

# Catcher's interference calls are skyrocketing in MLB; it's putting players at risk.

By KATIE WOO

Weeks before Opening Day this season, Major League Baseball sent a memo to all 30 clubs highlighting a rise in catcher interference. The instances of catchers being struck by the bats of opposing hitters were rising rapidly. Catcher's interference was called 94 times in 2023, nearly 20 more times than in 2022.

What was causing the dramatic uptick? Catchers kept moving closer to the plate. In the era of pitch framing, teams believed that the closer a catcher is to receiving a pitch, the better chance he has to "steal" a strike.

It worked well enough that catchers kept shifting closer to the batter's box. The memo this spring essentially warned teams to cut it out and move catchers farther behind the plate to minimize risk.

But anyone who saw St. Louis Cardinals catcher Willson Contreras sustain a fractured left arm Tuesday night knows that risk remains ever present.

Catcher's interference calls continue to skyrocket at a historic pace. The average catcher's interference total from 2010 to 2019 was 31. This year, it's been called 33 times — less than two months in.

MLB's concerns were already growing. There are more than double the interference calls in 2024 compared to the 2022 season at the same point (15). The league is on pace for a record 148 catcher's interference calls this season. The push to frame the lower strike has inadvertently put the safety of catchers in jeopardy.

"The risk is high," Cardinals manager Oli Marmol said earlier in the week. "We just experienced it."

Contreras was struck flush by the swing of New York Mets' designated hitter J.D. Martinez. The catcher underwent surgery on Wednesday and will miss a minimum of six to eight weeks. Contreras was one of baseball's worst framers last year on borderline pitches below the zone. The Cardinals, a defense-oriented club, worked extensively with Contreras to improve in that regard.

Over his first year in St. Louis, the Cardinals overhauled Contreras' approach, including his set up behind the plate. Contreras ditched the traditional crouch behind the plate in favor of the one-knee down method. They also did indeed move Contreras closer to the plate.

The Cardinals are hardly the only team in baseball to deploy this method, but they were the first to pay the price for it this season.

"The more catchers are evaluated on framing, the closer they're getting to the hitter in order to get to that low pitch," Marmol said. "You're seeing more catchers do that based on being able to get the low pitch, but you're also seeing more catcher's interference and backswing getting guys based on them being closer. Sometimes the catcher unknowingly could get closer and closer from hitter to hitter without noticing."

That seems to have been the case for Contreras, who was caught by the swing of Martinez, who has a naturally deep swing and sets up as close to the back of the batter's box as possible. Perhaps he showed the head of Martinez's bat hitting Contreras' left arm square. It also showed just how far Contreras had reached in his attempt to frame the pitch.

"There's always a risk being a catcher," Contreras said after the injury. "Could have been something different. It could've been off my knee, it could be a concussion. That risk is always going to be there. I'm not blaming any part of my game because this happened tonight."

Perhaps that's the problem. No position player in baseball takes a more constant beating than the catcher. And as teams across the board court the low-strike call, catchers take the brunt of the consequences.

"We used to always talk about catcher interference being long strings on your glove or ticking your glove," Detroit Tigers manager A.J. Hinch, who caught seven seasons in the big leagues said. "Then it turned into the glove in its entirety. Contreras is one of the first I've seen on a limb."

"That is risky," Hinch added. "The closer we get to the plate the more strikes we can

grab at the bottom rail. Catchers are getting evaluated. They're getting paid on how well they can control the bottom rail. That's led to more and more catcher interference throughout the game. ... We do want our guys close enough to be impactful with the low strike but not walking into harm's way. It's a tough balance when the incentive to do it is real and the risk is extreme."

Some teams stress the low strike more than others. Philadelphia Phillies manager Rob Thomson was caught in the Tigers' organization for four seasons. He was taught that as the bats come through the zone, the glove should follow.

"You're going to catch more foul tips," Thomson said. "You're closer to the plate, you're closer to the strike zone. It's a better presentation for the umpire."

