Little League Rule Changes 2026: What Coaches Need to Know

Fundamentals | Coach Nick & the YSC Coaching Team

Two outs, bottom of the fourth, and our catcher was standing on second base with his shin guards still in the dugout. I wanted him off the bases and getting dressed so we weren't burning three minutes between innings. The other coach wanted to know if that was allowed, since the kid hadn't finished his mandatory play yet. The umpire looked at both of us, and all three of us reached for a phone. Nobody was trying to pull anything. We just didn't know.

That exact argument is one of the things Little League cleaned up for 2026. Here is the short version: **the 2026 Little League rule changes are mostly clarifications, not an overhaul.** The ones you will actually notice are that pine tar is now allowed at every level, thumb protectors are now legal while choke-up knobs are not, the pitcher's sleeve rule now covers every kind of sleeve, and the courtesy runner rules for pitchers and catchers are spelled out more clearly. Pitch counts and bat standards are not on the list of changes.

Everything below comes from Little League's own "2026 Rulebook Significant Updates" document and its January 2026 announcement. Where the official summary is thin, we say so instead of guessing.

The 2026 Changes at a Glance

Rule	What changed	Who it affects
Rule 1.10, Note 2	Pine tar or similar adhesive is permitted at all levels	Baseball and softball hitters
Rule 1.10, A.R. 2	Thumb protectors are permitted; choke-knobs and choke-up assists are not	Baseball and softball hitters
Rule 1.11(a)(3)	The "neoprene" wording is gone, so the rule covers all sleeves worn by the pitcher	Baseball pitchers
Regulation IV(i), Note 5	A courtesy runner can be used for the pitcher or catcher of record before that player finishes mandatory play, in tournament play and any time a continuous batting order is used	Coaches, scorekeepers
Rules 3.04, 7.14(b), T-3(d)	Clarifies where runners go when you courtesy run for both the pitcher and the catcher with two outs	Coaches, umpires
Rule 4.04, Note 2	Guidance for a player who can't finish an at-bat or run the bases because of injury, illness or ejection in a continuous batting order (regular season)	Coaches, scorekeepers
Rule 7.15(g)	With a double first base, on an uncaught third strike the fielder and the runner can use either part of the base	First basemen, catchers, hitters
Rule 3.17	A team gets a reasonable amount of time to fix a malfunctioning one-way communication device	Teams that use one
Rule 8.06(b), Note	Being out of mound visits does not stop a removed pitcher from coming back to pitch	Intermediate (50/70), Junior, Senior baseball; softball
Rule 4.18	The Umpire-in-Chief no longer has to sign the scorebook on a forfeit	League officials
Rule 6.06(d) and Tournament Rule 3(b)	Illegal bat rules reworded so the regular season and tournament versions match	Everyone, but nothing new to do

Four regulations also got what Little League calls minor edits: Regulation I(c)(5), V(b), IX(4) and XIII(b). The summary does not describe those edits, so check them in the rulebook if you sit on a league board.

The Changes Your Players Will Notice

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For years the answer to "can my kid use pine tar?" depended on the division. For 2026, Rule 1.10 Note 2 permits pine tar or any similar adhesive substance at all levels of Little League Baseball and Softball.

What that means in practice: a 10-year-old with small hands and a slick bat handle now has a legal fix. Our advice, which is coaching advice and not rulebook language, is to keep it low on the handle, use a lot less than the kid wants to, and keep a rag in the bucket. Sticky hands end up on the ball, the helmet and the dugout bench. A good pair of batting gloves does most of the same job with less mess, and that is still what we would start with for players under 10.

Thumb protectors are in, choke-up knobs are out

Rule 1.10 A.R. 2 now permits thumb protectors, the small padded ring that sits between the thumb and the bat handle to take the sting out of a mishit. The same update says products such as choke-knobs and choke-up assists are not permitted, and the wording is "such as, but not limited to," so do not assume a similar gadget is fine because it has a different name.

