

Determining Earned and Unearned Runs – Stew Thornley, October 2019

Errors (as well as passed balls, which can cause unearned runs) usually fall into one of two categories, which can be classified as missed-out or advancement errors:

- Missed-out errors/passed balls are those that create a baserunner (or prolong the life of a baserunner) and avoid an out. A shortstop bobbling a ground ball, an outfielder dropping a fly ball, a passed ball that allows a batter to reach first after striking out are all examples of missed-out errors or passed balls.
- Advancement errors/passed balls allow an additional advancement of a runner already on base and do not affect the number of outs. An outfielder bobbling a ball on a base hit, a catcher making a wild throw on a stolen base, a passed ball that allows a runner to advance are all examples of advancement errors/passed balls.

A few other types of errors don't fall into either category, such as a batter reaching base on catcher's interference (where a baserunner is created but the number of outs is not affected).

The key in determining unearned runs is to figure out what would have happened had the error or passed ball not occurred. In some cases, particularly with advancement errors/passed balls, the determination may be subjective with the judgment left to the official scorer. Also, the status of a run may change depending on subsequent events with advancement errors/passed balls.

For purposes of the following examples, assume the following batting order:

Aparicio, Battey, Charlesworth, Dancer, Evers, Frisch, Gibson, Heisler, Ivie

Missed-out Errors/Passed Balls

A run scoring because of a runner reaching base on a missed-out error will be unearned. Because a missed-out error also affects the outs, there may be additional runs that will be unearned.

With no out, Aparicio reaches base when the shortstop bobbles his grounder. Battey homers. How many unearned runs?

One. Aparicio's run is unearned because of the error.

With no out, Aparicio strikes out but reaches first on a passed ball. Battey homers. How many unearned runs?

One. Aparicio's run is unearned because, in this case, the passed ball was the equivalent of a missed-out error, such as a shortstop bobbling a grounder.

With no out, Aparicio reaches base when the shortstop bobbles his grounder. Battey forces Aparicio at second. Charlesworth homers. How many unearned runs?

One. Battey's run is unearned. Battey took Aparicio's place on the bases with the force out and assumed the unearned status.

With no out, Aparicio reaches base when the pitcher bobbles his grounder. Battey homers. How many unearned runs?

One. Aparicio's run is unearned even though the error that allowed him to reach base was on the pitcher. Earned-run average is a measure of a pitcher's pitching, not fielding, ability, and it is irrelevant that the error was on the pitcher as opposed to any other fielder.

Aparicio reaches base when the shortstop bobbles his grounder. Battey grounds into a double play. Charlesworth singles and Dancer homers. How many unearned runs?

None. The double play took Aparicio off the basepaths, so the error is no longer a factor in the scoring.

Aparicio reaches base when the shortstop bobbles his grounder. Battey and Charlesworth fly out. Dancer homers. How many unearned runs?

Both are unearned. Because there would have been three outs without the error, any additional runs scored in this inning are unearned to the pitcher who was in the game when the error occurred. Subsequent pitchers are not off the hook with regard to earned runs because of the error on Aparicio's grounder.

With fewer than two out, Aparicio singles. Battey hits a ground ball to the second baseman. His throw to second for an attempted force on Aparicio pulls the shortstop off the base. The second baseman is charged with an error. Charlesworth singles to center, scoring Aparicio and sending Battey to second. The remaining batters strike out. Is the run unearned?

Yes. It's important to distinguish which runner is on base (or remains on base) because of the error. In this case, without the error, Aparicio would be out and Battey would be on first. Had the error been on a throw to first, then the opposite would be true – Aparicio would be on second and Battey would not be on base. In the latter case, the run would be earned since Charlesworth's single would have scored Aparicio from second even without the error.

Aparicio grounds out to the shortstop. Battey triples. Charlesworth grounds to the third baseman, who bobbles the grounder for an error as Battey holds at third. Dancer flies to center, with Battey tagging and scoring after the catch. Is the run unearned?

Yes. Without the error, Dancer's fly to center would have been the third out. Thus, Battey would not have scored on the play.

Aparicio reaches base when the shortstop bobbles his grounder. Battey and Charlesworth fly out. Kamenshek relieves Joss on the mound. Dancer homers. How many unearned runs?

One individual unearned run and two team unearned runs. Aparicio's run, charged to Joss, is unearned. Dancer's run, charged to Kamenshek, is earned to her because, by rule 9.16(i), Kamenshek cannot benefit from an error prior to her appearance affecting the number of outs. However, the rule also states that all runs scored this inning are unearned to the team.

Aparicio hits a foul pop up that is dropped by the first baseman for an error. Aparicio singles. Battey and Charlesworth fly out. Dancer homers. How many unearned runs?

