

The Dreaded Balk Rules

What is a “balk”?

Remember: A balk can only occur in baseball, there is no such thing as a balk in softball.

A balk is an illegal act by the pitcher with a runner or runners on base. It entitles all runners to advance one base, and it is a delayed dead ball (except in high school where it is a dead ball and nothing else may happen). Since it is a delayed dead ball in almost all codes (HS excepted), it is important to remember that if the ball is pitched, and the batter hits the ball, there may be options, so you must familiarize yourself with the options that are available if that happens. Thus, if you declare the balk early and loud enough, the pitcher may stop his motion and you won't have to deal with those options.

The intent of the balk rule is to *prevent the pitcher from deceiving the runner(s)*. *Umpires are instructed to rule based on the “intent” of the pitcher if there is any doubt.* Of course, there are obvious circumstances where the determination is essentially made for you. But, as we all know, there are those marginal situations and when they occur you should judge whether there was intent, and whether he deceived.

It is important that we note that to change a players status from *infielder* to *pitcher* it is necessary to step on the pitcher's plate (rubber) and to change their status back to *infielder*, they must step back off the rubber with their PIVOT foot.

In official MLB rules, there are many (13) different ways to balk:

1. The pitcher makes his natural pitching motion but fails to pitch to home.
2. The pitcher feints (fakes) a throw to first base, while touching the rubber, but fails to make the throw. The pitcher may, however, fake a throw to second or third base as long as there are runners on those bases. If the pitcher steps BACK off the rubber, they are not obliged to throw.
3. The pitcher fails to step directly toward a base before throwing to that base. Note that you cannot throw THEN step. Umpires judgement is the determining factor as to whether they stepped towards the base. The general rule of thumb is did they step within a 45 degree angle to first, for example.
4. The pitcher throws or fakes a throw to an UNOCCUPIED base, except for the purpose of making a play. For example, if a runner breaks for second, it is acceptable to throw to second base even though he turned toward first as long as it is a continuous motion toward second.
5. The pitcher makes an illegal pitch. A quick pitch is illegal, pitching from off the rubber is illegal (see below).
6. The pitcher delivers the ball to the batter while they are not facing the batter.

7. The pitcher makes any motion naturally associated with the pitch while they are not touching the rubber.
8. The pitcher unnecessarily delays the game.
9. The pitcher fakes a pitch without the ball; it does not matter whether he is on the rubber or not.
10. The pitcher, after coming to a legal pitching position, (usually sets), removes one hand from the ball (other than releasing the ball on the throw).
11. The pitcher accidentally or intentionally drops the ball while on the rubber.
12. The pitcher, while delivering an intentional base on balls, pitches when the catcher is not in the catcher's box. Catcher has to start in the catcher's box and then move outside after the pitch leaves the pitcher's hand to catch the ball. This has been referred to in the past as a "catcher's balk".
13. The pitcher delivers from the set position without coming to a discernible stop. A change in direction is not a stop (called rolling through the pitch).

Most common mistakes made by pitchers:

- a. Turning their shoulders toward first base to look at the runner before coming to the set position. Shoulders should be still, and head may turn. Turning the body towards first after coming to a set is considered to be a move toward first and then they have to step and throw. Be lenient on this with developing and younger pitchers, however, if it is deceptive, penalize.
- b. Not stopping after coming to a stop in the set position.
- c. Moving the ball from hand to mitt to hand while on the rubber waiting to pitch.
- d. Stopping motion to the plate when a runner attempts to steal
- e. Attempting the "hidden ball trick" and stepping onto the mound without the ball. If a pitcher steps onto the mound (the circle of dirt around the pitching rubber) without the ball signaling the start of the next play, it is ruled a balk by default.