

# Pesäpallo: The rules for the casual viewer

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I round out the bat-and-ball sports in my “minimum you need to know about a sport in order to watch a match and not be completely confused” mini-series by covering pesäpallo, also known as *Finnish baseball*. Unfortunately, when I watch a game, I’m still a little confused. Part of it is that the ball is so hard to see on video.

[Watch the game highlights](#) and see if you can figure out the rules.

I found [the official international rules](#), but not all the terms are defined, so I had to make some guesses. The rules are given in Finnish, English, Swedish, and German. Even though I can read three out of those four languages, I still don’t understand all of the rules. I’m sure my Finnish readers will gladly correct my many errors of interpretation.

## Set-up

- The playing area is shaped like an upside-down house  $\triangle$  with **home base** at the apex, and first, second and third bases arranged irregularly. Within home base is a white disk known as the **home plate**.
- One team is batting and the other is fielding. The inactive players of the batting team crowd around home base. I find this confusing.
- After three players from the batting team are put **out** (“burned” in Finnish), or if all the players have come to bat without scoring at least two runs (provided the last batter did not hit a home run), then the teams exchange roles. An **inning** consists of each team having one turn batting and one turn fielding.

## Batting

- The members of the batting team bat in a declared order known as the **batting order**. When the end of the order is reached, it wraps around to the start. Teams may change their batting order at the end of each period. In addition to the nine regular players, the batting team has three **jokers** who may be inserted into the batting order at any point, except that you cannot start with a joker. Each joker can be used only once per half-inning.

- A ball that first touches the ground inside the playing area is a fair ball. Otherwise, it is a foul ball. Note that a ball which lands beyond the rear line is a foul ball.
- The batter and pitcher both stand at home plate. The pitcher tosses the ball straight up into the air, and the batter may attempt to strike the ball with the bat.
- A **strike** is recorded if the batter swings and misses, if the ball lands on home plate, if the ball is hit foul, or if the batter hits the ball but elects not to run. (After two strikes, the batter must run after hitting the ball.)
- The batter is out upon receiving a third strike, even if the third strike is a foul ball.
- If the pitch does not land on home plate, is not thrown high enough into the air, or is otherwise bad, the batter is awarded first base if there are no runners. If there are runners, then the first infraction (per batter) is not penalized. Subsequent infractions award one base to the runner at the highest-numbered base (the **point runner**).

## Running

- Runners attempt to go from home base to each of the bases in order, returning to home base, which scores a **run**. The runner must pass outside a flag placed between third base and home base.
- The distance from home base to first base is relatively short, first base to second is longer, second to third longer still, and third base back to home base is quite a long way.
- A runner at a base is safe from being put out. At most one runner may be at each base. A runner loses the right to a base when another runner acquires the base.
- Runners are permitted to pass each other. (I don't know how common this is.)
- If the batter runs, then this may force other runners to advance. For example, if there is a runner on first base, that runner must advance to second base because the batter is running to first base.
- Runners may advance at their own risk if the batter hits the ball but chooses not to run.
- Runners may not advance on a foul hit.
- A runner who is not on a base may be put out by touching the next base while holding the ball, or by touching the runner with the ball.
- If the ball is caught before it touches the ground, any runners not on their base may be removed (**caught**) by throwing the ball to the next base, but the team is not charged an out. (I don't know what happens to the batter.)
- The furthest the batter may advance on his own hit is to third base. This scores a run (a *home run*). If the runner advances to home base on a later play, then that scores another run.

## Ending the game

- The game is played in two periods, each four innings long. Periods may end in a draw.
- If one team wins more periods than the other, then that team wins. Otherwise, the game continues with a *super-inning*, played under normal rules.

- If the score remains tied after the super-inning, then a *scoring contest* is played:
  - Each team announces five batters and five runners. A player cannot be both a batter and a runner.
  - A runner is placed on third base, and the batter attempts to bring the runner home. (The batter can also hit a home run to score another run.) If the runner scores, the round is over, even if the batter has strikes remaining.
  - The process repeats with the other four pairs of batters and runners.
  - After one team has five rounds, it is the other team's turn.
  - If the score is still tied, then the scoring contest restarts with three rounds per team. The three-round scoring contest repeats until a winner emerges.

**Tournament scoring:** Each match awards three points.

- If the match is won in two periods, then the winning team earns all three points.
- If the match is tied after two periods, then the teams each earn one point for the tie, and the third point goes to the winner of the super-inning or scoring contest.

### Other notes

- Umpires make their decisions known by blowing a whistle in specific patterns, making hand signals, or holding up a marked paddle.
- Penalties for various infractions vary, but typically take the form of base awards, removal of runners (with or without outs), or returning runners to their original bases.
- Substitutions for reasons other than injury are permitted only at the change of innings starting with the second inning, and the replacement player must play a full inning (both fielding and batting). A player who has been replaced may return to the game.
- A limiting rule prevents the inning from ending due to lack of runs if the last batter was given bad pitches. This prevents the fielding team from being rewarded for intentionally throwing bad pitches.
- The manager of the batting team signals strategy by holding up a Pantone fan. Or at least it looks like a Pantone fan. The order of the colors encodes the strategy.
- The batting team may intentionally allow a runner to be caught to remove a slow runner from the bases. Conversely, the fielding team may elect not to remove a caught runner.
- There is no wall surrounding the playing area. A fair ball that leaves the playing area must be chased down and retrieved, even if it goes into a river.
- The sport of pesäpallo had a match-fixing scandal in 1998 which cast a shadow on the sport for over a decade.

One of my friends will be visiting Finland later this year. Some of us have been trying to convince him to attend a pesäpallo game and report back.

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