

PLATE MECHANICS (Part 1)

Let's build a list for the plate umpire watching a single pitch come in for a strike:.

FOCUS means the umpire	FORM means the umpire
is aware of the game situation	lets nothing happens until having checked the count and is certain all officials and players are ready to go
is ready for every possibility	has not dropped into his stance until the pitcher has committed to the plate.
has have a clear, defined strike zone	has a plate stance that is consistent and constant for each batter
is concentrating on each pitch's location	is in position to maximize the view of the pitch
calls a consistent zone	follows the pitch with the eyes, not the head
will make one call, the right call	will read, pause and then react
move to follow the developing play	comes up aware of the potential plays
moves the game along	allows the game to establish its natural rhythm

This is only a partial list of the aspects of focus and form on only one pitch, something to be repeated time after time in every ball game. The plate umpire is correctly called the "umpire-in-chief." In one person all the priorities of the game are initially vested and from that one person all play flows. In no other sport does the "spirit of the game" flow from the technical skills of its officials. It is what, in my opinion, separates an umpire from a referee or adjudicator.

To make the history books a batter need only be successful 1/3rd of the time. An umpire who, through some miracle, is successful 100% of the time would likely not even merit a footnote. We all know the accomplishments of Baltimore's #8, but he will be playing for a lot more years to accomplish **the true ironman feat of umpire Harry "Steamboat" Johnson who totaled over 27 seasons, 4400 games, in the Southern League without missing a single assignment.** Johnson umpired

for 37 consecutive seasons, 1910-1946 and more than 5700 games. (Johnson, 1994, p.x)

Plate Priorities

What makes a good plate umpire? The ability to call the plays at the plate? The ability to move out to work the bases or handle the foul lines? The skills at managing coaches and players, to work with the catcher, call the strikes and balls, the appeals? What makes a good plate umpire are "priorities": order, design, balance, harmony. Like a good painting, the ability to communicate something to everyone at the level they come to the game at.

COMMUNICATION : the first priority

Some might argue the "only" priority but the skills of a successful plate umpire go far beyond such a mundane definition. The good plate umpire will **focus** on the skills which foster clear and concise play on and off the field. Communication takes **form** with the first meeting of the crew and the pregame conference, this **form** continues through the entry of the crew to the field, the opening ceremonies (if there are any) and the plate conference.

The pre-game plate conference with the coach/manager and often player will cover different aspects of the game depending on the level of play. Normally it will cover at least these topics:

- Introductions (self/partner) to each manager\coach
- Collect/review/confirm and distribute the final lineups
- Playing field ground rules

Player/Coach Ground Rules and Expectations: A few words spoken in pre-game can avoid many misunderstandings during the course of a game. For example in a youth level game you might include:

- Players
 - no throwing of helmets or bats! (automatic game ejection)
 - collisions will not be tolerated, let us call the obstruction
 - helmets must be worn at all times for all offensive players on the field
 - no jewelry (except for Medical Alert)
 - hustle on and off the field. Don't delay the game!
- Coaches
 - responsible for your players and their proper equipment
 - no arguing the judgment calls of umpires. (Safe,outs,ball,strikes, etc.)
 - do not leave the dugout until a proper time-out is called.
 - trash talking is not appreciated and the coach is responsible for eliminating it before the umpire does.

CARE : the second priority

Every quality umpire demonstrates that they truly care for the sport, its history, and traditions, and for the players and fans who participate in the game. In amateur ranks few umpires receive remuneration for their efforts, or if they do it is usually quite small, certainly not a "living" wage what would make any person want to don heavy protective equipment and stand in the sun for 3 hours? Why would an umpire volunteer to work back, to back, to back games on a tournament weekend? **Caring** and its unique aspects of focus and form enter into the picture.

In preparation, an umpire will focus on details right from shoes, to equipment, to clothes, to inspecting the balls, the diamond, mound and plate. This is not only a level of care but a sign of professionalism and dedication. How many umpires enter the field with a second indicator tucked into their back pocket or carry an extra mask, leg guards or chest protector in the trunk of the car?

