

Helmets for High School Baseball Coaches

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As Major League Baseball continues on into the late summer months, the debate over whether to wear or not to wear helmets as a base coach has ended. No longer are there reports of how uncomfortable, hot or restrictive the helmets have been. A decision that was instituted for the 2008 season due the tragic death of Mike Coolbaugh, a former major leaguer, who was a minor league coach for the Colorado Rockies Double-A team in Tulsa. He was hit by a line drive as he stood in the first-base coach's box during a game in Arkansas.

The rule that forced major league first and third-base coaches to wear helmets in the coach's box was implemented by club general managers at their November meeting as a response to the death of Coolbaugh last July. He was hit below the ear which burst a blood vessel. Coolbaugh was administered CPR on the field, but later passed away at the hospital. This was truly a horrible set of circumstances.

"This is an important rule, mainly because it is a safety issue," said Bob Watson, MLB's vice president of rules and on-field operations. (From MLB.com, *Base coaches weigh in on helmet rule* by Tom Singer)

Unfortunately, it took the death of a coach to bring this issue to everyone's attention. It was the same with batting helmets. Players started wearing some kind of head protection after Ray Chapman, a shortstop for the Cleveland Indians, was killed when he was hit by a pitch during a game in 1920. Chapman became the first and only on field fatality when he was hit in the head on August 16, 1920. He died a few days later.

"Batting helmets have been mandatory for MLB players since 1956 and anyone reaching the big-leagues after 1983 must wear a helmet with an ear flap. Minor League players must wear flaps that cover both ears." (From MLB.com, *Safe at home plate* by Jim Street)

Although there is a major difference between coaches' helmets and those of the batter, coaches' are not required to wear ear flaps. This is an ironic distinction as Coolbaugh was hit just below the ear. Why the major difference? Ears are an integral part of a coach's sign sequence and need to be exposed. As well as, a coach not only uses his eyes to see the play develop, he needs to be able to hear the players and sounds of the game.

"There's inherent danger in this game," Mike Quade third-base coach for the Chicago Cubs added. "You want to put helmets on pitchers? How many umpires do you see get hit?" (From MLB.com, *Base coaches weigh in on helmet rule* by Tom Singer)

Which raises an important question, why is it that the field umpires do not have to wear protective head gear? They are in the immediate line of fire and are in play when they do get hit. Hopefully this will be the next major issue discussed by the general managers and the commissioner of Major League Baseball as safety is an ever present topic.

Then again where does it end?

While safety is a major concern the question remains as to when and if amateur coaches will be required to wear helmets while on the field in the coach's box. The understanding that as a member of MLB or the Minor Leagues and that wearing a helmet is mandatory has become accepted.

"You hear some guys complain, but when the day is over, it's just done to protect us," said Pirates first-base coach Lou Frazier, who was a base coach in the Minor Leagues before joining the Pirates' organization in November. "We're in a position where we're not able to see the ball. We have to watch the baserunner. It's better to be safe than sorry." (From *pirates.com Bucs base coach support the helmet rule* by Jennifer Langosch)

As it stands the National Federation of State High School Associations does not require adult coaches to wear helmets. Also the topic was not discussed at the National High School Baseball Coaches Association meetings in December as reported by Andy Gardiner from his article *Amateurs not following pros' helmet stance* from USA Today.

From the same article "It's a little bit strange, because things like this usually start at a lower level and work their way up," University of Vermont baseball coach Bill Currier said.

While there hasn't been an official rule passed there are some that see the trickle down effect beginning to happen. In some states around the country the discussion is beginning to take place. For example the Maryland Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA) is one of the first leagues in Maryland to pass a helmet rule for adult coaches. During the league's three-day summer meetings, the new rule requiring all baseball base coaches, middle and high school, to wear helmets was passed by an almost unanimous vote. The rule will go into effect the beginning of the 2009 season. (From *digitalsports.com MIAA Passes Helmet Rule for Baseball Coaches* by Aaron Gray)

This can be seen as a direct result from an incident this past season. In April, Stephen Wheeler a junior-varsity coach from St. Albans in Washington D.C. was hit in the head from a thrown ball during a run-down between second and third. Wheeler, who wasn't wearing a helmet, was struck in the side of the head and suffered a fractured skull and hematoma. Wheeler is still recovering from his injuries.

Again this is not an issue that has been decided on at the national level. All states follow the NFHS and their policies. If they haven't mandated that coaches must wear helmets then coaches aren't going to wear them.

Northern Illinois head coach Ed Mathey believes that any changes to the helmet rule will begin at the high level and will gradually become universal. He feels many leagues and organizations will face an 'everyone else is doing it' mentality, and that to avoid any legal issues will follow suit. (From *daily-chronicle.com Helmet Rule: Amateur baseball hasn't followed MLB's lead* By James Nokes)

A survey given to high school coaches in Illinois came back decidedly against wearing a helmet when coaching the bases. However, student-athletes who fill in as a base coach still have to wear one.

"We talked about it and gathered feedback," said Elliot Hopkins, the Baseball Rules Editor for the National Federation of State High School Associations. "We looked at the injury that prompted Major League Baseball to enact their rule and it was to an area of the body that a helmet doesn't protect. We think coaches are far enough back. If a coach thinks it is necessary, then they are welcome to wear a helmet." (From *daily-*

chronicle.com *Helmet Rule: Amateur baseball hasn't followed MLB's lead* By James Nokes updated July 2, 2008)

As it stands at the amateur level baseball coaches still have a choice in whether they wear a helmet or not. Some consider the risk too great and don the skull cap. However, for most the feeling is since the game has been a part of their lives, they know the risk and are willing to make the choice not to wear a helmet. Some might say this is due to an "it can't happen to me mentality". It could be due to vanity, or the belief that as a coach "I can get out of the way of anything".

Either of these thoughts can be used to rationalize why as a base coach a helmet may be unnecessary. It will take a mandated rule from the NFHS to make base coaches put on a helmet. Again, consider if coaches are required to protect themselves by wearing protective head gear, then umpires should be required as well.

In MLB and the Minor Leagues it was made a rule that first and third-base coaches are required to wear a helmet. Otherwise they would face a fine and ejection. Once the coaches got used to wearing the head gear it was forgotten as an issue. It can be assumed that if the NFHS passes a rule that says adult base coaches must wear a helmet, there will be some disgruntled coaches. However, once they get past the difficult stage and understand the consequences of not wearing the helmet, the complaints will cease.

So, in 2009 wear a helmet if you want. It might be a good idea to get used to it now, as it is a very possible reality for the future of high school base coaches.