

# THE (UNWRITTEN) RULES OF



Braden wasn't too pleased about someone crossing over his territory ...

Baseball's unwritten rules go back decades, but not everyone believes in them.

**T**HE MARQUESS OF QUEENSBERRY RULES, a professional fighting code that was published in 1867, offers guidelines under which boxing matches are fought to this day and imparts that there is a gentlemanly way to pummel an opponent. "You must not fight simply to win ... you must win by the rules." The sentiment is also shared in baseball, a game steeped in tradition and built on the idea that there's a proper way to play. But unlike boxing, much of baseball's code can't be found in its 132-page official rulebook.

Just ask Yankee Alex Rodriguez. He drew the ire of A's pitcher Dallas Braden by crossing the mound on his way back to first base after a foul ball during a game in April. Braden laid into A-Rod — and later a water cooler, which the lefty pounded in the Oakland dugout — miffed about what he saw as a brazen violation of the unwritten rule that the mound is a pitcher's exclusive territory.

Fans, players and coaches still debate the legitimacy of "Thou shalt not cross the mound" as a baseball commandment. But what's clear is that the great American pastime is governed by a nebulous code of unwritten rules, regulating everything from home run trots to sign-stealing etiquette.

## NO-NO? HUSH HUSH

**SUPERSTITIONS AMONG BALLPLAYERS** are as rich and varied as the game's history. Some won't change caps during a winning streak. Others go through the same routine during every at-bat. Wade Boggs ate chicken before every game. While the extent to which a player will go for good mojo runs a wide gamut, there's one jinx killer that they all agree on: Don't talk about a no-hitter in progress.

"I've never heard anyone talk about a no-hitter during a game," says Phillies skipper Charlie Manuel, who has spent 23 seasons in the Bigs as a player and coach. "Everybody knows that rule."

In June, when the Tigers' Armando Galarraga came within one hit of throwing a perfect game,

ZAGARIS/GETTY IMAGES



BY CHRIS OFFER

# THE GAME

Detroit's dugout was so tight-lipped that utility-man Ramon Santiago was oblivious to Galarraga's flirting with history until late in the contest. "I didn't even realize until about the eighth inning," Santiago says. "No one mentioned it."

## MERCY RULES

ALTHOUGH THE OCCASIONAL blowout is inevitable in 162 games, players and coaches on the wrong end of a beatdown tend to take it to heart when an opponent appears to be running up the score.

"When you're blowing a team out, you don't swing on a 3-0 pitch or hit and run," says Orioles hitting coach Terry Crowley. "And you don't steal bases if the fielders are playing behind you."

But the point at which a team should call off the dogs isn't clear. In 2001, the Indians rallied back from a 14-2 fifth-inning deficit against Seattle to win, 15-14, in 11 innings. "Five runs used to be the norm, but the way teams score these days, it's hard to tell when to let up," Manuel says.

Still, the consequences for not knowing when to hold 'em can be painful, according to Royals hitting coach Kevin Seitzer, who played 12 years in the Bigs. "If a team tried to run up the score on us," he says, "a batter was usually gonna get smoked."

