DIRECT LINE

Communication technology has reached high school baseball

By Wesley Sykes, managing editor

The use of a one-way communication device between a coach in the dugout and a team's catcher for the purposes of calling pitches will be permitted in high school baseball beginning in 2024.

This change to Rules 1-6-2 and 3-2-5 was one of five rules revisions approved by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Baseball Rules Committee at its June meeting in Indianapolis. The recommendations were subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors.

The new rules prohibit coaches from communicating with any other player besides the catcher on defense and with any player while batting. The coach must also be in the dugout when using the communication device.

"This change is consistent with the growth of the game and is indicative of a measured and responsible approach to enable technology into our level of competition," said Elliot Hopkins, NFHS Director of Sports and Educational Services and liaison to the Baseball Rules Committee. "The committee has made these changes to maintain the balance between offense and defense; increase the pace of play; and will responsibly manage technology so there is no advantage gained by schools that have more available resources than some of their contemporaries. Creating a level playing field is paramount to education-based athletics."

With the change, state athletic associations, like the Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA), will now implement the rule. FHSAA baseball director Robbie Lindeman said electronic communication devices have been an interest of member schools over the last couple of years.

"Our office feels this will enhance gameplay execution, speed up the pace of play, and help with the flow of the game," Lindeman said.

More Than Pace of Play

Sean Donovan is the varsity baseball coach for Bourne High School in Massachusetts. His Canalmen baseball team is the reigning MIAA Division 5 state champion and he earned Coach of the Year recipient from The Boston Globe. The team was anchored by a senior catcher, whom Donovan trusted to dictate the defense and handle the varsity pitching staff. But as Donovan sets out to defend his state title in the 2023-24 season, he'll have to groom a freshman to man the plate and he sees these communication devices as a great developmental tool.

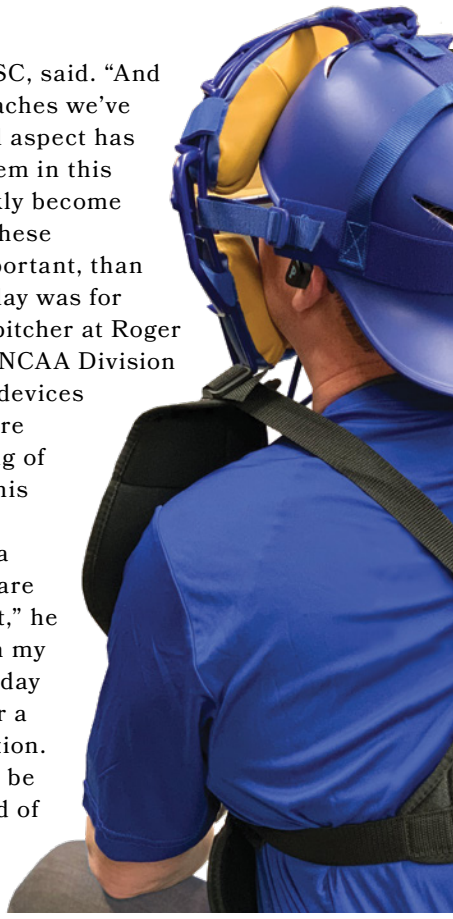
"I can tell him how to give signs, how to align the defense, and capitalize on bad swings," Donovan said. "This can cut down on players having to remember all the extra little things while playing."

For GSC, a producer of coach-to-catcher communication devices that have been used in the NFL as well as NCAA baseball and football, the player development aspect was a secondary benefit to speeding up the pace of play.

"When we developed this, the whole intent was based on increasing the pace of play," Alex Shada, managing member of GSC, said. "And through talking with coaches we've found the developmental aspect has been a really a hidden gem in this whole product. It's quickly become almost as important to these coaches, if not more important, than increasing the pace of play was for us." Donovan, a former pitcher at Roger Williams University, an NCAA Division III program, sees these devices as an opportunity to share his unique understanding of the game in developing his catchers.

"My greatest asset as a coach is my ability to share the game the way I see it," he said. "To be able to be in my catcher's ear day in and day out can go a long way for a player at a difficult position. They can then developto be more reactionary instead of stalling at the moment."

John Hooper Jr., president of Port-a-



Phone, said he's spoken to coaches who attest to having more time to focus on other aspects of the game.

"College coaches have expressed that game communication allows them to focus on other facets of gameplay now that the possibility of hand signal stealing has been eliminated. This results in the proper execution of the game strategy speeding up the flow and pace of play," Hooper said.

Unfair Advantage?

With every new tool that's allowed to be used in sports comes the question of fairness. Those institutions and programs with the means will be able to add these tools while those with less means may not be able to right away.

These questions pop up during the integration of sideline video replay in football, as well as sideline communication devices. But athletic associations like the FHSAA have already discussed this notion.

"Each member school will decide if they want to use the device during the game, and this is an optional enhancement for all schools to use. During the contest, one or both member schools can decide to use electronic communication," Lindeman.

While the coaching communication devices are new to the high school level, it does not dramatically change the way the game is played. Coaches can still deploy hand signals and call out defensive alignments.

"It's an old game. You use what you have and don't use what you don't have," Donovan said.

Hooper added, "Not every team has the same bats, gloves, cleats, or even uniforms, so the team that outfits their players with better equipment will enjoy some advantage."

For players who want to continue playing at the next level, getting an opportunity to familiarize themselves with this technology will undoubtedly give them an advantage to their recruiting peers.

"I don't see it deciding the outcome of a game. I do think it develops players and helps those players become better, and, on the whole, the team becomes better. So if it's going to become an unfair advantage, it's going to be because of the in-practice stuff," Shada said. "But as I said, everybody has the ability to use it now." ■

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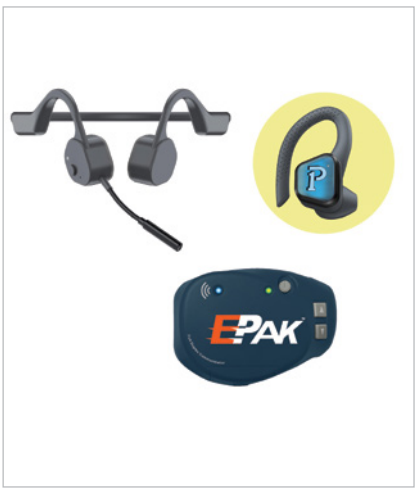

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