The Infield Fly Rule
The most confusing rule in the book?

Of all the rules that are in the rulebook, the infield fly rule is perhaps the one that's the most difficult for people to visualize. Its definition is certainly one of the most complex – you have to have runners on first and second or first, second and third, and you have to have fewer than two outs, and then you have to have a ball hit high in the air, and the ball has to be able to be caught by an infielder with "ordinary effort." If you have all that, then the batter's out. Huh? What were they thinking?

As with many of the rules, it's best to go back to the play that this rule was designed to cover. Realize that in the situation described (R1/R2 or R1/R2/R3 and fewer than two outs) we have a least two runners that will be forced to advance if the batter hits the ball. So let's suppose that the batter pops the ball up right over the shortstop. The ball's an easy catch, so the second baseman has a chance to kind of scope out the infield, and sees that R1 and R2 are both hugging their bags. So, being a crafty type, he steps back, allows the ball to bounce, and then whips it to third for one out, followed by a relay to second for a second out. (We're assuming that the batter's doing what he should be and legging it out towards first – if the ball's high in the air, he should be able to make it there.) So, the defense has gotten a double play out of a pop-up.

Of course, if the base runners try to prevent this by, say, going half-way, then the shortstop catches the ball and throws behind one of the runners. Again, a double play on a pop-up.

Somewhere back in time, the Lords Of Baseball decided that this wasn't really fair to the offense. (Probably after somebody did this once or twice.) So, they created the Infield Fly Rule. By automatically declaring the batter out in this situation, the force is automatically removed on the runners, thus allowing them to stay on their bases with confidence that they won't be doubled off.

That's why this rule is in the book – to protect the baserunners.

It also helps explain the restrictions on the situation. If there are two outs, there's no incentive for the defense to be trying for a double play, so there's no reason to grant an "automatic out." Similarly, if first and second aren't both occupied, then there aren't two runners forced, and the defense never has the opportunity to set up this play. (Remember, we assume everybody on the offense is trying to do his or her job, which means that the batter is hightailing it down to first as the ball is in the air.) If the ball is hit to the outfield, or if it's going to be a tough catch for the infielder, again the "special" play by the defense is unlikely to work, since dropping the ball isn't going to leave the defense in easy control of the situation. It's only when the full combination of events comes together – two runners forced, incentive to create a double play, and a ball that's easy to manage – that the protection is needed.

Now, obviously most Little Leaguers aren't sneaky enough (or talented enough) to actually pull off the play that the rule was designed to outlaw, but the rule is in the book and thus it should be called.

In my opinion, however, understanding the intent of the rule comes in handy when applying it in marginal situations.

First, I've lost count of the number of times that an infielder drops a little hump-back liner and then we have a mad scramble, three overthrows, two runs scoring, etc., and after it all, the defensive manager comes out and wants me to make an infield fly call so that he manages to get at least one out on the play. Sorry, skipper – the rule is designed to protect the offense, not to give your team a cheap out when they can't catch the ball. "High in the air" means "high in the air," not "any ball that makes it to an infielder in the air." How high? Again, that's a judgment call, but to borrow a phrase from Potter Stewart, I know it when I see it.

Second, I use a very large grain of salt in determining what "ordinary effort" means when I'm working games involving the younger kids. When I see the ball go up in the air, turn over and start down, there had better be somebody camped right underneath it with his or her glove in the air, or this may not meet my definition of "ordinary effort." As the players get older, of course, things will loosen up a bit, but I'm still looking for someone more or less underneath the ball, and either calling for it or obviously intending to catch it. If a player has to run hard for the ball (say, one popped up mid-way between home and third with both the pitcher and third baseman charging it), or if they have to turn their back and run away from the infield, this probably doesn't constitute "ordinary effort." Your mileage (and judgment) may vary of course, but remember that the rule was designed to protect against situations in which the offense would have incentive to allow the ball to bounce and then control it on the hop. If the ball isn't easily catchable, it's going to be hard for the defense to do this, and so the offense doesn't need to be protected (at the cost of an out.)

