

A guide to softball and baseball; a cheat sheet to America's favorite pastime

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Spring is in the air and baseball is here. Local Valley spectators can enjoy high school or Little League games beginning later this month. If you enjoy watching kids participate in sports, but aren't able to keep up with the lingo, don't worry. Help has arrived. The following "cheat sheet" will help any spectator understand the game of baseball and softball a little better.

Let's begin with the distinction between the two: baseball and softball. Baseball is more often than not played by boys, where softball is played by girls.

- **Pitching:** A baseball pitcher (we will get to the definition later) pitches from what is known as a pitcher's mound, where the player will deliver the ball. A softball pitcher pitches on level ground, even with the batter. One other major difference is how the ball is delivered or pitched. In softball the ball is pitched in an underhand motion whereas a baseball is thrown overhand.

- **Pitching distance:** In softball, the distance between the mound and home plate are much closer than in baseball. At beginning levels, the pitching distance starts at 35 feet from home plate. In higher divisions, the distance is 40 feet. Baseball begins at 40 feet and increases from there at the higher divisions.

- **Base Paths:** The base path is what a runner follows as they advance to each base. Softball has a much shorter distance than in baseball. Softball bases are typically set at 55 feet apart, while bases for baseball are set at 90 feet.

- **Size of balls:** The balls that are used are also different. Baseballs are usually 9 to 9.25 inches in circumference. Baseballs are also commonly white with red lacing. Softballs are larger, ranging from approximately 11 to 12 inches in circumference. A softball's color is typically a bright, almost neon yellowish color also with red lacing.

- **Bats:** Baseball and softball also use different sizes and shapes of bats. Baseball bats tend to be long and slender while softball bats are more stout and larger in circumference.

From there, the game of baseball and softball are similar. The next important thing to note about baseball and softball is unlike basketball, wrestling, football, etc., there are no points. In baseball the score is determined by runs. Runs are scored anytime a player successfully crosses home plate after advancing from each base.

Bases are what a runner advances to after leaving home plate either after hitting a ball or being walked. There are three bases: first, second, third. Combined, the bases and homeplate create a diamond shape.

When a team is on the field there are nine positions that make-up the infield and outfield.

The infield has six positions. The pitcher delivers the ball to

the opposing team's hitter. The pitcher does not necessarily have to strike out the batter every time. The other infielders will back up the pitcher by getting the ball to the appropriate position to get the needed out.

The catcher is positioned slightly behind the batter, ready to catch the ball if the batter misses the ball. The catcher is also a coach of sorts while on the field. They have a vantage point that allows them to see the entire game unfold from behind the plate. The catcher calls the pitches and lets teammates know what is happening on the entire field.

A first baseman has to be quick and agile. They are the team's first defense in getting an out. A first baseman must have the ability to think fast and be quick. This is the opposing team's first stop after hitting a ball.

A second baseman has to be quick on their feet and with their hands. This is where most double plays occur. A second baseman not only has to cover second base but also acts as a cut-off for outfield when needed.

Third base is a hot spot for plays. It is the last stop before a runner heads for home and scores a run. A third baseman has to be tough as nails because many of the hits are towards third base and the baseman can be injured from a fast moving ball.

The shortstop position is between second and third base. The shortstop has to not only cover their area but also act as back-up to second and third base. A shortstop also at times has to act as second baseman when the second baseman acts as a cut-off.

The outfield has the remaining three players: The left fielder sees lots of action because most of the opposing batters are right-handed hitters and left field is where the ball tends to be hit.

The center fielder has to be very athletic, agile and fast. They not only cover the center part of the outfield but they also act as a back-up for the left and right fielders.

The right fielder sees slightly less action than left field, but has a similar job as the left fielder. Most left-handed batters tend to hit to the right field and a few right-handed hitters have the ability to hit to the right field.

Along with the field positions there are a few more definitions one must understand to get into the game.

- **Cut-off:** This is the job of the second baseman or short stop, depending on where the ball is hit. If the ball is hit passed an outfielder, they must retrieve the ball. The second baseman or short stop will then go halfway between the outfielder and home to help get the ball into make the play.

- There are also a lot of different pitches: The two most common pitches are the two and four seam fastball. The difference is how the ball is held and thrown. A two seam fastball is held between the seams of the ball and when thrown, creates a tail, or slight drifting to the left or right. A four seam fastball is positioned in the hand to have two seams on the top and two seams on the bottom of the ball, when thrown fast it has no

movement, just flies straight.

When a curveball is thrown, it will fly straight but at the last second will break within the strike zone, causing a strike against the batter.

- **Scorekeeper:** Keeps track of how many runs and outs are made within an inning. They also keep track of each runner's advance around the bases and if they score a run. There are usually two scorekeepers per baseball/softball game; normally each team has their own scorekeeper.

- **Umpire:** Is in charge of the entire game. They make the calls; safe, out, strike or ball. They also keep the peace during the game and keep track of the innings.

- **Strike zone:** A strike zone is where a ball is considered a strike and counted against the batter. A strike is from corner to corner of home plate and from the batter's knees to the chest area.

- **Steal:** When a runner advances to a base before the batter hits the ball, usually as the pitcher begins his/her release of the ball.

- **Pop fly:** When the ball is hit on the bottom half and soars high into the air and is caught by a defensive player.

- **Double play:** When two outs are made in the same play.

Example: The batter hits the ball and takes off for first, the first baseman catches the ball, tagging his/her bag and throws the ball to the second baseman, who then catches the ball and tags the runner who is advancing towards second.

- **Grounder:** A ball that has been hit and bounces along the ground.

- **Strike:** After the ball has been pitched, the batter either misses the pitch or the ball goes by the batter without being hit. Each batter is allowed three strikes before being called out by the umpire.

- **Ball:** The pitcher is unable to get the ball within the strike zone of the batter. The batter is allowed four balls.

- **Walk:** If an umpire has called four balls for the batter, he or she is allowed to advance to first base.

- **Home run:** A batter hits the ball and is able to advance to each base without being stopped or thrown out.

- **Inning:** An inning consists of two halves; one team bats, while the other team plays defense. Once three outs have been made against the offensive team, the teams switch offense and defense positions. The visiting team always bats first; this is called the top of the inning. The home team is second to bat, called the bottom of the inning. Once the home team has had three outs against them, a new inning begins until seven to nine innings have been played; the game is then called to an end by the umpire.

To put this cheat sheet to use, watch the I.V. News for updates as to when IVHS baseball and softball teams will be playing.

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