

Manage Dead Time for the Right Pace

Baseball is played without a clock, but increasing game times are very much on the minds of many involved with overseeing the game, particularly at those upper levels where television contracts and drawing fans into seats are big concerns.

With an eye toward keeping games moving, MLB effectively eliminated the third-to-first move (by treating first and third base the same — a pitcher can't feint there) and instituted no-pitch intentional walks. Minor League Baseball is testing visible pitch clocks. Last year, the NCAA allowed the Southeastern Conference to test coach-to-catcher electronic communication to speed up pitch-calling.

For a game that doesn't run on a clock, baseball is a game that benefits from a certain pace of play. Not that it needs to be rushed, but there's dead time that needs to be managed better. And, as umpires, we're not getting paid by the minute.

While there are many things outside the control of umpires, there are matters under the rules upon which umpires should remain diligent to keep the game moving appropriately. These include:

- Enforce the time limits between half-innings. Count the pitches and let the catcher know, "Catcher, one more and then take it down." Show how many more pitches to the pitcher and on-deck batter, so everyone knows to be ready in two pitches.
- Don't wait until you run out of baseballs to alert a coach or attendant that you're low.
- Make sure batters are staying in the box according to the rules. If they're not, remind them. Letting them know you'll have to call a strike if they step out tends to solve the problem. And if that doesn't work, enforce the appropriate penalties under the rules.
- Show some hustle. Jog back to the plate after breaking up a conference at the mound. (And don't let those conferences stretch endlessly; break them up after a reasonable time.) As the base umpire, after the third out, jog out to your between-inning spot in the outfield. Being a model for hustle will often inspire players to show a little hustle themselves — they don't want to seem slower and less inspired than the umpires.
- Between innings, don't get together needlessly with your partner(s). Count the warmup pitches and get the game moving. If the plate umpire needs to take a substitution, the base umpire should count the pitches and flash the number remaining (or whatever prearranged signal was

worked out before the game, such as a winding of a finger) once the plate umpire is done noting the lineup changes.

- At levels where stopwatches are required, make sure they're not forgotten in an equipment bag.
- All levels have a rarely enforced rules provision regarding time to deliver pitches. In NFHS, pitchers have 20 seconds to deliver the next pitch or make or attempt a play, including a legal feint (6-2-2c). Otherwise, a ball is awarded to the batter. NCAA rules apply a similar 20-second requirement, but only with the bases empty and a warning is first issued to a pitcher before a ball is awarded (7-5c). In pro, there's a rule aimed at unnecessary delays that gives the pitchers 12 seconds to throw the pitch with the bases empty (5.07c). If supervisors want that enforced, it's a tool in an umpire's arsenal (a visible pitch clock would certainly help to avoid potential disputes that would create arguments that take up more time than would be saved by enforcing the rule).

Innings may not run on a clock, but the game benefits from moving along at a certain pace. Umpires should make sure they're enforcing the rules that help keep that pace going.