Most umpires are creatures of habit. The game begins long before the car is packed to head to the field. Maybe it started last night with one final brush of polish onto the shoes, a preventative mend of a button, a reread of a rule or case book just to be certain.. The equipment is checked and the umpire arrives early at the field. It is hard to determine the motivation of the official as he checks out diamond making sure everything is up to specifications for the game. Equally difficult is following the umpire's personal pregame ritual as final preparations are made. Is it by **focussing** on the intricacies of the game that the official gets prepared or is the period of preparation one of **form** and attention to a self-directed code of expectations? Regardless of the motive the aspects of **care** are clearly seen.

CONSISTENCY : the final priority

At the end of a long day, the crew had pulled no less than five games, through rain, high winds, temperatures running from freezing to hot and finally finishing late under the lights, the tournament director said, "**The umpires were consistent, and really that's we expect of them.**" That was all, time to pack up and head home.

Form means the umpire will see the pitch hit the glove before calling "Strike" or saying "ball." **Form** lets the plate umpire wait until the ball stops rolling or is touched before calling "Foul Ball." **Form** sends the plate umpire up the first base line, clearing the catcher, following the runner watching for the swipe tag or interference / obstruction call every time unless a runner is in scoring position. **Form** automatically extends the third base line and moves the umpire in order to handle the potential scoring runner or moves down the third base line to obtain the best angle on the throw to the plate.. And without thinking **form** pulls the mask off and holds it in the **left** hand.

It is **Focus** and **Form** on communication that calmly calls time while the crew returns briskly to their field positions. These are the elements of **positive communication**, items, not always verbal, that speak about the care and the control the umpires are bringing to the game.

Assembling all of the factors from [teamwork](#) to [base mechanics](#) to handling the plate come together to produce a complete arbiter. When the elements of focus that permit proper and ongoing preparation mix with the attention to detail and drill that produce a practiced, polished form you arrive at a "consistent" umpire. Meeting the

challenge of section 9.00 in the Pro rule book cannot happen accidentally. It will never happen without dedication, and it is impossible in isolation.

Over the past years numerous articles have been written, editorials spoken, commentators discussing the apparent lack of "consistency" in officiating. One growing trend in every sport is to have officials working with an almost military precision. It is as if the action on the field was a regulated affair in which every situation could be predicted and a calculated response anticipated. Teams of officials are expected to react to similar situations with exactly the same movement, the same rule interpretation and application. This interpretation is an invitation for limitation and therefore a recipe for danger.

Lets examine this element from a different perspective: in the arts it is often said that **"consistency is the death of good acting."** An orchestra, band or musician does not strive for a consistent performance. Doing that would quickly lead to the death of live music since the recording would be the final expression of the arts. The orchestra concert is similar to a baseball game in that there are a given set of rules and parameters within which the piece/game must be performed. What does consistency mean in these environments?

Consistency is the strive for excellence. The orchestral player, the actor, the musician strives to maximize the peaks of performance while minimizing the valleys. Through practice the weakest portions rise to meet high standards, not perfect, but with defined quality. The strongest portions continue to mature, winning wide recognition. This is officiating at every level; the strive not to be just consistent but to be excellent. The umpire who through teamwork, study, practice and experience limits the "low points" on the field, who strives for excellence, will be consistent; growing, learning, changing, challenging consistent. **The umpire is a performing artist** having more in common with musician, dancer, painter and actor than an attorney or judge.

Gerry Davis, NL umpire was asked, "Is umpiring and art or a science?" His response reflected the complexities of the craft. He responded, "I think umpiring is a science, but it is the art of applying that science." (Davis, ACN1001)

Plate Mechanics

Choosing a Plate Position

Historically there were two schools of thought: what was called the **American League School** favored the umpire to stand in a wrestler, box or straddle stance directly behind the middle of the plate. AL umpires used outside chest protectors. The pad proves to be too bulky to work anywhere else but directly down the pipe. The AL stance is therefore slightly high and often the bottom of the strike zone will get cut off by the catcher's movement. This position afforded excellent view of the corners of the plate and top of the strike zone at all times.