Both are unearned. Without the error on the foul pop up, Aparicio would have been out, and there would have been three outs before Dancer came up. In this case, an error on a foul pop up has the same effect as any other missed-out error, such as a bobble by the shortstop.

Aparicio reaches base when the shortstop bobbles his grounder. Battey and Charlesworth strike out. Kamenshek relieves Joss. Dancer reaches base when the second baseman bobbles her grounder, Aparicio taking second on the play. Evers homers. How many unearned runs?

All are unearned, both to the team and the individual pitcher. The error after Kamenshek entered the game means that she should have been out of the inning and, thus, the run by Evers is also unearned.

Charlesworth leads off with a walk and steals second. Dancer hits a grounder to third. Charlesworth goes to third as the third baseman throws to first. The throw is wild. Charlesworth continues home on the error while Dancer reaches second (a two-base throwing error on the third baseman). Evers strikes out. Frisch walks. Gibson doubles, scoring Dancer with Frisch stopping at third. Heisler hits a sacrifice fly to left, Frisch scoring. Ivie grounds out. Which runs are earned and which are unearned?

Charlesworth's run is earned. Her run was originally unearned, but it became earned after Gibson's double. Gibson's double scored Dancer, which was an unearned run because Dancer had reached base on an error. Frisch scored on Heisler's fly, an unearned run because the fly out would have been the third out of the inning if not for the error.

Obstruction is the act of a fielder without the ball impeding the progress of a runner. (People often use the term "interference" in this situation; however, the only example of interference on the team in the field is catcher's interference. Other situations are obstruction.)

An error may or may not be charged when obstruction occurs, depending if it affects the outcome of the play or not. If a runner collides with a fielder while rounding a base and, as a result of the collision, does not try for the next base, the umpire may call obstruction and award the runner the following base. In this case, an error would not be charged. The award of additional bases is not a penalty on a fielder for obstruction; it is to place a runner based on where the umpire thinks the runner would have reached without the obstruction.

An error could be charged if the obstruction extended the life of a runner. If a runner is caught in a rundown and collides with a fielder who does not have the ball, obstruction may be called and the runner awarded the following base. Since the runner would have been out if not for the obstruction, this is a missed-out error. If it occurs with two out and the next batter homers, all runs are unearned.

Advancement Errors/Passed Balls

Advancement errors and passed balls are those that allow additional advancement of a runner or runners already on base and that do not affect the number of outs. As such, the error affects the earned or unearned status only of the runner directly affected by the error (unlike a missed-out error, which can render an unlimited number of runs as unearned after two are out).

The judgments involved in determining the status of runs affected by advancement errors can be tricky. For example, if a runner steals second, continues to third on the play because of a throwing error by the catcher, and then scores on a single to the outfield, a determination must be made as to whether the runner would have scored from second on the hit. This judgment is up to the official scorer.

Aparicio singles, steals second, and goes to third on a throwing error by the catcher. Battey flies to left, with Aparicio tagging and coming home. Is the run unearned?

Yes—for now.

Charlesworth then triples. Does this affect the status of Aparicio's run?

Yes. Because Aparicio would have scored on Charlesworth's triple, regardless of the error, the run becomes earned.

Aparicio hits a ground ball to the shortstop, who bobbles it and then makes a wild throw to first. Aparicio ends up on second, and the shortstop is charged with two errors, one for the bobble and one for the throw. After Battey and Charlesworth fly out, Dancer triples to score Aparicio. Evers flies out to end the inning. Is the run unearned?

Yes. It is unearned because of the first error on the shortstop, the bobble that allowed the batter to reach first (a missed-out error). If this play had been ruled a hit and an error (with the error on the throw), the run would be earned.

Aparicio singles and makes it to second when the center fielder boots the ball. Battey reaches base when the second baseman bobbles his grounder, with Aparicio taking third on the play. Charlesworth and Dancer strike out. Evers triples, scoring Aparicio and Battey. Frisch singles home Evers. How many runs are unearned?

All are unearned. The error on Aparicio (an advancement error) is irrelevant since he would have scored from anywhere on the bases on the triple by Evers. However, the error on Battey (a missed-out error) affected the number of outs. Without this error, the inning would have been over before the triple and the run-scoring single that followed.

On the above play, Kamenshek relieves Joss after Dancer bats. She gives up a triple to Evers and a run-scoring single to Frisch. How many runs are unearned?

The status of the runs by Aparicio and Battey is unaffected by the pitching change. Both are still unearned. The run by Evers is earned to Kamenshek and unearned to the team (Rule 9.16[i] again).

Aparicio singles and makes it to second when the center fielder boots the ball. Battey walks. Charlesworth singles, Aparicio scoring. The remaining batters in the inning strike out. Is the run earned or unearned?