Still, Thomson professes his catchers keep some distance from the plate. "We keep our eye on guys that do that and remind the catcher, 'You got to back up a little bit,'" he said.

The happy medium for some teams seems to be self-monitoring. The Minnesota Twins, for example, monitor their catcher every pitch. It's one of the primary in-game responsibilities of first-base-and catcher coach Hank Conger.

"A good, tight setup generally speaking is better than worse, something you prefer. But it's important to avoid not just catcher interference, but injuries, too," manager Rocco Baldelli said. "I think there's a few reasons why (being closer) is helpful, but there are other things that we're yelling at them to back the hell up to also be helpful, you know?"

The Atlanta Braves had two coaches assigned to catching duties. Sal Fasano is the catching coach. He's assisted by Eddie Pérez, who spent nine of his 11 big-league seasons catching for the Braves. Pérez certainly understands the strategy behind being close to the plate but thinks the responsibility to inform the catcher he's too close falls on those watching the game from the dugout.

"It's always a good idea to be closer to the hitter," Pérez said. "It's thought that if you're closer to the batter, you're going to get more calls."

"Sal always reminds them to go back, you don't want to get hurt," Pérez added. "From (the dugout) you see better. When you're catching you don't know how far you are from the hitter, and every hitter has a different setup, so you have to adjust. ... As a catcher, they've got to tell you from the side how close you are to the hitter."

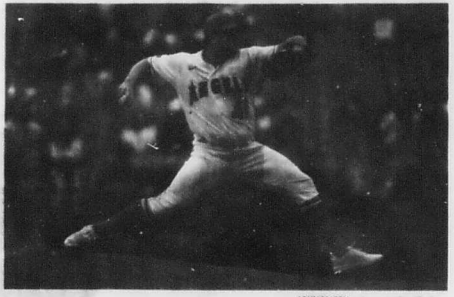
But the accidental blows behind the plate can sometimes be a two-way street. Catchers are frequently clipped by hitters' swings regardless of where they're positioned. With the average bat speed registering roughly 75 mph, some argue the responsibility lies on the batter to ensure not just their physical body remains within the parameters of the batter's box, but their swing as well.

"The thing I don't necessarily agree with is if it can be the way people are swinging too," Chicago Cubs manager Craig Counsell said. "It can be the way catchers are setting up, yes. But it also can be kind of the way some people are swinging. And it's dangerous."

With the league on notice and MLB clearly aware of the risks, what can be done to cut down catcher's interference — and the inherent injury risk? Cardinals' starting pitcher Miles Mikolas suggested a physical line behind the plate that catchers cannot cross, a box of their own in a way. Could the automated ball-strike system (which theoretically eliminates the value of framing) be the answer? Possibly, but it's an imperfect system in the minor leagues and is far from being a big-league product.

"I don't know what they could possibly do other than reward the hitter with more bases, put him on second base," Hinch said. "There are things you could probably do to make it super impactful to the game, but I don't know if anything can be more impactful than losing one of your best players for six to eight weeks, 10 weeks, whatever it's gonna be."

The Cardinals now know how severe that impact can be. The bigger question looms: Does baseball?



Los Angeles Angels starting pitcher Carson Fulmer delivers during the first inning of a game against the Oakland Athletics on Oct. 1, 2023, in Anaheim.

## 'I'm still here': Angels' Fulmer hopes to finally live up to expectations

By SAM BLUM

Anaheim, Calif. — The baseball season was in full swing, but Carson Fulmer was at home. No team seemed to want him.

It was the spring of 2023, and Fulmer, then 29 years old, had little to do but watch the transaction wire. He saw other players signed to long-shot attempts to reach the big leagues. Each one reinforced the realization that nobody thought he was worthy of a similar look.

Fulmer has been designated for assignment six times in his career and optioned nine times more. He has been claimed off waivers six times, outrighted three times and released once. A former phenom and top prospect, Fulmer had gotten all too used to his career being kicked around like a hockey sack.

