feet) before reaching first base. However, that assumes the runner’s right foot is the one planted at that spot. If his left foot is there, and he attempts to begin that shift with his right foot, he will trip himself. Looking at several videos, it appears that both right-handed and left-handed batters (who are tall and fast) tend to land on first base with their left foot. This makes sense if there is only one step difference between the two runners’ distances while each runner will begin running with his dominant foot. Considering each batting stance, this is almost the only possible way he could start his run. Hence, in this case, the shift will actually need to begin 12 feet before first base. Furthermore, that last step toward first base is sometimes a leap. One does not want to run and then leap unless going in a straight line.

**HOW YOU GET TO FIRST BASE**

Actually, there is one scenario during which the runner could easily adhere to this rule. If he remains in the three-foot area and slides head first with his left arm outstretched, he could swipe first base as he is going past it. However, according to MLB with the aid of Statcast, a case was made that running the full distance to first base was faster than sliding into first base. This is intuitively obvious to most people since (unlike the other two bases) running past first base is permitted.

What difference does it make where the runner was before reaching first base since he will be at first base when reaching first base?? In other words, if in that World Series game Turner was in the runner’s lane and was somehow able to miraculously shift toward first base a split second before landing there, he would still be at the same position he was in when the ball hit him (assuming for argument’s sake it did not take longer to get to the bag). Apparently, with the umpires’ thinking, this does matter.

In an online video “TECH TALK: Running inside the base paths with umpire Ted Barrett” dated May 7, 2015, Barrett discusses the running lane with Fox Sports Ohio’s Chris Welsh. At one point, Mr. Barrett says, “So, about a step or two before the base, we allow him to go into fair territory to touch the bag. And so, you might see a ball hit him just in front of first base, he’s okay because we allow him to … come into fair territory to physically touch the bag.” It certainly makes sense that one step (for a slow jog) and at least two steps (for running full speed) should be allowed since there is no other way to accomplish this feat as previously indicated. That begs the question, what is the purpose of the term “immediate vicinity?” It seems to be superfluous and completely irrelevant. Immediately after that last quote, Mr. Barrett points to the foul line and says, “If he’s running inside this line all the way and he gets hit with a thrown ball, he’s probably going to be out for interference.” The wording of this sentence and the previous use of “we” (two times) strongly implies that Mr. Barrett is speaking for most umpires.

Even though the umpires have discretion regarding whether or not to call interference, it appears they are choosing to penalize the runner for not being in the running lane even though the scenario at the end of the play is the same (i.e., the runner gets hit with the ball as he lands on first base, while in one case, he was previously in the lane before that occurrence and in the other case he was not there). Perhaps, it was this mindset that compelled Sam Holbrook to call interference in the World Series game previously discussed.

**PROPOSED RULE CHANGE**

This seems to violate logic in addition to being inconsistent with other rules of baseball. For example, if a ball is hit into foul territory, and then enters fair territory before reaching first or third base and remains there, it will be declared fair. Whether it was previously in foul territory does not matter. Also consider, if an infielder attempts to retrieve a ground ball, and misplays it miserably but somehow is still able to throw the runner out, he will not be charged with an error despite his clumsy fielding effort.

MLB Rule 5.09(a)(11) should be modified so that the so-called three-foot area is eliminated and allow the runner to do what he is already doing almost all the time, namely running directly from the batter’s box to first base. He wants to ensure he lands near the middle of the bag because too close to either side will likely result in an injury. Almost no one runs in the running lane as the rule dictates. It is probably the most under-used section of real estate on the entire baseball field.