If a parent asks before buying, the simple test we use is this: does it cushion the hand, or does it change where the hands sit on the bat? Cushion is the direction the rule moved. Anything that changes the bat itself is where we would stop and ask the league's umpire-in-chief first.

The pitcher's sleeve rule covers all sleeves now

The old language in Rule 1.11(a)(3) singled out neoprene sleeves. The 2026 wording drops "neoprene" so the rule applies to any sleeve a pitcher wears. The summary does not restate the full requirement, so read the rule itself in the Rulebook App before opening day. The takeaway for parents is simple: a compression sleeve is not exempt just because it isn't neoprene. If your son pitches, have the sleeve question answered before he takes the mound, not when the other dugout brings it up in the third inning.

The Changes Coaches and Scorekeepers Need

Courtesy runners for the pitcher and catcher

This is the one from the story at the top. Regulation IV(i) Note 5 now says that during tournament play, and any time the continuous batting order is used, a courtesy runner may be used for the pitcher or catcher of record before that player has completed mandatory play. Before this, the safe assumption was to wait.

Rules 3.04, 7.14(b) and T-3(d) were also updated to clarify where runners are placed when a team courtesy runs for both the pitcher and the catcher with two outs at the same time. The summary document only says the placement is clarified. It does not walk through the scenario, so read the actual rule text and settle it at the plate meeting.

When a player can't finish an at-bat in a continuous batting order

Rule 4.04 Note 2 adds guidance for a situation every rec coach has seen: a kid in a continuous batting order gets hurt, gets sick, or gets ejected in the middle of a plate appearance or while standing on base. The guidance applies to the regular season. Know where to find it before you need it, because that moment is always chaotic and usually involves a crying nine-year-old.

Double first base on a dropped third strike

If your league uses a double first base, Rule 7.15(g) now makes clear that on an uncaught third strike the fielder and the runner can each use either part of the base. That makes sense once you picture it. The throw is coming from behind the runner, often from foul territory, so the first baseman may need the outside half to give the catcher a clean lane.

Mound visits and bringing a pitcher back

In the Intermediate (50/70), Junior and Senior baseball divisions, and in softball, the Rule 8.06(b) Note clarifies that the number of visits you have left does not prevent a pitcher who was removed from returning to pitch. This does not create a new right to re-enter a pitcher. It only says that visit count is not the thing that blocks it, in the divisions where returning is already allowed.

One-way communication devices

Rule 3.17 now says a team must be given a reasonable amount of time to correct a malfunctioning one-way communication

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What Did NOT Change (Read This Before You Believe a Blog)

This is the part most rule-change articles get wrong. Some of the pages ranking for this topic list things like a new two-hour time limit, a two-coach dugout cap, or adjusted pitch counts. None of those appear in Little League's 2026 significant updates.

- **Pitch counts.** The 2026 significant updates do not touch them. Little League's daily limits by league age are still 50 pitches for ages 7 to 8, 75 for ages 9 to 10, 85 for ages 11 to 12, and 95 for ages 13 to 16, with required days of rest based on how many pitches were thrown. Those are maximums, not targets.
- **Bat standards.** The only bat items on the list are wording changes so Rule 6.06(d) and Tournament Rule 3(b) read the same way. If your bat was legal in Little League last season, the 2026 updates did not change that. If you are also playing travel ball, the rules are different there, and our guide to the USSSA vs USA bat standards explains why one bat rarely covers both.
- **Your local league's rules.** Time limits, run rules and whether you bat a continuous order are often local decisions. A rule change you heard about at the field may be your league's, not Little League International's.

When in doubt, the free Little League Rulebook App was updated for 2026 and is the source the umpire will use.

The Part Nobody Covers: Teach the Rules Like a Skill

Every result we found for this topic is a list. A list helps the coach. It does nothing for the 10-year-old first baseman who has two seconds to decide which half of the bag to use.