But after he was let go by the Seattle Mariners, to his surprise, late last spring, suddenly all the chaos came to a disquieting halt.

"I was fortunate enough to be a pretty high pick," Fulmer said. "And when that happens and you're given so many opportunities, you really don't see it happening that way. It was tough. I had a bunch of buddies that were playing. You try to keep yourself going."

"It was a really hard time for me. Probably one of the hardest things I've ever had to go through."

Fulmer was the No. 8 overall pick in the 2015 MLB draft, selected by the Chicago White Sox. He had been a college baseball legend. The Vanderbilt University ace threw 127 2/3 innings with a 1.83 ERA en route to a 2015 College World Series championship game appearance.

He looked ready-made for the big leagues. And he had the intense demeanor to become a presence in the sport. Fulmer was as close to achieving national stardom as a college pitcher could possibly be.

Fast-forward eight years, and Fulmer was simply grateful when the Los Angeles Angels called him May to offer him a role as a Class AAA innings eater. He wasn't just contemplating retirement at that time. He was on the doorstep of it — with his first child about to arrive.

"There's a lot of guys that take things for granted," Fulmer said. "I don't want to be one of those."

Fulmer did not always agree with the way he was developed. He said the White Sox tried to calm his max-effort delivery — possibly out of concern that his arm wouldn't hold up under the strain of significant innings.

As a result, his fastball, which had

touched the upper 90s in college, instead sat in the low 90s with the White Sox.

Fulmer believes that his natural delivery provided a lot of deception for his best pitch, the change-up. He also says he has something of a rubber arm — one that is largely unfazed by heavy and strenuous work.

"I guess what he is saying, as I understand, 'Don't make me change until I fail,'" said Steve McCatty, who was the pitching coach for the White Sox's affiliate in Charlotte, North Carolina. McCatty pushed back on the idea that there was a top-down edict to change Fulmer. "If someone did, I certainly don't know about it," he said.

Fulmer didn't revert to his original max-effort delivery for years, after he was selected by the Los Angeles Dodgers in the minor league portion of the 2022 Rule 5 draft. The change came with success: He posted a 2.86 ERA in Class AAA that season.

Fulmer is 30 now. His spot long-term with the Angels is far from assured. Such is the reality of a long reliever. But in a season in which Angels relievers have struggled, Fulmer's stability has been necessary. He has a 3.21 ERA over his first 14 innings. No one would confuse him with a Cy Young Award winner, even if that was once hoped to be his calling. Fulmer, though, believes he has turned a corner in his career and that he's a late bloomer who has figured something out.

"I love him, man. He's everything that's been advertised," said Angels pitching coach Barry Enright. "The kid always wants the ball. His mentality is probably No. 1. I don't think he takes anything for granted. And that's his story. You draw from those failures that he's gone through."

Fulmer never got numb to his disappointments. He has found some silver linings. Just reaching the major leagues and continuing to get back are major accomplishments in their own right.

But bouncing from the White Sox, Detroit Tigers, Baltimore Orioles, Cincinnati Reds, Dodgers, Mariners and Angels, along with seven minor league affiliates, has been an undeniable strain.

"He can reinvent, refine, reorchestrate, reorganize, whatever you want to call it," said Derek Johnson, Fulmer's pitching coach with the Reds. "He's a super kid."

Fulmer's son, Fox, was born just two weeks after he signed with the Angels. Fox got to attend a game late last season. Fulmer hopes his son can someday watch him pitch and be old enough to internalize it.

"That's why I want to continue to play," Fulmer said. "I'm going to try my best to continue to play for as long as I can until he has that memory."

Milwaukee Brewers catcher Omar Narvaez is called for catcher's interference as the St. Louis Cardinals' Paul Goldschmidt bats during a game on April 14, 2022, in Milwaukee. The major leagues have seen a marked increase in catcher interference calls this season.

MOFF GASH



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