## SWING AWAY

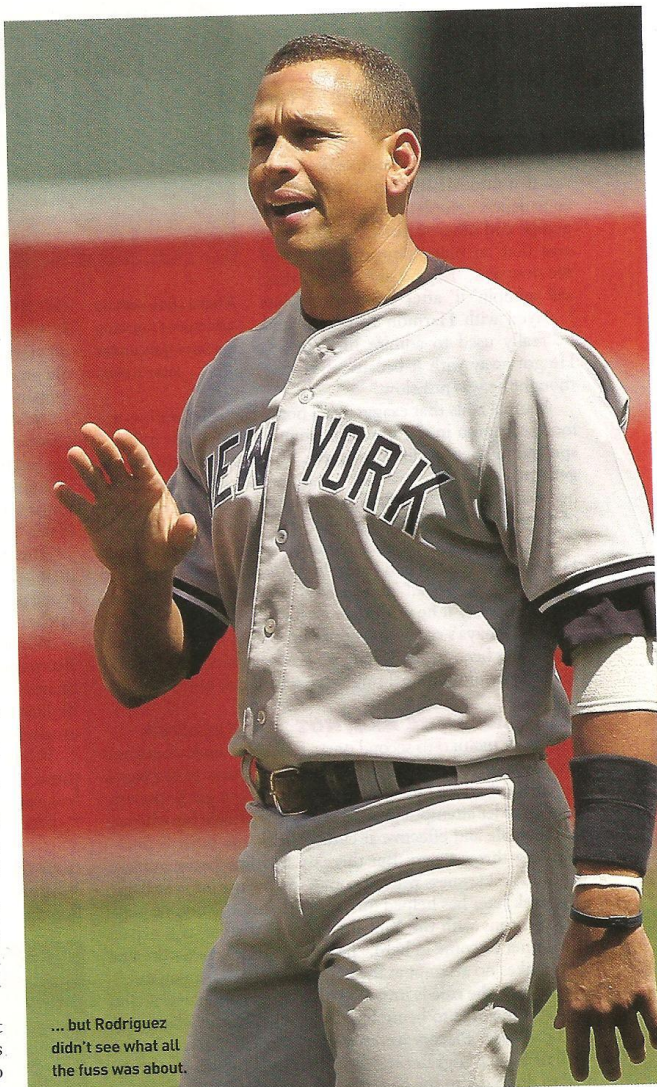
FEWER THAN TWO dozen perfect games have been thrown in MLB history. So when a hurler has a shot at perfection, he and his club don't want anyone mucking it up, especially with a bunt.

"A perfect game is one of the biggest accomplishments," Manuel says. "If you can't hit a pitcher, don't mess it up by sneaking in a bunt."

In 2001, Diamondbacks ace Curt Schilling had taken a perfecto against the Padres into the eighth when San Diego catcher Ben Davis reached first on a bunt single, thwarting Schilling's effort.

Although it was a 2-0 game when Davis laid down the bunt, Arizona skipper Bob Brenly was fuming in the post-game press conference. "Ben Davis is young and has a lot to learn," Brenly told reporters. "That was just uncalled for."

But broadcaster Joe Morgan had a different perspective on the play: "I never knew there was an unwritten rule saying you have to stop trying to win, no matter how good the pitcher is pitching."



... but Rodriguez didn't see what all the fuss was about.

SULLIVAN/BETTY IMAGES



## DON'T SHOWBOAT

PROFESSIONAL BALLPLAYERS ARE strong men hardened by seasons of crashing into outfield walls, diving for line drives and swatting 95-mph fastballs. But their egos can be eggshell fragile. So, while most players take breaks, bumps and bruises in stride, they often find it hard to stomach any behavior perceived as showing up a player or team.

This rule is often stretched after a home run, when hitters might admire their work by standing and staring or by taking their time circling the bags.

"These days, every team has guys who showboat after they hit a home run," says Tigers third base coach Gene Lamont. "I don't like it, but I put up with it more than I used to."

Reggie Jackson is widely credited with sparking the evolution of the home run trot into MLB's version of an end-zone dance, complete with bat flips, fist pumps and other theatrics. Yet Manuel says that an older slugger introduced the slow trot. "Reggie started what they call 'pimpin' it' after a home run, but I played with Harmon Killebrew and he really used to admire his homers. He got away with it because everyone thought he was just slow."

Manuel adds that exaggerated home run celebrations are more common in the modern game partly because a disrespected pitcher has little recourse. "Used to be a guy would get brushed back — at least — the next time at the plate," he says. "These days, umpires are looking out for that type of thing, and they'll toss a pitcher for throwing at a hitter."

For Detroit pitcher Joel Zumaya, excessive celebration is a two-way street. "When I get a big strikeout, I'm excited and I'm not holding back," Zumaya says. "If somebody hits a shot off me, it's okay if he wants to watch it. I'd watch it, too."

