

FIU Law Review

Volume 13

Number 5 *Micro-Symposium: Infield Fly Rule Is in Effect: The History and Strategy of Baseball's Most (In)Famous Rule*

Article 8

Spring 2019

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Online ISSN: 2643-7759

Recommended Citation

Richard Hershberger, *The Prehistory of the Infield Fly Rule*, 13 FIU L. Rev. 943 (2019).

Available at: <https://ecollections.law.fiu.edu/lawreview/vol13/iss5/8>

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THE PREHISTORY OF THE INFIELD FLY RULE

Richard Hersherberger*

Professor Wasserman has given us an exacting analysis of the logical conundrum behind the infield fly rule: how it addresses the peculiarities of the infield fly situation, with that situation presenting the runners with an unsolvable dilemma and the fielder with a perverse incentive to intentionally muff a fly ball. These are conventionally taken as collectively being the reasons behind the rule. The infield fly rule has, however, a prehistory that is not widely known, with a more pragmatic reason for its existence.

On May 13, 1872, in a National Association game between the Athletics of Philadelphia and the Troy, New York club, the Athletics had the bases loaded with one out in the top of the ninth inning. (The game was played in Philadelphia. The order the teams came to bat was at that time determined by a coin toss before the game.) Wes Fisler of the Athletics hit an easy fly ball to Davy Force, the Troy shortstop. Force intentionally dropped the ball so as to keep the force play intact, then picked the ball up and threw it to third, intending to put out Levy Meyerle, the runner from second. The umpire that day was Nicholas Young, the secretary of the National Association and future secretary, and eventually president, of the National League. Young called Fisler out, ruling that the fly ball had been caught, and McBride out at third for failing to tag up on the fly.¹

This was a controversial call, at least in principle. A disputed call by the umpire could, in this era, result in a literal riot, but the Athletics had already scored ten runs that inning, and they won the game 25–5. The controversy was therefore more academic than practical, but a controversy nonetheless. What justification did Young have to rule the ball, which was dropped, to have been caught? The ball had, after all, been held but momentarily.

How long must the ball be held before it is ruled a catch? This question rarely arises in modern baseball. Occasionally, a fielder makes the catch then fumbles a hurried transfer to his throwing hand. This is almost always ruled a catch. Fans might raise their eyebrows, but these situations do not result in arguments on the field. An outfielder might attempt a shoestring catch and go tumbling. This situation presents no mystery. At the end of his tumble he will

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¹ This version is based on a combination of the game accounts in the *ALL-DAY CITY ITEM* (Philadelphia), May 14, 1872 and the *SUNDAY MERCURY* (Philadelphia), May 19, 1872.

either triumphantly hold up the ball or not, and the ruling will follow accordingly.

The infield fly play is another matter. It might feature a high pop-up, falling straight down, with the infielder simply letting it fall in front of him and taking it on the bounce. More often, it is not so simple. The infielder must stop the ball while it is in flight, guiding it to the ground in a controlled manner. The line is not clear between muffing the ball and completing the catch and subsequently dropping the ball.

Where to draw the line? How do we decide what is and is not a catch? This is a familiar problem in American sports. Just not in baseball. We see it every weekend in the fall watching football games. The game stops while the play is reviewed frame by frame from multiple high definition cameras, until finally the referee announces what had happened. No one finds this a salutary feature of the game.

This was, even without the benefit of replay, the problem Young faced in 1872. This problem was built into the infield fly play. Young's answer, taking the ball as caught, was really the only possible one. Suppose he had gone the other way, ruling the ball muffed late in the play. In this interpretation, the infielder could catch the ball, observe at leisure the actions of the runners, and if they were to return to their bases, the infielder could then drop the ball, reopening the force. The ball must at some point be ruled caught. This can be unambiguous only by ruling this earlier rather than later.

The National Association implicitly ratified Young's interpretation two years later, adding language to the 1874 rules that a batter was out if a caught fly ball was held but "momentarily." Over the course of the 1880s, Young would, in his official National League capacity, reinforce this point. He instructed National League umpires in 1883, for example, to "rule that if a fielder even stops the force of the fly ball, with the object of effecting a double play, the ball shall be decided as having been caught and held."²

The infield fly rule in its modern form was a product of the 1890s. The Players League of 1890 adopted an explicit version. The National League followed suit in 1894, with a few kinks worked out over the next few years. This today is taken to be the beginnings of the rule, but at the time was understood as being a clarification of the existing rule. So, when the umpire was criticized for calling an infield fly in the Players League game of April 30, 1890, between Brooklyn and New York, the response was that the ruling was consistent with how the rule had always been interpreted. The rule was restated, but not novel.³

² *Too Little Left to Their Discretion—The Fly Ball Question*, SPORTING LIFE (Philadelphia), June 3, 1883, at 2.

³ *A Rule That Has Not Been Observed*, THE SUN (New York), May 4, 1890, at 5.

Rules are changed in a cycle of problem and response. Sometimes the response is so successful that people forget what the problem was in the first place. Such is the case with the infield fly rule. The issues with the baserunner's dilemma and the perverse incentives to the fielder were part of the discussion in the 1890s, but during the prehistory of the rule the two decades before, the discussion was about what is and is not a catch. The solution was so completely successful that we have forgotten that it ever was a problem.

And this, finally, brings us to the pragmatic reason for keeping the infield fly rule. Were it to be abolished, we would soon be reminded of the problem, to our regret.