

# The Mechanics of Umpiring

## Teamwork - The Basic Mechanic

By Brent McLaren

*Author's Foreword: To attempt to do an "in-depth" article on every aspect of umpiring mechanics and style would be indeed a daunting task. Much has and is being written about every aspect of the officiating role. Books, magazine articles, newspaper reports, educational information, conferences.... and on and on.... (the list is endless) ... deal with every aspect from personal appearance to human psychology. No avenue of the umpire's duties has not been explored, celebrated or dissected.*

*This article is the first of a series of four designed to become a general guide to the novice umpire, not necessarily just about mechanics as much as about "being there."*

*You won't find extensive discussion on handling fly ball coverage and tag-ups but you may find information about chapter 9.00 of the Pro Rule Book, the one section many umpires fail to read. Throughout the season I find myself reading and rereading that specific section of the rule book since it is from those few rules that an umpire's authority to work with the first eight chapters flows. The wise words of rules 9.05 and the General Instructions that accompany that section in my rule book (Ingalls, 1994, p.171, 172) are the hinge pins which support the umpire on and off the field. This articles approaches "mechanics" in a both a practical and philosophical sense: to paraphrase a popular book, sort of "Zen and the Art of the Calling the Infield Fly."*

A [bibliography](#) occurs at the end of the final article.

## Read - Pause - React

*"He also had that invaluable intangible quality called "presence." He carried himself with an air of assurance born of confidence, not arrogance. Steamboat was good, and he knew it. Good judgment, handling situations and making calls correctly, is an umpire's most important skill. Steamboat was a careful student of human nature, and he could handle people as well as an indicator."*

*Larry Gerlach writing about Harry "Steamboat" Johnson (Johnson, 1994, p.xxx)*

The early spring brings a fresh group of umpires gathering for training. It also marks the time when seasoned umpires reexamine their understandings of the game and begin to hone themselves into shape for another season. As the National League puts it in their instructions to umpires, "Each umpire should frequently ponder his way and manner of doing his job and diligently strive for improvement." (Ingalls, 1994, p.173)

Umpiring is much more than mechanics, it is much more than common sense or the way an individual carries himself or herself on the field. Still, the fundamentals of Angle, combined with distance and proximity remain the key elements to success on the field. Timing is one of the most noticeable attributes of an experienced umpire. Combined with the most important element, teamwork and the umpire's tasks become manageable.

Each umpire must know their priorities throughout play. Establishing these set of understandings is essential for success on the field. In tandem with the game situation the umpire works from both a body and field position designed to maximize his coverage while minimizing the chance for mistakes happening. It is impossible to handle all the game situations here. The most thorough analysis currently available is published in three volumes, The Baseball Umpire Guidebooks by The Referee. Any umpire interested in developing a detailed knowledge of positioning, communication and case study mechanics would be wise to consult these publications.

## Teamwork is Mechanics in Motion

It is hard to decide which is more important, sound personal mechanics or a solid team dynamic when working a game. Ideally, it is both. A well practiced umpiring crew minimizes their chances of making an error. Similarly, know and using consistent, high quality mechanics will enhance an umpire's presence at a game, regardless of the level of play. Consistency, Care and Communication are three of the essential ingredients that flow from a good umpire. Teamwork comes when I am certain of every move I will make on each play. Teamwork happens because I know where my partner will move to on each play. Teamwork is mechanics in motion.

Nothing is more impressive to another official than an umpire crew each on the "same page" when it comes to working a play: With no one on, the base umpire goes out to cover a fly ball, the plate umpire moves quickly to the infield. The base umpire returns down the first base line, with an eye towards covering home if an overthrow happens. Similarly, on the third strike the base umpire is assisting the plate umpire signaling that the ball was trapped, no guessing, the plate umpire prepares to clear the catcher and follow the play up the line.

## Defining Your Priorities

Prior to each game the umpires meet. In this pre-game conference many of the elements essential to a successful game are discussed and the "tone" of the game is established, anywhere from "strictly by the rules" through to "take it very easy."

What are the essential items for a pregame conference? The pregame meeting of the umpires will be adjusted to the game at hand and should at least cover:

- Introductions if needed
- Fair/foul coverage - Who got what & where
- Tagups/Touches - Who takes what & when
- Fly balls to the infield and to the outfield
- Coverage of third base
- Live ball and restart procedures after foul/dead balls
- Dropped third strike and trapped third strike
- Batted ball hits batter while in the box
- Half swing and appeals
- Umpire positioning
- Signals

If you have worked previous games with these officials then a review of the game may be in order before this game. Remember to review positive aspects as well as areas for improvement. Only by establishing good communication as officials can we go on the field as a team.

