

HENDERSON COUNTY SENIOR SOFTBALL ASSOCIATION (HCSSA) OPEN PLAY (CY 2026)

I. OVERVIEW

A. Introduction to “Open Play” -- The Henderson County Senior Softball Association (HCSSA), hereafter referred to as the “League” fields “Travel Teams” competing within the local area and occasionally “Tournament Teams” competing at the state and national level. Additionally, members may also participate in “Open-Play” games regularly scheduled at Henderson County Jackson Park. This document outlines the expectations and rules during Open Play -- it’s written to complement the Senior Softball-USA (SSUSA) rulebook.

Changes to the League’s Open Play rules may be made by a majority vote of the Executive Board. The members of the Executive Board are the League’s President, Senior Vice President, Vice President for Open Play, Vice President for Competitive Play, and a Member-at-Large. Board members have equal authority in the decision-making process.

By email, all members of the League will be advised that these Open-Play rules are available on the League’s website.

Within Open Play, players are assigned to either Division 1 (D1) or Division 2 (D2). Players with the most skill are normally delegated to Division 1, while the less skilled players to Division 2. Each Division has a Manager who supports the Vice President for Open Play in its administration.

In the event of a shortage of players, Division 1 and Division 2 are frequently merged (Merged Divisions) for Open Play. As stated herein, rules for the two Divisions are somewhat different. When the Divisions are merged, Division 2 rules shall apply.

B. Alcohol, Drugs, and Smoking Policy -- The League has a strict no alcohol, no illicit drugs (or paraphernalia), and no smoking policy for both League members and spectators. This policy applies to ball fields, dugouts, parking lots, and spectator areas. Arriving to the field in an intoxicated condition will not be tolerated. Offending players may be subject to suspension and/or

expulsion from league play. Offending spectators will be asked to leave the facility.

C. Code of Conduct -- As a part of the registration process, members must agree to comply with the League's Code of Conduct. In summary, players are expected to conduct themselves in a courteous and thoughtful manner.

II. RULES FOR OPEN PLAY

A. Umpires -- In these rules, umpire responsibilities are occasionally cited. Generally, there is no formal umpire for Open Play. Because of this, the fielding team's catcher may also serve as the umpire.

B. Team Rosters and Team Captains -- Teams are designated as Red, Blue, and, if necessary, Green. The Red team bats first, followed by Blue, and then Green. In Open Play, the goal is to play at least one game with a duration of seven or nine innings. Afterwards, if there is sufficient interest, a second game may be played with a duration depending on time, weather conditions, and the availability of players to form a roster.

The Managers of each Division, or their designee(s), is responsible for establishing team rosters and Team Captains. This process will be done in a manner to: (1) strive for a competitive balance between the teams, and (2) not cause embarrassment. If there is an obvious inequity between the teams after two or three innings, the teams may be rebalanced and the game continued or restarted.

C. Participation -- All available players, who are ready to play, must be inserted into the batting order and must bat in the same order throughout the game unless they are injured or are unable to continue. Positions in the field will be determined by the players in consultation with the Team's Captain.

Frequently in Open Play, one division is short players while the other has extra players. Taking into consideration a player's ability and willingness to play in another division, players may shift from one division to another to facilitate the playing of two games.

D. Batting Order -- If a player is not present to start the game, he must be inserted at the bottom of the batting order. Players arriving late will be assigned to a “short team.” If teams have an even number of players, the first late arrival will be assigned to the Red Team, second arrival to Blue, and the third to Green (if applicable).

If Division 1 and Division 2 are merged for Open Play, the Team Captains will establish a batting order which alternates players between the two divisions.

E. Outfield Play

1. In general, a team may not have more than 4 players positioned in the outfield. However, sometimes in order to accommodate a large number of players, exceptions can be made.

2. No outfielder can throw out a batter who is 80 years of age (or older) running to first base. Also, in keeping with the intent, an outfielder may not relay to another defensive player to obtain an out at first base.

3. For Division 2 and Merged Divisions: All outfielders must remain beyond the cone markings 150 feet from the back of home plate. The outfielder must remain behind the line until the ball is hit -- the outfielder may be moving forward during the pitch but may not be over the line until the ball is struck.

F. Infield Play

1. A team may not have more than seven players positioned in the infield: pitcher, catcher, 1st baseman, 2nd baseman, 3rd baseman, short stop, and mid-fielder.

2. For Division 2 and Merged Divisions: All infielders, including a mid-fielder, must be positioned fully on the dirt of the infield at the time of the pitch. The only exception is if a team is short and has three outfielders -- then, the mid-fielder may move into the outfield at any time, but must play behind the 150-foot “line.”

G. Run-by Rule -- It is always the responsibility of the base runner to avoid contact.

The run-by rule is in place to enable the base runner to avoid contact at second and third base without compromising the runner's ability to reach base safely. A runner that makes contact with a fielder or interferes with the throw may be called out based on the umpire's discretion.