**OTHER EXAMPLES**

Would there still be a need to prevent runner interference? Sure, if the runner is to the left of the bag, whether intentional or not, this could be the new criterion for calling interference. With this change, the fielder will not be intentionally throwing at the runner, and the first baseman will likely not attempt to catch the ball if he does. This will eliminate other related injuries such as what happened to first baseman Max Muncy on the last day of the 2021 regular season, when the Los Angeles Dodgers were hosting the Milwaukee Brewers. In the third inning, the
Brewers’ Jace Peterson hit a slow roller toward the pitcher that was retrieved by Muncy’s teammate, catcher Will Smith. Seeing that the play would be close, he may have intentionally thrown the ball at the runner’s back. Intentional or not, that is where it went. Muncy attempted to catch the ball, but instead the runner collided with his glove and Muncy, much to the chagrin of all who watched, fell to the ground with an injured elbow, which was later determined to be dislocated. In this case, Max held onto his glove immediately after the collision and then released it because of the injury. Is it not reasonable to believe that Muncy could have seen the runner approaching within his peripheral vision? What if he made the catch attempt for the sole purpose of influencing the umpire to call interference? Ultimately, the home plate umpire did call the runner out due to interference. Certainly, Peterson did what he always does when going from home plate to first base after a batted fair ball, except this time he was called out, neither from a force-out nor because he was tagged, but rather because the ball was thrown at his back, something that otherwise has not been permitted in more than 150 years. MLB Rule 5.09(a)(11) as currently stated may have contributed to Muncy’s injury.

Consider the following hypothetical scenario: Bases are loaded. A slow roller is hit, retrieved by the fielder a couple of feet to the right of third base, and he will attempt to make a play at home. The catcher will be standing up with at least one foot on home plate since it is a potential force out. The runner who was on third base is running straight home, and there is no rule disallowing him from doing so. There is no running lane in foul territory in the last 45 feet before home plate. The runner does not have to slide, he may remain upright all the way home. He does not have to stop at home, he can keep running after stepping on home plate. The only difference between this scenario and an analogous one at first base is the frequency of incidents. Yet, in the latter case, all the fielder has to do to make the out is throw the ball at the runner as a school-yard kid who does not know any better might do and the former must do so as a professional.

According to author, Peter E. Meltzer, this running lane has been in use since 1881. However, prior to 1887, half of each first and third bases were in foul territory (Figure 4). At that time, it was logical to require the runner to stay in the running lane since he could remain there all the way to and touching first base. In 1887, those bases were moved to their current locations, probably to make it easier for umpires to judge fair/foul balls. By solving one problem, another was created to what exists now: an impractical restriction for the runner approaching first base.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

MLB has already made rule changes to protect player safety. For example, there was recently a rule added that does not allow the catcher to block home plate while a runner is attempting to score. This has greatly reduced the number of collisions that occur in that area. Hopefully, some serious analysis of Rule 5.09(a)(11) will be considered soon.

MLB has also been focused on shortening the length of games. During that 2019 World Series game, there was a delay that lasted more than four and a half minutes debating the legitimacy of this rule’s implementation. Although certainly not as long, other such incidents in regular season games have also caused delays.

MLB has also been focused on increasing offense. Modifying this rule as suggested will result in fewer called outs at first base. So, we will have improved player safety, shorter baseball games, and potentially more offense. This seems like a win for baseball and fans.

**THE AUTHOR WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING FOR PROVIDING VALUABLE CONTENT AND LITERARY FEEDBACK:** Wayne L. Elban, Ph.D., DE A ‘69, Professor Emeritus at Loyola University Maryland; Ed Price, CAA baseball agent; and Marylou Chiarito, retired biology teacher and the author’s wife.

**WORKS CITED**

2. At least one other writer has done this in a delightfully candid article written from a player’s perspective by Doug Glanville, posted the day after that World Series game, — “Glanville: I’ve despised the running lane rule since I was a player. Here’s why it needs to change.” https://theathletic.com/1336629/2019/10/30/glanville-ive-despised-the-running-lane-rule-since-i-was-a-player-heres-why-it-needs-to-change/
8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zl82sPn1Uj0
11. Meltzer, Peter, E. “So You Think You Know Baseball?: A Fan’s Guide to the Official Rules,” p. 152. [Note: At the time of this publication, MLB Rule 5.09(a)(11) was referred to as Rule 6.05(k)].