

# MERCY



# RULES:

## Should they be used in youth programs?

By Greg Bach

**A**s baseball and softball programs hit full swing around the country this summer the debate over mercy rules heats up once again. Used in some programs to end lopsided games in which one team owns a substantial lead, mercy rules have zealous supporters, as well as those passionately opposed to them. As can readily be seen around the country, youth baseball and softball programs are divided on the issue.

So, as millions of youngsters clad in colorful uniforms step on the field to participate in games this summer the questions surfacing once again concerning mercy rules are both bountiful and perplexing: Do they save a team getting trampled that day from further embarrassment? Are kids on teams that have fallen behind by double-digit margins thankful to get off the field without having to endure an endless parade of runs scored against them? Or does the scoreboard carry more relevance for coaches and parents, and kids generally prefer the game continuing because they simply enjoy playing?

Furthermore, do mercy rules instill in young athletes that when things don't go their way and difficulties are encountered that it's ok to give up and pack it in? Do they send messages that simply doing your best – regardless of what the scoreboard reads – isn't good enough to warrant playing one more inning in a 15-0 ballgame?

## DIVERSE STANCES

Clearly, there are lots of questions, but certainly not many easy answers.

Programs that use mercy rules point to a variety of factors for doing so, such as protecting children from being saddled with additional disappointment and helping ensure that they'll want to continue showing up at the field to play throughout the season.

## By the numbers

63

The percentage of respondents that think mercy rules are good in youth sports.

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ter three innings or eight runs after four innings. It also utilizes a runs-per-inning rule, in which teams in the 10-and-under to 6-and-under age brackets can only score five runs per inning.

Those on the other side of the debate voice concerns that mercy rules unfairly chop games short and send kids home earlier than expected who are there to play and have fun.

"I believe the kids are just playing a game and that it should be played to its completion like they would on the playground or in the backyard," said Neal Healy, assistant superintendent of recreation for the Millburn Recreation Department in New Jersey, which doesn't use a mercy rule with its in-town softball program for youngsters in the third through eighth grade. "You never

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"The main reason we've adopted these types of mercy rules is to keep the game in perspective for all the players involved," said Ann Finn, president of the Grandview Baseball Association League in Missouri. "Why would an 8-year-old who plays 12 to 16 games a season and loses game after game want to come back and play again the next year? We look at our mercy rule as a way to keep the game fun – no one wants to lose over and over by 20 or 35 runs."

At Grandview, its mercy rule works like this: For six-inning games involving children ages 12 or younger the mercy rule is invoked once one team leads by 15 runs af-



know when one team will score 10 runs in an inning, so who says that a game is really out of reach? Besides, the kids are out exercising, playing a game and having fun, so why send them home after four or five innings?"

What also tends to get overlooked in the mercy rule debate is the impact it has on the winning team, too.

Should teams that happen to play really well on a particular day and score a bundle of runs be punished by getting to play fewer innings? Plus, that places additional strain on those coaches with large numbers of players on their team who then are faced

with fewer opportunities to rotate all the kids in so that they have chances to hit and play in the field.

“We just play softball and let the kids have fun and play, that is why they show up,” Healy said. “Whatever the score is, it is. A game is a game and when it is over, it is over, the girls leave the game at the field.”

Robert Whelan of Civitas, the London-based Institute For the Study of Civil Society, told the London Daily Telegraph that stopping one-sided games does children no favors.

“It’s a symptom of a society that wants to protect the young from anything unpleasant at all costs,” he said. “But the fact is that life can sometimes be unpleasant and you don’t always win, and sometimes you lose by a big margin.”

### CONVENIENCE FACTOR

Many youth baseball and softball programs turn to the mercy rule simply to avoid a logjam of games that would create chaos with their scheduling.

“While the argument of mercy rules preventing players on losing teams from having to endure embarrassing losses is justified, I think it is just as embarrassing for the team to lose a game that’s declared a mercy rule,” said John Luton, athletic director for the Spartanburg Parks Commission in Spartanburg, S.C. “There’s no way in sports to prevent embarrassments. I think dealing with that is just another lesson that sports can teach. Our reasons for using the rule are much more practical. I think the two biggest reasons we use it are time

and safety. Most of the time those games with lopsided scores would extend well beyond the allotted time because in a game like this even a half inning can last a long time. I also feel that in one-sided games, emotions tend to run high, play tends to become sloppy and injuries and negative instances become more likely.”

Games involving players ages 9 and up are halted after four innings if one team is leading by 10 runs in the Spartanburg Parks Commission program.

“I think a mercy rule should be looked at the same way a time limit is viewed – as just an addition to the rules of the game, not as quitting,” Luton said. “We like

to use the term ‘run rule’ as opposed to mercy rule. I think this gives the term a more positive connotation.”

Adds Autumn Smiley, league commissioner of the Hilliard Girls Softball Association in Ohio: “I think a mercy rule is an important thing in youth sports. While emphasis is not placed on winning in our leagues, it can be quite devastating for a team to never win. We use



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Hilliard Girls Softball Association

the mercy rule to keep our girls motivated, as well as to move the game along. Neither team benefits from a lopsided win. Plus, we are an instructional league so we want to ensure that both teams get equal playing and batting experience.”

So, as leagues around the country commence play this summer, games will be won and lost by a variety of margins. Some will conclude an inning or two early due to mercy rules while others will continue on until the last out is recorded – regardless of the score.

And what’s really in the best interests of the players involved will continue to be debated. ✿

*Do you have an opinion on mercy rules? Share it by emailing [sportingkid@nays.org](mailto:sportingkid@nays.org).*