

Softball Rules Changes - 2026

1-9-6: No player shall transmit or record audio or video from the playing surface. New language further clarifies the use of electronic devices and what is not permitted.

Rationale: This change clearly defines the types of electronic devices prohibited by the rule.

Rule 8: Rule 8 has been reformatted for clarity. Changes have separated longer articles, and organized exceptions, penalties, and effects into outline format for improved comprehension.

Rationale: Added article references to PENALTIES and EFFECTS, and Section 4 was separated into two sections addressing runners entitled to advance with and without liability to be put out to delineate differences.

10-4-2: Umpires have the option of wearing heather gray, charcoal gray, or navy blue slacks. Effective January 1, 2027, heather gray slacks will no longer be permitted as part of the umpire's uniform.

Rationale: Manufacturers have discontinued producing heather gray umpire pants. This change will assist umpires in the purchase of pants that are currently being manufactured.

2026 SOFTBALL EDITORIAL CHANGES

1-6, 2-25-3, 3-2-3a &b, 4-3-2, 7-1-1, 7-2-2, 8-2-4 EXCEPTION, 8-2-12 PENALTY 2, 8-5-2 PENALTIES 1 & 2, 8-7-14 PENALTY 2, 8-7-16 PENALTY 2, 8-9-15c, 8-9-15 PENALTIES

2026 SOFTBALL COMMENTS (Based on Rules)

1-9-6: With the increasing accessibility and use of electronic devices, it is important to establish clear boundaries for their use in competitive softball. Players shall not record audio or video while on the playing surface, as doing so presents significant safety risks and potential distractions that can compromise the integrity of the game. Movement and recording during live play—whether with handheld devices, wearable cameras, or phones—can interfere with a player's ability to perform safely and effectively. Handheld equipment may limit a player's capacity to catch or throw a ball, while wearable devices can become entanglement hazards or create impact risks during high-speed plays or collisions. Additionally, extra foot traffic or positioning for the sake of capturing footage can unintentionally place individuals in the path of play, leading to unnecessary contact or disruption. Beyond safety, the use of recording equipment on the field raises concerns around focus and liability. Players distracted by filming may not respond as quickly to the ball or to their teammates, and their inattention could increase the chance of injury. Moreover, audio recordings introduce privacy and liability considerations, especially when capturing conversations during competition. For these reasons, no player is permitted to record while on the field of play. The emphasis must remain on maintaining a safe, focused, and fair playing environment for all participants.

Rule 8: To improve clarity and enhance the overall usability of the rules, the existing content was reorganized into a structured outline format. This new layout allows for easier navigation and better comprehension of key concepts by clearly separating topics and presenting information in a logical, accessible sequence. One significant change involved dividing the original Section 8-4 into two distinct sections. This split more clearly distinguishes between situations in which runners are entitled to advance without liability to be put out and those where they advance with liability. By isolating these scenarios, officials, coaches, and players can more readily understand the conditions under which runners are protected or at risk during play. Additionally, article references were added to corresponding PENALTIES and EFFECTS. This change provides direct links between specific rule violations and their consequences, eliminating ambiguity and helping users quickly identify the appropriate rulings and applications. The result is a cleaner, more intuitive rule structure that supports accurate rule enforcement and improved learning.

10-4-2: Effective January 1, 2027, heather gray umpire pants will no longer be permitted for use, as manufacturers have discontinued their production. This update reflects a practical shift to ensure that umpires can purchase and wear uniform pants that are currently being manufactured and readily available through suppliers. Moving forward, umpires will be expected to wear pants in either charcoal gray or navy, both of which are actively produced and supported by major manufacturers. The transition to these colors—particularly charcoal gray—provides consistency in appearance while allowing state associations and officials to align with what is accessible in the current marketplace. This change comes in response to ongoing feedback from state associations, which emphasized the challenges officials face in locating heather gray pants and the need for standardized, available uniform options. By establishing a clear implementation date and aligning with existing production trends, this adjustment supports both uniformity and ease of compliance across all levels of competition. Pants in either heather or charcoal gray will be legal until January 1, 2027, when charcoal pants will be required.

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.