

# Base Umpire Mechanics

## The Set Positions

There are two standard positions, the standing and hands-on-knees set, and one less common, the kneeling set, for the base umpire to assume when on the field. These positions offer a sturdy platform from which to react to each pitch and ultimately make each call. Each position also permits the umpire to focus intently on the action taking place. Practicing and using defined starting positions will make you into a better umpire. When each play begins with a common stance the feeling of focus and attentiveness are recreated each time.

- **The Standing Set** is most commonly used when you are on the baseline. In a two man system this would be when the base umpire is 12 - 15 feet beyond first base in foul territory. It is a relaxed position, standing erect, feet slightly apart, hands at your side. From this position you can quickly shift and move onto the field or down the baseline if needed. The "relaxed" calls are made from this set position: ie: a tapped ball to second base that easily retires the batter runner.
- **Hands-On-Knees Set** creates a feeling of being locked into the play. With your legs spread slightly wider than shoulder with and your hands resting on your knees the umpire is not in a position to suddenly run a great distance. The umpire is however on a solid platform which can rotate and move forward, or backward one or two steps to make the call. Hands "on" the knees, not "pressed into" the knees allows you to focus your vision towards the play. It stabilizes the whole picture you have of the play. It should be used anytime you are in the infield or have taken a few steps and are about to make a close call. The closeness of pickoff plays demands this consistent support.
- Taken while a play is developing, **The Kneeling Set**, so common when you watch videos of old World Series, is rarely seen in a two man system since many argue it "decreases mobility." In truth it takes only about one second to go to or from the kneeling position. It can however provide the umpire with a better focus on a play, particularly when you are in close proximity to the play. If a play a base is happening quickly and you can get down on one knee to observe the play, avoiding any throws to the base, and providing the strong foundation that the Hands-On-Knees provides. Unskilled umpires should be careful not to use this set position with multiple runners on base when their ability to quickly pivot and step towards the next play cannot be limited. When working with a single runner on an uncomplicated play, it can be effective.

## Priorities in a Two Umpire System

You are working a tournament hardball game where leading off is not permitted. Your partner is meticulous in picking runners who are leading off. The calls are flying quickly and accurately. On a full count runner goes, the batter checks his swing, the catcher pops up in front of you obstructing your view. "Did he swing?" you say appealing to your base umpire. After a moments hesitation he shrugs his shoulders

and signals back a very weak "safe" sign. Priorities. To be an effective umpire you must establish and maintain a set of working priorities.

In the case above the priority of the base umpire should have been assistance on the half swing in case of an appeal. Whether or not the runner lifted his foot from the base or not is lower in importance to the essential elements of the play at hand. These priorities change when the bases are empty or when there are runners on base. Knowing and following your priorities will give you the best opportunity to be in position to make the call.

### **On every pitch, what are the immediate priorities for a base umpire?**

1. Watching for the illegal pitch or balk if callable.
2. Handling pickoff plays to the bases when possible
3. Assisting on the check swing appeal
4. Handling the "runner leaving early" rules (level / league dependent)
5. Watching for pickoff plays from the catcher
6. Watching for attempted steals, particularly double steals when possible

If **the ball is hit** the base umpire's priorities depend on the game situation

### **No One On Base**

1. Do you have a "dead ball" situation (ball hits batter)?
2. Assess the ball's flight and position of the ball,
3. Call **fair** or **foul** if the ball is hit down the first base line beyond the bag
4. You have the bases on any ball hit into the infield or outfield. You have the **Catch / No-Catch** decision on any fly ball hit from center to the right-field dead ball area.
5. Be aware of any ball hit into a "trouble area" for the plate umpire, such as a ball hit to left center with the fielder running away to make the play. Be ready to assist the plate umpire's call..
6. If the ball goes to the outfield then **come inside** to the infield and take lead the runner from first to second base.

### **With Runners On Base**

1. Assess the ball's flight and position of the ball, you have the bases on any ball hit into the infield or outfield. You have the **Catch / No-Catch** decision on any fly ball hit in the "V" from left to the right-field dead ball area.
2. Be aware of any ball hit into a "trouble area" for the plate umpire, such as a ball hit to left center with the fielder running away to make the play. Be ready to assist the plate umpire's call..
3. Be aware of any options the fielders may have and do not commit yourself to one specific play until the fielders have committed themselves.
4. You also have responsibility for both ends of a double play..

