

PLATE UMPIRE (Part 2)

Too often an umpire is told to "learn the rules, study the rules, know the rules" as if that is all the umpire must acquire to be effective on the field. The effective umpire knows that there is so much more to the experience: to be must at one's best the umpire must be **a student of the rules** and **a student of the game**. It is equally important to develop a philosophical understanding and technical proficiency. There must exist a balance.

Achieving this is not as easy as "read this" or "attend that." Only by becoming involved in all aspects of baseball can the umpire truly mature. In the pro book: section 9 defines the umpire. sections 1 through 8 the rules, yet each game remains unique, each play slightly different from the last, each element possessing a diversity. To understand the balk rule, learn how to pitch. To become more effective on close base-tag plays, learn how to slide. Want to see the strike zone from a different perspective? Become a hitter for an hour. If you don't think you can call strikes from the dugout, become a catcher: you'll quickly see how the coach has a pretty good idea on the inside/outside of a pitch.

Know the "whys" of the game. Understand the intensity of the base runner and you will understand "why" he believes he was safe. Understand the focus of the batter and you will understand "why" he believes the pitch was a ball. Watch the complete focus of the sliding runner and you will know "why" he believes he was never tagged. Becoming a student of the game is more than just understanding its rules, casebooks and positions, it is understanding the psychology of the player and coach.

Thinking Strikes

On warm summer night I watched a pitcher working his stuff against a senior umpire I have worked with and respect. It was men's league and particularly humid that night. After watching three of "his best" go for naught he said to the umpire, "Blue, where's your strike zone?" My friend replied, "You've got nine innings to find it!" The umpire's strike zone is the umpire's strike zone. I can assure that pitcher that if my friend was calling "ball" it wasn't even near the plate, for he taught me to "go in expecting a strike every time!"

Floating out over that plate is almost a perfect cube, about 15 inches up in the air, nearly 22 inches wide, 24 inches high and yes, 22 inches deep. "I call a **big zone**." Why? Because I think strikes. Working with younger ball players you have to think that way. Sure, as the quality of the player increases some think an umpire might boil an inch or two, maybe more, off the top but then he remembers that the quality of the batter has also increased so they feel he adds an inch or two at the sides. Its all relative. Truth is, call the same "strike-able" zone at all levels unless the rules specifically dictate a change. No umpire can give an inch to this level, take off two in the next age group, call at the shoulders in another, and claim a consistent strike zone.

Your league and its traditions will define the strike zone as much as any rule book will. By some books every pitch that crosses the batter shoulders would potentially be a strike.. Does any umpire really call them up that high? Some associations call at the belt buckle as the top of the zone, others call half-way down the calf as the lower part. In some areas "painting the black" is the norm while in others the ball has to have the full plate. Regardless of your definitions, restrictions or instructions **THINK STRIKES ON EVERY PITCH!** A pitch has to convince you it is a ball before you will not call it a strike. This positive mental approach will increase your consistency and move the game along more than any other mechanic. you can learn

Stay Still and Calling The Box

Some umpires think of it as a window watching the ball sail through. This works well until the umpire comes up against a pitcher with a hanging curve ball, one that breaks over the back half of the plate. Suddenly the umpire realizes that the strike zone has not only height and width but also has depth. (see [The Strike Zone - It's Taught To Be Called](#)" by Tom Anstett)

To call the full box the umpire must follow the pitch to the plate with the eyes only. The head does not move until the thud of the ball into the glove is heard. The umpire must have the complete picture of the ball's path from the pitcher's release to the catcher's glove. If the pitch nicks the strike zone the call is automatic "STRIKE."

Stay still, absolutely still. Any movement you make with the ball in flight will affect your strike zone. You simply cannot see the ball cross the plate if you are diving out or moving with the ball. An umpire must have complete faith in their equipment. One of the major faults with wearing an inside protector is a mistrust in your level of protection. You must follow the ball with your eyes throughout its entire flight even if it means tracing it all the way into your chest protector. Not only will head and body movement mean you open yourself up to missing a pitch but you open yourself up to injury as you expose unprotected parts of your body to the pitch.

