

# Understanding the New NFHS DH Rule

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For several years, High School Baseball Head Coaches have had two options regarding the Designated Hitter (DH) – use one (a 10-player lineup) or don't use one (a 9-player lineup). Beginning with the 2020 season, however, they are given a third choice – a 9-player lineup that includes a DH. Let's examine this new option, and some of the confusion and “headaches” it has the potential to cause for those involved in the game (e.g. Head Coaches, Umpires, Scorers, Announcers).

The new Rule (NFHS 3-1-4b) introduces a concept that college baseball has used for several years – the Player/DH (P/DH). However, unlike the college rule, the new NFHS Rule specifies that ANY DEFENSIVE PLAYER (not just the pitcher), can be assigned this dual role.

At the start of the game, when the Head Coach presents his team's lineup card to the Plate Umpire, the P/DH must be clearly listed as such in one of the nine batting order positions. Failure to list a P/DH precludes that team from taking advantage of the new P/DH Rule for that game. As a preventative measure – before the lineup card is “accepted” – if the Plate Umpire sees a 9-player lineup listed, he should confirm with that Head Coach that “No DH will be used for this game, right?”. This should forestall a misunderstanding (and a potential problem later in the game) that one of the nine players listed “should have been listed as the P/DH”. On a side note, the re-entry rule has not changed – any of the players listed on the lineup card presented to the umpires at the start of the game may be withdrawn and re-enter once (NFHS Rule 3-1-3).

As mentioned before, the player listed as P/DH is assigned TWO DISTINCT ROLES – a *defensive player role* (playing any of the nine defensive positions) and an *offensive player role* (batting as the DH). It is very important to keep these two roles separate since each has its own specific rule requirements. Substitutions can be made for the *defensive role* at any time (3-1-4b). However, no substitutions can be made for the *offensive role* at any time during the game (i.e. the player originally listed as P/DH is the ONLY player that can be the DH in that game). If any player other than the originally-assigned DH (*offensive role*) hits or runs in that batting order position, the role of the DH is terminated for the remainder of the game (3-1-4b(2)). To clarify, a Head Coach may NOT substitute another player for the original P/DH and have that substitute be a P/DH. In this case, the lineup reverts to a 9-player lineup (the DH is terminated for the remainder of the game).

Let's look at some Case Plays that demonstrate the use of this new rule option.

## **Play #1: Jones is listed in the 4<sup>th</sup> spot in the batting order as 1/DH (pitcher).**

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> inning, Jones reaches base and the Head Coach wants to use a courtesy runner for Jones. This is not legal, since Jones is currently playing *offense* as the Designated Hitter, not pitcher (which is solely a *defensive position*).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> inning Jones is replaced on the mound by Smith (as pitcher – a *defensive role*). The Umpire should ask the Head Coach if:

(1) Jones will remain as the DH (*offensive role* in the 4<sup>th</sup> batting order spot) with Smith fulfilling the pitcher's spot (*defensive role*); **OR**

(2) the role of the DH being terminated for the remainder of the game (Smith would pitch AND bat for himself – a “traditional” 9-player lineup).

For this play case, option (1) is chosen by the Head Coach, so Jones would continue to bat as the DH (Smith would pitch but not bat). In the 5<sup>th</sup> inning Jones again reaches base and the Head Coach wants to use a courtesy runner for Jones. This is still NOT legal, since Jones is still playing *offense* as a DH.

RE-ENTRY CONSIDERATIONS: If (1) above applies, Jones is not considered to have left the game – he stays in the game as DH in a “traditional” 10-player lineup (new NFHS Rule 3-1-4a). If (2) above applies, Jones has left the game and may re-enter once. If he re-enters it must be in the same spot in the batting order – the 4<sup>th</sup> spot (Jones may play any of the nine defensive positions). In this case, Smith must leave the game and may not further participate in any playing role for that game (e.g. may not be a courtesy runner), although he could serve as base coach.

**Play #2: Russell is listed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> spot in the batting order as 2/DH (catcher).**

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> inning, Russell reaches base and the Head Coach wants to use a courtesy runner for Russell. This is not legal, since Russell is currently playing *offense* as the Designated Hitter, not catcher (which is solely a *defensive position*).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> inning, Russell again reaches base. The Head Coach substitutes Correa as a pinch runner for Russell. At this point, the Umpire should clarify that Correa is a PINCH RUNNER (a substitute – legal) rather than a COURTESY RUNNER (not legal, as stated above). If the Head Coach indicates that Correa is a pinch runner (a substitute, NOT a courtesy runner), then the role of DH is terminated for the game (NFHS Rule 3-1-4b(2)) and the lineup reverts to nine players. Correa (and/or any substitute for Correa) will be required to play both offense and defense.

RE-ENTRY CONSIDERATIONS: Since he was a starter, Russell may re-enter the game once. If he re-enters, it must be into the 3<sup>rd</sup> spot in the batting order (his original spot) and he would play both offense and defense (any defensive position), which is consistent with 9-player lineup rules. Correa would not be allowed to participate further in that game in any playing role.

**Play #3: Schweitzer is listed in the 8<sup>th</sup> spot in the batting order as 8/DH (center fielder).**

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning, Kim pinch hits for Schweitzer (Schweitzer has not yet batted). This is legal, but the role of DH is terminated for the remainder of the game (NFHS Rule 3-1-4b(2)), resulting in a 9-player lineup. Kim may play any of the nine defensive positions in addition to batting in the 8<sup>th</sup> spot. Schweitzer may re-enter the game once, but only in the 8<sup>th</sup> spot in the batting order.

**Play #4. Kuzillo is listed in the 1<sup>st</sup> spot in the batting order as 3/DH (first baseman).**

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning, Kuzillo is replaced defensively at first base by Ahmad. The Head Coach notifies the Umpire that Kuzillo will remain in the game as the DH. The lineup now reflects a “traditional” 10-player lineup; the new NFHS Rule 3-1-4a (2019’s Rule 3-1-4) would apply for the remainder of the game, except that Kuzillo is the only player that can bat as DH. Kuzillo is NOT considered to have left the game for re-entry rule purposes. If any player is substituted for Kuzillo offensively, the role of DH is terminated for the remainder of the game (3-1-4b(2)).

In the 6<sup>th</sup> inning, Kuzillo returns to play first base (*defensive role*). This is legal, and the 9-player lineup is re-instituted. However, the DH is terminated for the remainder of the game (3-1-4b(1)). This “defensive re-entry” provision only applies to an originally-assigned P/DH, and may only be applied once (3-1-4b).

In summary, a High School team can now manage its lineup during the game in three distinct ways. Umpires and Head Coaches should be fully aware of which option is being used at all times during the game to avoid confusion and misunderstanding. The three options are:

1. Start with a 9-player lineup (no DH), must remain a 9-player lineup (no DH) for the entire game;
2. Start with a 10-player lineup (“old style” DH), remain a 10-player lineup for the entire game OR revert to 9-player lineup (terminate the DH);
3. Start with a 9-player lineup with P/DH, change to a 10-player lineup (separate DH and defensive player) for the remainder of the game, OR change to 9-player lineup (terminate DH).

Strict attention to detail will be the key for Umpires, Head Coaches and scorekeepers to implement this Rules change smoothly and keep the game from being delayed needlessly.