### **Reading The Play**

You have heard the old adage, "Keep your eye on the ball." For the umpire that is not always the case. Anticipation is one of the most essential ingredients of a

successful umpire. Not blind anticipation in the sense of "the play will go here therefore I will move here" but anticipation that allows you to take your eyes from the ball and watch the fielders in motion.

Example: On a sixty foot diamond, runner on first, you are working in the outfield slot to the left of second base. The batter pops the ball up to the second base area. You ....

- (a) Keep your eye on the ball moving carefully, just enough to ensure the ball does not hit you.
- (b) Realize the ball is about to land on you and quickly move to your right or left
- (c) Realize you may become involved in the play and immediately shift your focus to the fielders converging on the ball moving yourself out of the play and away from them.
- (d) Recognize that you are also responsible for a tag up at first base and align yourself to see the catch and the tag.

Experience has shown the best answers would **simultaneously** be (c) and (d). "At the same time?" Exactly, one (c) is a trained response the other (d) a thought or cognitive process and response. Knowing the game situation and making the proper shift is critical to your success on the field.

Similarly, the ball hit over your head into the right field requires you to ultimately concentrate on the fielders and then, if close, the baseline. Following the ball through the air is an invitation to make a mistake sooner or later. Follow the fielders and they will direct you to the ball.

A foul ball or pop up at the plate brings about the perfect example for the plate umpire. The proper mechanic for the plate umpire is not to follow the ball but to follow the head and shoulders of the catcher. Generally, wherever his head goes the shoulders and body will follow. Once the motion of the catcher is established he will guide you to the play, even if another fielder comes in to make the catch. Move back and make the call.

Reading the play requires discipline and experience. A solid foundation as the pitch is being made will ensure you have the initial focus to commence following the play. The set positions ensure that you will be able to call the play with the minimal opportunity for mistakes..

## **Making the Call**

American League umpire Bill Kinnamon and one of the first instructors professional Umpire Development System put it simply:

*"The most important thing in calling plays on the bases is angle, not distance. If you are thirty feet away with the right angle, you will get the play; if you are ten feet away with the improper angle, you will miss it. .... Sometimes you must move away from the ball to get the proper angle. That's why mechanics, position is so very important." (Gerlach, 1994, pp.253-254)*

Based on Kinnamon's examples and experience, arranged in priority, here are the ingredients needed to make each call while minimizing errors:

1. **Angle** is of primary importance. At all times strive to attain a 90 degree angle to the play that is happening. Always move to arrive at the best possible viewing angle.
2. **Distance** is always secondary. 10 to 15 feet from every play would be perfect but often you can be too close to see the entire play. Beginning umpires often move directly towards the base where the play is about to take place. In doing so the limit both their angle and their distance, and increase their chances of error.
3. **Timing** must be consistent in a game. **Proper timing is not an artificial creation.** Proper timing is the result of umpiring the entire play, and making the signal only after you have ascertained the play has truly ended. That simple throw over to first is not an out until you have seen two things: 1. The foot of the runner arriving after the ball, and 2. The ball held firmly and securely in the glove. Now signal your decision as quickly as possible. If you umpire the complete play, you will never rush your calls.
4. **Selling the call** is a part of umpiring that brings the crowd on to your side. The woo'ers can't say you missed the tag if you signalled the tag was high after you gave the safe sign. They know you are claiming the fielder did not have possession when you are juggling with your hands after the safe call. That little bit of confidence and showmanship can go a long way towards you taking charge of the diamond.
5. **But not too much.** The umpire is not the game's color commentator. The umpire is the "arbiter" who must make delicate calls to assure the teams remain equals. A little style and show skills are welcome but excessive displays are often frowned upon. Substance, content and form: the same elements that make up a good essay also make a quality umpire.

Again to quote Kinnamon:

*"If you anticipate a call or if you make up your mind too quickly, you are going to kick some. If the first baseman drops the ball or even juggles it momentarily, you've got a completely different decision. Umpires have been seen with their hands in the air signalling a decision only to reverse it. That is bad timing. You must wait until a play situation is completed before making your decision."* (Gerlach, 1994, p.254)

Practice making calls off the field. The time to perfect your timing and moves is not in a game situation. Visualize and respond. Move, pivot, set, make the call. Run the hook and lead the imaginary runner to second base, set, make the call. A pitch out; gain an angle but not too close, set, make the call. Do it over and over until it feels part of your natural signs and signals vocabulary. Your game can only improve.