The **National League School** umpire used an inside chest protector. These umpires were free to work **the slot**, best described as taking a position with your eyes centered down the side of the plate that the batter is standing on. In the slot you are

able to work in quite close to the catcher, get lower in the zone, and see every part of the plate and strike zone. This position requires you to learn where the outside corners are in order to call them correctly (a skill that must be practiced regularly.) The NL stance also permits you to work in closer to the plate. Many umpires move so that their mask is actually over the catcher's back or even tighter, their shoulder. Getting too close in an invitation for an interference penalty. too far back and you will not see the plate.

There is nothing stopping an NL or slot-style umpire from taking a position in the center of the plate like an AL style umpire would. For the umpire using the outside protector attempts to use the slot will lead to many times when clear sight of the plate and strike zone is restricted. An interesting point to not here is that some umpires are very relaxed about your selection of position, some are adamant. For many umpires it is slot, and slot-only; for others it is over the catcher and that position only.

Choosing a Plate Stance

If you use an outside protector you must select a wrestler, box or sometimes called the straddle stance as you will be standing higher in the zone than might an umpire wearing internal protection. An umpire should be able to move quickly and effortlessly into their chosen stance. The umpire should not drop and lock into the stance until the pitcher has committed to delivery to the plate. Between pitches the umpire must stand and relax leg, back and arm muscles. Fail to do this and your career behind the plate will grow increasingly less comfortable and could be shortened due to back and muscle problems.

Finally you will be facing forward, never turned, particularly your head. Point your nose at the pitcher and leave it there. If your stance places your head at an angle, or if you routinely turn your head to follow a pitch, you will get injured. Your stance must permit your equipment to protect you as much as possible.

The Box Stance

We have all seen Olympic wrestler's preparing for their first standing rounds: one foot slightly forward, knees flexed, back slightly bent, completely balanced. This is the most universal stance for the umpire. To take this stance move to your place (slot or center) behind the plate and catcher. Keep one foot, the foot on the side the batter stands on, slightly forward of the other foot. As the pitcher moves forward drop smoothly in a crouch. Many umpires move their eyes down to a line at the top of the strike zone, some go slightly below that line, some stay quite high. If you are working the center of the plate you will normally remain quite high in the stance. The major problem you see with umpires using this stance relates to their positioning behind the catcher. If you take their eye-level, and relate it to the catcher's helmet, you often discover that they are blind to many pitches in the last 20 or more feet of the pitch. This tends to get worse as the game progresses and the umpire gets more and more tired.

The Kneeling Stance

Umpires working the slot will often kneel down on one knee. The knee behind the catcher in on the ground.. You will see this stance often as you watch professional league umpires. It has several advantages, particularly relieving

pressure on the back, allowing the umpire to get very low in the strike zone and providing a smaller "target" behind the plate. It has several disadvantages, notably, more pressure on the legs and muscles as you stand. It is often argued that it decreases mobility but it only takes a fraction of a second to move from down to standing. A good plate umpire can be moving down the line as fast as an umpire who elects another stance.

The Scissors Stance

I see this stance often while watching International League (NL affiliate) games. The umpire, instead of kneeling, extends his leg backwards. This stance has all the advantages of the kneeling stance without nearly as much leg strain and without requiring that extra second to come up from the ground. The disadvantages are that it must be carefully developed and implemented. It is the stance with the most leg movement and therefore the most likely to provide a small instability in the umpire. It is best if a stance has a "lock-in" point. This is the most difficult aspect to achieve in the scissors stance. Finally, there have been reports of neck strain related to this stance. The weight of the mask, and the potential for injury should a foul ball strike the mask, are concerns someone using this stance should be aware of.

The Slot Stance

This is the current stance taught by the [Jim Evans Academy of Professional Umpiring](#). It is similar to a wrestler stance except the outside foot is one shoe length in front of the trailing foot, which is behind the catcher. The base of the stance is slightly wider and the stance has a comfortable feel to it, using and not abusing muscle groups. The drop (A to B) is simple, strong and very efficient. Lock-in is positive and consistent. Adjustments can be made quickly.

