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## **The Gray Zone**

By Brent McLaren

Maybe you've been there. An important game. Two out, runner on first with a hit-and-run being called. Batter hits a comebacker to the pitcher's left. The pitcher stabs at the ball and deflects it. The second baseman who was moving to his right on the play now reverses his lunge to the left and plows directly into the runner.

From both dugouts you hear simultaneously "**Time!**" This is about to be followed by one manager arguing obstruction and the other arguing interference. **Your first base umpire tells you it was interference, your third base umpire is calling obstruction!**

You know the rules well, "the runner....", "the fielder....", you even have come to a determination on whether the second baseman actually had a play on the ball. You feel very confident in your call and call it.... (?).... While you watch one coach's blood pressure go ballistic. This is an interpretation your crew has to make and you know at least one coach is not going to be happy, and you know that no amount of logical, calm or rational discussion is going to convince that coach of anything other than you *kicked* it

Would you have called the play any differently if this were the second game of the season at the Minor level? What if it was a mid-season house league game? Anytime you have had to enter into the "*spirit of the rules*" you have entered "**The Gray Zone.**"

The umpire's strike zone is a classic example of the color gray. As I walked off the field for the first time this season one of the fathers, whom I know very well, laughed and remarked, "Still missing the good pitches as usual this year I see!" Once again I mused on how much money I could save on equipment if I only could call the game from the stands.

I do not know one umpire who maintains the same strike zone all the way from Minor to Big League. Many umpires will admit that their personal strike zone narrows as the season progresses. Consistent from inning to inning but not always from game to game or level-to-level. How often have we stood behind the plate praying that the pitcher would deliver anything that we could even give them a strike call on. Some nights I have even wished I could call the ones that bounced!

In the youngest divisions at the start of the season anything that is hittable is a strike. Do we really care if it is inside, outside, up or down - if the batter could reach it with the bat using anything other than herculean effort you should hear the strike called. Isn't that the intent of the game? .... of the rules? I'm not here to call nine consecutive walks each inning so that we can arrive at the five-run per inning mercy rule. Every one of us is present to see and take part in baseball. That nice tight box I have for my competitive leagues vaporizes into the air. Get the ball near the plate, at a height the batter can offer at it and there had better be something swinging.

Have you ever called a **wreck**? It wasn't interference, it wasn't obstruction, it wasn't cruising, it was just something that happened as the two or more players converged. A wreck! "You go here, you go there, get a runner in for this guy, get medical attention for that arm and let's get this game back underway!" The Gray Zone.

In an article published in the November 1995 issue of **Referee** magazine senior editor Tom Hammill developed eight guidelines for understanding the Gray-Area.

## The Gray Zone

### Gray Area Guidelines

1. Understand the level of play
2. Be aware of the quality of play
3. Know the spirit and intent of the rule
4. Know the competitiveness of the contest
5. Consistency is a must
6. On marginal infractions issue warnings
7. Don't look for calls to make
8. Don't let the players decide the game
9. Don't let the coaches decide the game
10. Don't compromise the game of baseball

There is a fine line between *knowing* the rules, being aware of the *intent* of the rules understanding the *spirit* of the rules, *applying* the rules and making a decision to "*decide, twist*" or even "*invent*" rules. The rulebook is there to establish a consistent game at all levels of play. No official can simply dislike a rule and decide not to enforce it.

In all matters **common sense must prevail**. The smart official constantly adjusts to the contest that is going on. The smart official provides a solid foundation and understanding from which all levels can strive to "*always do my best.*"

Developing an understanding of your personal **Gray Zone** can spare you a lot of grief throughout your officiating career. Each official is unique. We bring a judgment to the game that is ours and ours alone. We temper our judgment with common sense and a sincere desire to do what is right by "**baseball**".... by the rules of baseball, by the intent and spirit of those rules and most important, by the participants in this great sport.