1. A player running to second or third base where there will be a play should utilize the run-by rule to avoid both physical and line-of-sight interference with the fielder making the play. The runner should run three to four feet to the side of the base opposite of where the play is being made.

2. When a runner uses the run-by rule, the runner should exercise his/her best judgment to determine whether the play would have resulted in a safe or out call. While exercising the run-by rule, the runner is considered inactive and cannot be tagged.

3. A runner that utilizes the run-by rule, and then makes a move to proceed to the next base, is once again an active runner and can be thrown out at the base that he had previously run-by. If there is a play at that base, the runner is permitted to run-by the same base again to avoid contact with the fielder. Again, the rule above applies (G2).

4. The run-by rule can be utilized exclusively on bases where the runner's initial intention is to not continue to the next base. If a runner utilizes the run-by rule, with the intent to stop, and then notices a wild throw that would allow him/her to continue to the next base, he/she must touch the base prior to proceeding to the next base.

H. Over-Running Rule – To reduce the chance of injury, over-running 2nd or 3rd base is allowed in Division 2 or Merged Divisions.

I. Running to First on an Overthrow -- After hitting the ball, a runner may turn to the left toward second on an overthrow of first and is not out unless he/she makes a runner's move (an aggressive step toward second). Simply turning to the left, with no attempt to run, should not result in a tag out.

J. Pitch Count -- The pitcher is required to pitch from the rubber. An exception can be made if both Captains agree. However, the pitcher may not be any farther than five feet behind the pitching rubber.

For safety, a pitcher playing Division 2 (or Merged Divisions) must remain behind the pitching screen until the ball is hit.

1. A strike will be called for any legal pitch landing on any portion of the wooden home plate (“strike mat”). A pitch that strikes the ground and subsequently hits the strike mat while bouncing up is by rule a dead ball and will be ruled a ball.

2. A legally pitched ball shall have an arc between 6 feet and 12 feet. The umpire should decide quickly if the pitch is legal and call it “*illegal*” in time for the batter to determine whether to swing or not. The batter swings at his/her own risk. If the pitch is called illegal and the batter does not swing, the pitch shall be ruled a ball.

3. Only the pitcher or home-plate umpire can declare a pitch to be illegal. The pitcher cannot overrule the umpire. The call should be made in a voice sufficiently loud for the catcher and batter to hear the call.

4. Walks -- Taking a walk is optional after four balls. After five balls, a walk is mandatory.

5. For Division 1 – The batter enters the box with a 1-1 count (one ball, one strike).

A second strike will be called if the batter hits a foul ball or hits the pitching screen.

With two strikes – if the batter hits a foul ball or the pitching screen, it is considered a “courtesy swing” and not a strike.

With two strikes and having used the “courtesy swing” – if the batter hits a foul ball or the pitching screen the batter is out (strike 3).

6. For Division 2 – The batter enters the box with a standard 0-0 count.

A ball hit foul is considered a strike. After two strikes, a ball hit foul will result in the batter being called out.

A ball hit into the pitching screen is ruled a dead-ball strike. If a batter has two strikes, any ball hit into the pitching screen will be a dead ball only and will not result in a third strike.

K. Leaving Base Early -- Runners may leave their bases only upon a batter's contact with a pitched ball. A runner leaving a base early is out, the play is ruled dead, and the pitch does not count. At the discretion of the umpire/team captains, a warning may be issued on the first offense.

L. Courtesy Runners -- Running is an important aspect of the game. Only the injured/elderly player may request a courtesy runner. Team Captains will avoid encouraging, for the sole purpose of their team's performance, a player to use a courtesy runner.

1. Any player can be used as a courtesy runner. Unlimited courtesy runners are allowed (no restrictions).

2. If a batter is injured, or still recovering from an injury, a courtesy runner may be used from home plate. Note: If the third base line were extended from the plate to the backstop, the courtesy runner must start 5 feet from the plate along that line.

M. Tag Outs -- With the exception noted below, tag outs by a fielder are allowed.

Once a player crosses the 30-foot commitment line, tags are not allowed -- if a tag is made by a defensive player, the runner will be called safe at home. A force play exists at "home" -- the catcher/fielder must use the home plate while the runner must use the "runner's plate."

N. Infield Fly -- For an infield fly rule to be called, it's important to recognize the playing ability of the fielders, the wind conditions, and the height of the batted ball. The fielder must be able to catch the ball easily, making a routine play -- he should not have to make a great or even a good catch. If the umpire

makes the call, then the batter is automatically out. The runners do not have to run if the infielder drops the ball. They may run at their own risk.

The Infield Fly rule will not be exercised in Division 2 or Merged Divisions. For Division 1, complying with the rule is at the discretion of the D1 Manager.

O. First-Base Play -- Two bases are located at first. The inside base (white and in fair territory) belongs to the fielder in the case of any play at the base. The outside base (colored and in foul territory) belongs solely to the runner. Neither can use the other's base in the event of a play.