Never Take Your Eyes Off A Live Ball

Always ... with one exception, the pop-up at the plate. You probably won't see it go and if you have an idea where it went you will find yourself scanning the sky while players converge around you. Keep your focus on the catcher and you will be lead to the ball. Where the catcher's head goes his body (and the ball) will follow. You will pick the ball up soon enough and you will ensure that you are not involved in the ensuing play.

NL umpire Doug Harvey encouraged umpires to "give up the ball, go to the glove" as a remedy for not missing trapped balls on the outfield and infield catch. (Harvey, ACN914) He encouraged umpires to train and discipline themselves to do this. Employ this when dealing with popups.

Be Certain You See The Entire Plate

Umpires who work the slot are often pressed by batter crowding the plate and the catcher working inside. The **first school of thought**: there is no rule that says that because you have an inside protector you have to work the slot: **adjust**. Go higher, go a little outside, go to the center of the plate. You have to adjust to the catcher. Yes, you can say "Hey catcher, give me a shot at seeing the pitch" but if the catcher doesn't give an inch you have to adjust so you can see the entire home plate. If the catcher's head or glove is blocking out any portion of the plate you must reposition. Try going a little higher, try a little farther back, maybe a touch more in.

There is **another school of thought** here: "**Hey buddy, what I can't see I can't call.**" This means the catcher is told he is taking away your view of the plate and the responsibility of correcting is his. This school holds that your consistency is based on a constant stance and placement behind the plate. In youth leagues if the catcher is not responding it may be discreet to let the coach in on the dilemma, but don't expect sympathy. Ten to one the coach has told the catcher over and over! "BALL, what I can't see I can't call." Often it is just a case of dropping that glove down a little, the catcher will and must adjust.

When the zone is closed

Every umpire has been behind the plate when the pitcher couldn't hit the backstop let alone the catcher's glove. The opposite is unfortunately true, often the base umpire is hanging out there while pitch after pitch goes in over the plate for naught. (see ["Opening the Window"](#) for more discussion.) There are times when someone has to get it together, pitcher or umpire, or else this game will never end.

Only practice and a policy of "thinking strikes" can improve the umpire's performance. Between games getting out and working your strike zone can bring new focus to your plate work. (see [Who Says You Can't Buy A Strike Zone!](#)) In the middle of games stepping back and visualizing a ball passing through your zone may allow you to see the box with new clarity. Some umpires tell me that they intentionally call the first close pitch a strike, forcing them to focus on the corners, outside and insides.

The umpire who does not expect a strike on every pitch (and the pitcher who can't find the plate let alone the corners of it) lacks the most basic mechanic of all. Striving to excel and the focus that brings to every pitch will achieve the consistency everyone looks for.

Timing and Body Language

"Thud Strike!" or "Thud Ball" or "Thud *signal*" Timing is everything. Just like the base umpire the plate umpire must make one call, and it must be accurate. (see ["Give It A Chance Blue"](#) by Dave Harris) Focussing on the pause before the call can go a long way to eliminating some of the concerns on the diamond. See the ball all the way into the glove and hear it hit before you call it. **Timing** and **rhythm** are critical to success.

There is never a rush to call the pitch. Very quickly the catcher, player and coach will realize that you call at a consistent tempo and there will be no arguments. This

timing should continue to the next step, giving the count after every pitch. By using the simplest format, "One ball, two strikes" in a consistent rhythm, at a consistent time, the umpire establishes a predictable point at which all players and coaches pay attention. Calls of "what's the count Blue?" become a rarity.

There is never a rush to call the foul ball or the foul tip. Be certain. If the pitch is a foul tip never say anything simply signal the foul tip and then the strike, calling the strike, mildly, only if it is a third strike. The ball is alive, any mention of "foul" will lead to confusion on the diamond. Similarly a ball can deflect back to fair. Don't call foul until you are certain it is a foul ball and is not going to come back on you.

You will develop appropriate body language to support your mechanics. A word of caution here though : keying the location of a pitch can and will be dangerous. **Don't do it!** One umpire consistently signals the location of the pitch. A pitch outside and low will result in a motion with the right arm that looks exactly like the strike signal where you are in the scorer's booth. Another calls "High and outside, ball two." Everyone waits for the running commentary and leads to discussions such as "That was high Blue?" Avoid this costly error all costs.