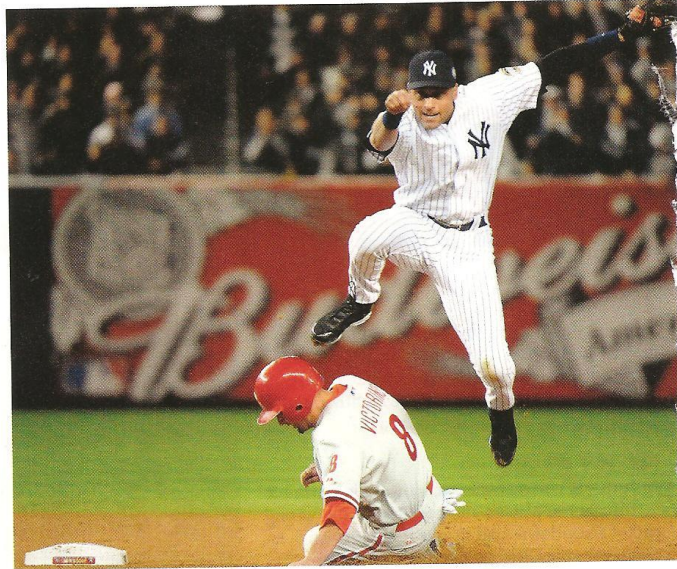
But Zumaya's easygoing approach has its limits: "If a guy who's only been in the league a few weeks hits a homer and he's already pimpin' it, I might have to check him."

## SLIDE INTO THE BAG, NOT THE FIELDER

A RUNNER HEADED to second on an infield grounder has a key job: Break up the double play. Beating the throw to the bag is one method. More often, the runner will try to get in the way of an infielder attempting to turn two. A hard slide into the bag is acceptable and effective at cutting in on the infield's pitch-catch-tag-throw tango. But there's a fine line between clean play and recklessness when it comes to bowling into the bag.

Derek Jeter has helped turn more than 1,100 double plays in 16 seasons with the Yankees. "As an infielder, you expect the runner to come in hard," he says, "but he crosses the line if he makes no attempt at the bag and tries to take you out."

To Jeter, the rule is intended to protect a double-play duo that is vulnerable to being blindsided by a runner's barreling into the base. Players weren't always so kind, according to Hall of Famer Yogi Berra. "In my day, you did whatever you had to do to get to the bag and break up the play."



A hard slide with no attempt at touching the base gets under Jeter's skin.

## HONOR AMONGST THIEVES

IT'S NOT *IF* you steal signs, it's *how* you do it. While MLB's official rulebook doesn't prohibit sign stealing, the decades-old practice of cracking a team's silent communication system remains a covert art, complete with a set of unwritten rules.

"It's a lot easier to hit the ball if you know what's coming," Lamont says. "Or if you know that a hit and run is called, you can pitch out and nail the runner at second."

Lamont merely asks that his signs be filched the conventional way. "It's okay if somebody steals our signs on the field. If they start spying with equipment, that's not acceptable."

Almost 50 years after their NL pennant-winning season, members of the 1951 Giants admitted that they used a telescope perched in the center-field clubhouse to steal opposing catchers' signs, which were then relayed to the dugout.

While MLB has since notified clubs that they cannot use electronic equipment for sign stealing, allegations of high-tech thievery still emerge. Earlier this season, the Rockies accused Phillies coach Mick Billmeyer of stealing signs when he was caught watching the game with binoculars from the bullpen.

While Charlie Manuel denied the allegation after the game, he also alluded to the fine line treaded in the old baseball axiom that says, "If you ain't cheatin', you ain't tryin'."

"We don't have [Colorado's] signs ... but we are trying." ♦

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PULLING/MLB PHOTOS

## MEMBER FINAL WORD

What do you think of these unwritten rules? Do players make too big a deal out of them or are they sacred?

E-mail your vote to [editorial@baseballinsidersclub.com](mailto:editorial@baseballinsidersclub.com).