In our experience, kids learn rules the same way they learn a relay throw: by running it at practice. I learned that the hard way. A few seasons back I explained the dropped third strike to a 9U team three separate times, in a circle, on one knee. Then a kid struck out on a ball in the dirt in our first game and jogged straight to the dugout while both benches yelled at him to run. He had heard the rule. He had never done it.

So now we spend 20 minutes on a preseason rules walk-through. It fits inside a normal first practice of the season or as one stop in a station-based practice.

> **Step 1 — Dropped Third Strike Live (6 min)** Catcher in gear, first baseman on the bag, hitters in a line with helmets on. Coach bounces a ball in the dirt behind the plate and yells "strike three." The hitter runs, the catcher finds the ball and throws, and the first baseman sets up on whichever part of the base gives the catcher a clear lane. If your league uses a double first base, run it both ways so players see that either part is fair game on this play. Coaching cue: "Strike three in the dirt, feet first, think second."

> **Step 2 — Two-Out Courtesy Runner Swap (5 min)** Put your catcher on second base and your pitcher on first with two outs called. On the coach's signal, the courtesy runners sprint out and the pitcher and catcher sprint in. Time it. The goal is a clean swap with no confusion about who goes where, and a catcher who is strapping on shin guards before the next pitch. Have your scorekeeper practice marking it. Coaching cue: "Runner out, gear on, no walking."

> **Step 3 — Bat and Gear Check Line (4 min)** Every player lays their bat, batting gloves and any sleeve on the foul line. Coaches walk the line. Check each bat for the correct certification mark for your division, look for any knob or choke-up attachment that has to come off, and answer the pine tar and thumb protector questions once, for everyone, out loud. Coaching cue: "If you're not sure it's legal, ask today, not on Saturday."

> **Step 4 — Hurt Hitter Scenario (5 min)** Run a short scrimmage inning with a continuous batting order. Midway through an at-bat, the coach calls "hitter's hurt" and the team has to solve it: who tells the umpire, what the scorekeeper writes, and who is up next. Do the same with a runner on base. The players do not need to memorize the rule. They need to know the adults have a plan and that the game keeps moving. Coaching cue: "Take care of your teammate first, then the lineup."

Notice that three of those four steps are sprints, reads and quick decisions under a little pressure. For players under 12 that is on purpose. A rules walk-through that keeps kids moving, reacting and communicating builds the same athletic habits as any other drill, and it holds their attention far better than a talk.

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What to Tell Your Team Parents

Parents mostly want to know two things: do I need to buy anything, and is my kid's stuff still legal. A short note before the season saves you a dozen sideline conversations. Something like this covers it:

- Pine tar is allowed at all levels this year. It is optional. Please send a rag if your player uses it.
- Thumb protectors are allowed. Choke-up knobs and similar add-ons are not, so please take them off the bat.
- If your player pitches and wears any kind of arm sleeve, check with me before the first game.
- Pitch counts and bat rules have not changed.

If you already send a preseason note, add those four lines to it. If you don't, our guide for first-time baseball coaches covers what else belongs in it, and the rest of our baseball coaching library has practice plans by age group.

If the gear check turns up a kid who needs batting gloves or a properly marked bat before opening day, you can pick up team gear at theranchsports.com with a 10% discount and no sales tax.

A Preseason Checklist for Coaches

1. Download the updated Little League Rulebook App and read the rules listed in the table above. It takes about fifteen minutes.
2. Ask your league president which optional rules your league uses: continuous batting order, double first base, one-way communication devices.
3. Run the four-step rules walk-through at one of your first two practices.
4. Send the four-line parent note.
5. At the first plate meeting, confirm the courtesy runner procedure with the umpire and the other coach before it comes up with two outs in the fourth.

The 2026 changes are small. The arguments they prevent are not. Fifteen minutes with the rulebook in February is a lot cheaper than three adults staring at their phones behind home plate in April.

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