One other mistake novice umpires make is turning and putting on a great show for the called third strike. In the professional leagues there may be three or more pairs of eyes watching the diamond while the umpire turns the head and does the motions. In an amateur two umpire system you can rarely afford the luxury of turning away from the field. Stay focused forward. Too many times there has been a close play at the plate missed completely by the umpire who was playing the lines for the crowd's applause with the great "Striiiiikkkkkke Thrrrrreeeeee....." call. Work facing forward at all times. particularly as you learn the craft.

Thinking Fair

If you are not sure whether it was foul, call it fair. The batter just beat the pitcher. The pitcher was throwing in his best stuff, the batter just beat him. Call it fair. The ball went sailing down the third baseline clearing the 6 foot high foul pole by 20 feet. If you are not absolutely sure it was foul call it fair. The batter just beat the pitcher's best stuff and deserves the rewards. IF you are "thinking strikes," the balance point is "thinking fair."

Get Ready To Move Out

An experienced plate umpire knows when to move and then hustles. Too many calls are blown by inexperienced crews who fail to cover the bases according to any standard "system." The mistakes: no umpire moves out to cover the fly ball, one calls "foul" the other "fair," one signals "out" the other "safe." Coaches love this!

As tournament time approaches many leagues try to assure better coverage by adding more umpires to the crew. The thinking is that if two umpires can cover a game, three must be better and four approaching perfect. Often umpires is not always better than two.

How many amateur four umpire crews really practice together? The idea of "the slide" or any rotation are unheard of. The devastating result can see the plate umpire ends up making calls at second base because no one was there to cover the bag after the fly ball was not caught. The second base umpire chases down every ball hit to the outfield, even ones hit to the lines which means potentially two umpires are following every fly ball. Oops!

In any system short of a six umpire crew, working the plate is a moving experience. It does not get easier as you add umpires. The short move out to the mound in the two umpire system becomes a rapid run down to third base in the three and four umpire crew.

With some two umpire systems if no runner is coming home get ready to move. If the base umpire goes out on the fly you have all the bases. Fly ball to left field hustle to gain an angle on the catch. A bunt: clear the catcher and follow the runner up the first base line. With a runner in scoring position things can get complicated but a quick point at the plate reminds your partner that you will be staying close to home.

A thorough three volume set of manuals has been published on two, three and four umpire crews working the 90' diamond in hardball and is available through Referee publications. A [review](#) of the guidebooks is available on the site.

Get Ready To Communicate

Preparation demands communication. With the wide variance in two umpire systems, three umpire coverage even four umpire rotations the pre-game umpire communication is essential. Arrive early and prepare. Have a written list and go through it.

Continue this on the field. Start with a business like approach to the plate and plate conference. Before you call play check with your partners. Everyone ready. ... "play." Do this every time. Be proactive. Anticipate what may happen and let your partner(s) know, in advance. Signal the potential rotation. Let your partner know you are sticking close to home if a play develops. "That's a catch," "I've got third" Communication demands commitment to just doing it. Close call - Good call! Let your partner know you saw it and you support it. Not a big display: echo the out with a tiny unperceived movement. Your partner will know what you mean and appreciate the support. Teamwork.

Particularly if you are the senior umpire working a game with a junior partner learn how to teach. Learn how to reinforce the positive aspects of your partner's game and through positive modelling and communication develop into a solid crew. The moment you look up and see the rotation working perfectly you will realize a great point of satisfaction for both of you. Reward it. Keep it up. Build on it.

In Conclusion : if you can ever conclude

Every ball game is unique. Every appearance at the plate is an opportunity to succeed. Becoming an effective plate umpire is a lifelong commitment to excellence,

to learning, to growth and development. Focus, form and commitment bring about the consistency demanded of the position.

Communication, Care and Consistency three traits that must accompany the crew to the field. Working the plate brings every fiber of training and preparation into clear definition. How effective the umpire will be is a combination of many factors: preparation, background, experience, philosophy, psychology just to mention a few.

No umpire will ever be perfect, call a perfect game, work a perfect plate. Pushing yourself to call the game without mistakes only leads to long, demoralizing experiences on the field. Working to understand the imperfections of the game and becoming comfortable with your commitment to minimize you and your crews potential for error are the daily elements that ensure your growth as an official.