1. If the fielder fields a ball and runs across the baseline and interferes with the runner, the fielder cannot make a put out and the runner is safe. The fielder must run up the first baseline, inside the line, in making any attempts to step on the bag. In the case of a play, the runner must touch only the outside base -- if the runner does not, even in beating the play, the runner is out.

2. When a runner considers continuing to second base, the runner may touch the inside base.

3. In the case of a ball thrown off target, the first baseman may tag a runner out when catching the ball naturally takes him toward the runner.

P. Advancing/Returning to a Base -- A runner who has advanced any distance to the next base is allowed to return to the previous base when the ball has been successfully played by the fielder. If the runner attempts to run to the next base, the fielder's throw must beat him to the base (tag or force) to be an out.

Q. Injury Stoppage -- Player safety is paramount. In the case of a serious injury, any player or umpire may call time and stop play to check on an injured player. "Serious" is the crucial characteristic -- a player tripping and falling does not generally constitute a serious injury.

Afterwards, bases will be awarded by taking into account where runners were at the time of injury.

R. Extra Innings -- If Team Captains agree, extra innings may be added to the game. Special consideration should be given for Division 2, in terms of weather conditions and time expired.

S. Scoring -- Open Play games are normally seven or nine innings. The last inning is referred to as the "open inning." Prior to the open inning, a team is limited to five runs per inning. In the open inning, there is no limit.

To save time and possibly embarrassment for the trailing team, the Flip-Flop Rule may be invoked -- under this rule, the two teams switch (or "flip-flop") their turn at bat as illustrated by the following:

If Red is leading by ten runs entering the final inning of a game, the flip-flop rule would be invoked and Blue would bat. If Blue should tie, or take the lead, then Red would bat.

If Red should take a ten run or more lead in their final at bat, then the flip-flop rule would be invoked and Blue would immediately come to bat. At the transition, it would be noted how many outs Red had, where their base runners were (if any), as well as who was due to bat when the flip flop was invoked. In the unlikely event that Blue should tie the game or take a lead, Red would resume batting.

T. Replacing an Injured Player -- Where possible, the batting team will supply a catcher when the opposing team loses a player due to an injury.

U. Half-Swing Bunt -- A batter contacting the pitched ball, must complete a full swing. The batter is not allowed to take an incomplete (short) swing with the purpose of hitting the ball softly, in the manner of a bunt.

The batted ball will be declared a dead-ball strike. Base runners will return to their previous bases. If that batter had two previous strikes, the batter is out.

V. Sliding -- Sliding is permitted but not encouraged.

W. Field and Equipment

1. The base length between all bases shall be 65 feet. The pitching rubber shall be 50 feet from home plate. The Scoring Plate will be placed 65 feet from third base and eight feet from the back tip of home plate.
2. There is a commitment line between third and home. Once a runner steps on, or crosses the line, he/she cannot return to third and must proceed to the Scoring Plate. The commitment line will be marked 30 feet from home plate.
3. The pitching screen will be placed 4 feet in front of the pitching rubber and to the side such that one-half of the rubber is covered.
4. With the exception of bats, all equipment and personal belongings must be placed in the dugouts or in the spectator area. Bats may be placed against the inside fence provided they do not impede play or endanger a player. Except to enter or exit, dugout gates should remain closed during the game. For the batting team, only the batter, the on-deck batter, the batter-in-the hole, and the coaches at first and third will be permitted to be outside the dugout (inside the fence).
5. All bats must be approved by SSUSA. Bats must have a maximum length of 34 inches, a maximum diameter of 2.25 inches, and not exceed a weight of 30 ounces. Bats must also have a Bat Performance Factor (BPF) of 1.21 or less.
6. All game balls must have a circumference of 12 inches, a Coefficient of Restitution (COR) rating of .44 and a compression rating not to exceed 400 psi. The Vice President for Open Play and the Division Managers are responsible for ensuring the game balls are in very good condition.

When batting, a female player or a player in their 80s may elect to hit a livelier softball (higher COR).

7. Metal cleats are not allowed.

III. SUGGESTED OPEN-PLAY FORMATS

A. 22-26 Players -- All players will bat. Players in excess of eleven will sit out an inning defensively. Unless a player volunteers, no player will sit out more than one inning. To allow for more participation, Division Managers may elect to field 12 players on a side (5 outfielders).

B. 18-20 Players -- The batting team will supply a catcher. And, if needed, one of the corner infielders.

C. 15-17 Players -- A three-team format may be used with each team having at least five batters. To execute this format, at least two capable pitchers must be available. All players will bat throughout the game. If necessary, a player may have to sit out an inning defensively. Unless a player volunteers, no player will sit out more than one inning.

D. Less than 15 Players -- A $\frac{1}{2}$ field or $\frac{3}{4}$ field format will be used with the Division Managers establishing the game-day parameters.

E. More than 26 Players -- The Division Managers will work together in order to allocate players such that two games can be played. For example, one field can play "three fives" (15 players) while the other plays a $\frac{1}{2}$ field format. Only volunteers should be asked to play in a different Division than normally assigned.