Earned. Aparicio would have gone to second on Battey's walk, so the effect of the error was erased when that happened.

Aparicio singles and goes all the way to third when the ball gets by the outfielder for an error. Battey singles, scoring Aparicio. (The scorer determines that, if not for the error, Aparicio would have stopped at second on Battey's single.) Battey advances to second on a wild pitch. (The scorer determines that, had Aparicio been on second, both runners would have advanced on the wild pitch.) Charlesworth walks. Dancer strikes out to end the inning. Is Aparicio's run earned or unearned?

Unearned. Without the error, Aparicio would have advanced to third on the wild pitch but would have stayed there when Charlesworth walked.

Same situation as above, but in this case, the wild pitch occurs after Charlesworth's walk, while Dancer was at bat. Earned or unearned?

Earned in this case (if the official scorer determines that the wild pitch that advanced Battey and Charlesworth would have also allowed Aparicio to score). In this case, in the reconstructed inning, the bases would have been loaded without the error, and the wild pitch would have then scored Aparicio.

If the wild pitch hit the backstop and caromed back quickly to the catcher – even though two runners did advance on the wild pitch – the scorer could determine that Aparicio would not have been able to come home from third on it. In this case, Aparicio's run would be unearned.

Aparicio singles to and takes a big turn at first. The right fielder tries to throw behind him, but the throw is wild and goes out of play. Aparicio is awarded third and then scores on Battey's single. Charlesworth walks, Battey to second. Both runners advance on a wild pitch. Dancer strikes out to end the inning. Is Aparicio's run earned?

Yes, if the official scorer determines that the wild pitch that advanced Battey and Charlesworth would have also allowed Aparicio to score.

Aparicio singles and makes it to second when the center fielder boots the ball. Battey is intentionally walked. Charlesworth hits a three-run homer. How many runs are earned?

All three runs are earned. Although it could be argued that Battey might not have been intentionally walked if not for the error that allowed Aparicio to go to second, this is not to be considered when making determinations on the status of a run.

Aparicio singles, steals second and takes third on a throwing error by the catcher, and scores on a sacrifice fly by Battey. Charlesworth singles. Dancer and Evers pop out. Is the run unearned?

This will depend on the judgment of the scorer, who may have to consider what would have happened on two plays. Would Aparicio have been able to advance from second to third on Battey's fly? If the judgment is that he would have advanced, then the run is earned since it would have scored on the single by Charlesworth. However, if the scorer decides that Aparicio would have remained at second on Battey's fly, then the scorer will have to determine if Aparicio would have scored from second on Charlesworth's single.

Aparicio triples and Battey strikes out. Charlesworth hits a foul pop up that the first baseman drops. Charlesworth then flies to center, with Aparicio tagging and scoring after the catch. Dancer flies out. Is the run unearned?

Yes. In this case, the dropped foul ball has the effect of an advancement error, unlike the missed-out error of the dropped foul cited earlier. Although Charlesworth did not reach base following the error, she was able to stay alive because of the error and then hit a fly ball deep enough to score the runner from third.

With the score tied in the last of the ninth, Ivie triples and continues home when the center fielder's throw into third is wild. The game ends on the play. Is the run unearned?

Yes. Even though the run might have scored as the result of subsequent plays had the game continued, in this situation the run is unearned.

Catcher's interference

Catcher's interference occurs when a batter is awarded first base when the catcher interferes with the swing. The catcher is charged with an error. This has one element of a missed-out error in that it creates a baserunner. However, it does not affect the number of outs. The impact of this is that the run will be unearned if the runner who reached on interference comes around to score; however, all other runs scored after two are out will be earned (unless there are other errors).

Fielder's Choice-Error following a Pitching Change

Alexander pitching. Aparicio singles. Borders relieves Alexander. Battey hits a grounder to the second baseman, who fumbles the ball. The scorer rules fielder's choice-error, meaning that the out was missed on the lead runner, not on the batter. Charlesworth doubles to score both runs. The next three batters make an out with no advancement of the runner.

One run is charged to each pitcher. One run is earned and one is unearned. Which pitcher gets the earned run, and which pitcher gets the unearned run?

Answer: Alexander is charged with the earned run, and Borders is charged with the unearned run. This is the case even though Aparicio scored the run that was unearned and Aparicio was put on by Alexander.

Consider this:

Had there been no error (if Aparicio would have been forced at second) and Battey later scored, the run would have been charged to Alexander, not Borders. A fielder's choice is a swapping of one runner for another, so the runner who remained (Battey) would have been the responsibility of Alexander.

Also keep in mind that this makes sense in that Alexander allowed a single, and Borders generated a ground ball that should have been an out.