What position and stance should you choose? Some umpires will argue that only "this stance" and only "over this part of the plate" are your only proven choice. With an inside protector they all work and work well. (Outside protector users must elect the center of the plate and straddle stance.) **Choose the stance that makes you feel most confident in your ability to call strikes and balls.** If you feel that you are weak on corners try moving to the center of the plate. If you feel your balance is off as you drop into your stance, change to kneeling or to box. All these stances work effectively if practiced and perfected. Elect one stance that works 100% of the time and stick with it. **"Use the stance where you miss the fewer number of pitches; comfort is meaningless if you can't properly call the game."** (Hammill, 1991, p.15)

My Personal Perspective

My quest for my optimal stance was greatly affected by a major lower back injury I had in 1992. When things get sore the pain develops in the hip area and literally shoots down the legs. I started with the traditional wrestling stance. I could work a game without discomfort but double headers and long tournament days were questionable. Older players and adults I was fine, the younger, smaller players placed a greater strain. Switching to one-knee was not an improvement, the constant jarring of the up and down motion could make even getting the first game in an unpleasant experience. The limp in my running was often noticeable by the end of the game. The one-knee stance did allow me to get lower in the strike zone, important since I was working the younger leagues so I used it for two seasons; but even I noticed the problems it was causing me. Off the field and in a few exhibition games I started experimenting with the scissors stance.

In 1995, I adopted the scissors stance full-time and did two things: 1) **delayed dropping** to the stance until the pitcher was committed into the delivery motion and 2) stand up and **relax between pitches**. I went through the entire season without any real discomfort except the usual muscle aches we all have to work through. I had used scissors before but the key element was the **delay**, I had been waiting far too long, and the **relax** time.

Most recently I was introduced to the **slot stance** while attending the [Jim Evan's Academy Of Professional Umpiring Florida Classic](#). I set my outside foot and then move my inside foot (the one behind the catcher) out so that its toe is on a line with the heel of my other foot. Working with the Academy instructors, I also started working slightly higher in my stance than before and able to adjust instantly in order to see the entire plate, glove and pitch. Now I adjust my zone with my stance then let the eyes do the work. I personally feel I am capable of calling the entire zone, rarely lowballing or missing the outside corner. Physically, I have far less discomfort at the end of a game than in any previous stance I have worked. I know I am more consistent on balls and strikes since I can accurately track the ball from hand to glove.

The Stance and The Equipment

We know that using the outside protector will affect your stance, are there considerations that should be made when using the inside protector?

- the more upright your stance is the more the throat is exposed. Consider adding a throat protector to the bottom of your mask.
- the new hard protectors can deflect the ball more than absorbing its impact. Look at the angles you are presenting to the ball. If the ball can hit you in the chest and deflect upwards under your mask even adding a throat protector may not protect you.
- the wrestler stance exposes portions of the inner leg and thigh to the ball. Make certain you are using equipment with extended wings. The lower you go the more area is exposed. This is a special concern in youth baseball with smaller players. In the one-knee and scissor stance your pad will be directly facing the pitcher minimizing the potential contact area.
- all stances expose the foot to injury. The wrestler stance exposes both feet and insteps. One-knee and scissor stance limit the exposure. Plate shoes are a necessity at the advancing levels of baseball.
- the scissors stance exposes the tops of the shoulder and collar bone to the pitch. Your chest protector must fit high and properly in these areas. The added shoulder plate is a must with this stance.
- both the one-knee and scissors stance expose less leg area to the pitch
- regardless of what stance you choose pay close attention to your hands and their protection. **The first lesson taught to a young catcher is to curl their fingers to avoid potential injury.** The second lesson is to keep their hands out of the way as much as possible. A good lesson for umpires.
- the ultimate question is, "Would you rather have a bruise, or a break?" Select a stance, and work with an instructor to eliminate potential weak elements.

The bottom line: If it is not working find a way to correct it. If it hurts find a way to work around it. There are no medals for umpiring in pain especially when there may be a simple solution. Get professional help if required.