

A collision of opinions over plays at the plate

Written by Mark Dukes

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The collision last week between runner Scott Cousins of the Florida Marlins and catcher Buster Posey of the San Francisco Giants has generated a nationwide debate over whether to change baseball rules.

Many media outlets have opined about the collision and its ramifications. ABC's "Good Morning America," somewhat curiously, had a piece on its nightly news last weekend. If you Google "Buster Posey collision," you'll see 275,000 entries on the Internet.

I suppose safety ought to be of utmost importance in sports, especially in youth and high school sports. But change the rule? Ridiculous.

I speak from experience as a former catcher. Blocking the plate and anticipating a collision with a base runner is part of the game, plain and simple. It's part of being a catcher and wearing "the tools of ignorance" that are face mask, chest protector and shin guards.

Ironically, a week prior to the Posey-Cousins incident, the Iowa High School Athletic Association addressed collisions in a May 17 letter to prep baseball coaches and umpires. The letter stated that malicious contact has been the No. 1 reason for player ejection nationally and, in fact, 26 Iowa high school players were ejected for that reason last season.

The IHSAA defines malicious contact as "leading with the shoulder or forearm with intent to run over the catcher" in hopes the catcher will drop the ball. The letter implores coaches to instruct players to make a legal slide at the plate and not try to run over the catcher.

Malicious contact and making a baseball play are two different things. If I'm a runner trying to score and the catcher has the ball and is blocking my path to the plate, I'm going to do everything I can to get there, and that includes bowling him over. As a catcher, you have to expect that. If the IHSAA wants to eliminate these collisions, the only way is to prevent catchers from blocking the plate.

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Which, of course, is silly.

(Editor's Note: If a runner does bowl over a catcher -- or any fielder -- in an Iowa high school game, the rules interpretation is that said runner will be called out and ejected. The onus is on the runner to avoid collisions either by sliding or stopping short and getting in a rundown.)

Home plate collisions are no different than runners trying to break up a double play at second base. Runners are taught to take out the middle infielder's legs to prevent him from making the relay throw to first base. I suspect more injuries result from these types of plays than collisions at home plate.

Plus, freak accidents happen in sports. Last year in Georgia, a 15-year-old first baseman died after he wandered into the path of a runner and tried to catch a ball. A collision resulted, the first baseman was knocked unconscious and later died.

I'm against changing home plate collision rules for the same reason I don't like the courtesy runner rule, the designated hitter, and composite bats. None has made baseball a far superior game. The main benefit has been higher batting averages (bats) and more player participation (DH and courtesy runners), which is well and good. But other than that, they have not improved baseball that much.

No one wants to see an injury to a player such as Posey. Even Cousins checked on Posey after the collision. But both understand, the play is part of baseball.

(Mark Dukes is former sports editor of the Cedar Rapid Gazette. He is co-host of The Gym Class radio show weekdays from 2-3 p.m. on KGYM-AM 1600.)