Now, of course, if I call an infield fly and the fielder drops the ball, we all now know that the forces are off because the batter's out. It's quite possible, however, that the runners (and the defense) will forget this, and you'll have fielders tagging bases, runners advancing, etc. and after everything is said and done perhaps the offensive manager's going to be complaining because I somehow didn't tell his runners that they didn't have to advance. Now the shoe's on the other foot – it is up to the offense to know the situation and the rule. Runners are allowed to advance on an infield fly, but they do so at their own peril. It's obviously not my job to coach the players. I make my call (saying "Infield fly" and signaling by pointing up in the air) and then let things happen.

That being said, I can certainly exercise some "preventative umpiring." If I have called an infield fly and the defense doesn't catch the ball, I can say loudly "Batter's out, batter's out" to emphasize the result of the infield fly. If I do that and the defense ignores me trying for force plays, then they really have no cause for complaint. This certainly helps my case. But if I fail to do this, or if the offense or defense doesn't hear me (or doesn't pay attention to me), this doesn't change the outcome of the play. (Although it might prevent a manager from taking an early trip to the parking lot.)

Finally, consider the case where I do mess things up. If I call an infield fly in a non-infield-fly situation (say, two outs, or on a bunt), then I'm going to have to fix things as best I can after the play is over (and take the grief for it). Similarly, if an obvious infield fly occurs and I neglect to call it, I really need to fix that, particularly if the defense got an undeserved double play as a result. I'm not saying it can't be tricky to unwind something like that, but the rule is the rule, and umpires are responsible for applying them properly at all times. Fortunately, the number of times that a real infield fly occurs (ordinary effort and all that) and it is not caught by the defense are actually comparatively rare.

Now for some situations:

Play 1: Bases loaded, one out. The batter pops up a ball in the infield, which is called an infield fly by the umpire. The runner from first (R1) strays off the bag. The first baseman catches the ball, and then steps on the bag before R1 gets back to the bag. Is R1 out?

Answer 1: Absolutely. This is a caught fly ball, just like any other. The first baseman has successfully executed an appeal for the failure of R1 to retouch his/her base following the caught fly ball. Fundamentally, if the infield fly is caught, you may completely disregard the infield fly call in terms of what happens thereafter. The infield fly call only really matters if the defense does not catch the ball.

Play 2: Bases loaded, no outs. The infield is playing in for a play at the plate. The batter pops the ball up behind the second baseman. The fielder turns to try to catch the ball, but isn't able to get under it. The ball lands just inside the edge of the outfield grass. Since the ball landed in the infield, is this an infield fly?

Answer 2: This ball should not be called an infield fly. The fact that an infielder was unable to get underneath the ball means that it could not be caught with "ordinary effort." Where the ball lands has no bearing on whether the ball is an infield fly or not. Its status is strictly determined by how "ordinary" a catch it should be, based on the umpire's judgment. The starting position of the fielders with respect to where the ball comes down does have bearing on this, since that affects the difficulty of the catch. Thus, given two identically batted balls, one could be an infield fly and the other not depending on where the fielders started.

Play 3: Bases loaded, no outs. The batter lifts a pop fly a few feet foul, about ten feet in front of first base, and the first baseman settles under it for the catch. The umpire calls "Infield fly, if fair." The first baseman loses the ball in the sun, however, and the ball drops untouched, hits the lip of the grass and rolls into fair territory where the first baseman finally grabs it. Infield fly?

Answer 3: Yes. Although the ball initially landed in foul territory, it did not pass first base and was first touched over fair territory. This makes it a fair ball, which means that the criteria of an infield fly (a "fair fly ball") have been met. The batter is out. Conversely, if the ball had landed a few feet fair, bounced into foul territory and been touched there, this would simply be a foul ball, and the batter would return to the plate.

So that's the infield fly rule.

Happy umpiring!

Sincerely,

Kevin Hunter
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