## A Team Is A Team from Moment One

I have been fortunate to live not far from a AAA park. It means I get to see some high caliber baseball and some top notch umpire crews. When everyone else is cat-calling I might prefer to be yelling "Great Positioning!" Once you witness good umpiring in full motion the effect can become contagious. They dress well, move well, and you can feel the discipline that makes them minimize any chance of error. Their attentiveness for the pitch-out to first base, the step in, every aspect is controlled, practiced, perfected. These crews slip effortless through the different type of coverage needed to properly handle the game.

We could go into the dynamics of dress, the effect of a fitted hat or appropriate pants. It is easy to note how something as simple as a shoe shine or lack of jewelry on the umpires makes a positive effect on how the game is played out. The best crews even pivot alike. They know where and when the other

umpires will be. They know when to expect support from the plate umpire in a rundown situation and when to move to cover home. It is part of working together.

There is one other hallmark of a quality umpire crew: five minutes before the first pitch they enter (and eventually exit) the field as a team and progress immediately to home plate. If there was a need to check the pinning of the bases or inspect the field perimeter this was done well before the teams commenced their infield drills. A last minute inspection can be accomplished when you move out to the field. The team is in control of every aspect of the game's regulations.

Team work, working together, is one hallmarks of a top notch umpiring crew.

## Preparation: the personal priority

The essential ingredient in a solid crew still comes down to the individual umpire and his/her capacity to officiate. Nothing can replace preparation. Nothing can replace training and ongoing development in every facet of the game. Many an umpire has neglected studying the balk rule because "it doesn't apply in our league" only to one day be called into a game level/situation where suddenly the rule must be applied. How many umpires correctly know the application of Pro rule 7.07, a rule that does not exist in many youth league rule books? An umpire cannot spend too much time studying the rule book, case studies and interpretations.

Here are only a few of the things you can do to stay personally prepared for your games:

In the off season:

- Attend an umpire clinic regardless of the "level"
- Stay in contact with other league or association umpires
- Subscribe to an official's magazine or newsletter
- Watch reruns of games paying attention to the umpires
- Read, read, read, read
- Scan the internet for rules pages and tests that you can take
- Check your equipment and replace worn or damaged items

During the season:

- Keep a rule book beside you bed. Look up anything you ruled on today, even if it was

the correct ruling; know how to explain you were right.

- Attend association meeting or in service training sessions
- Talk to other umpires after the games, work to correct your mechanics
- Work with a senior official who can help you evaluate your game objectively
- Regularly study books on field mechanics, this is particularly important if you are going from a two to a three or four man system.
- Never enter a field unless you are physically well and "in control." Call for a replacement early if anything would prevent you from being at your best.
- Know where every field is before you get in the car to drive to it!

Most important, understand the game and your relation to it. Practice positive umpiring. Make small changes in your game preparation, strategy and mechanics that have a positive effect on how you worked the game. Reward yourself for your successes, reward others for their success. Assess your failures and make plans to correct the faults that occurred. Do not dwell on your shortcomings or let them become your focus. The greatest game in the world is your focus.

His personality and demeanor made him a very popular umpire, but what made him a proficient umpire was his ability to run a game, his courage, and his integrity." ... "He understood the competitive passions of players and managers and thus set his pressure-gauge on low."

Larry Gerlach writing about Harry "Steamboat" Johnson

(Johnson, 1994, p.xxix & xxx)

## "The Ten Commandments of Umpiring"

By Ford Frick, NL President

- Keep your eye on the ball.
- Keep all personalities out of your work. Forget and forgive.
- Avoid sarcasm. Don't insist on the last word.
- Never charge a player and above all no pointing your finger and yelling.
- Hear only the things you should hear - be deaf to others.

- Keep your temper. A decision made in anger is never sound.
- Watch your language.
- Take pride in your work at all times. Remember, respect for an umpire is created off the field as well as on.
- Review your work. You will find, if you are honest, that 90% of the trouble is traceable to loafing.
- No matter what your opinion of another umpire never make an adverse comment regarding him. To do so is despicable and ungentlemanly.

## **The Base Umpire**

By Brent McLaren

*It's going to be close fans.*

Part One stressed that umpiring is a team responsibility born out of personal preparation. Working the bases is equally as important as calling the balls and strikes. What makes a quality base umpire is the ability to focus during the longer periods of inactivity. The base umpire must endeavor to stay "on top of the game" at all times. The critical call may occur at any moment. Being in position, being alert and ready to read-pause-react are the hallmarks of a good base umpire.

Each association develops its own specific mechanics related to the style of play encountered. Games played on a 60 foot diamond require modifications to coverage that are not the same as the requirements of a 90 foot diamond. Similarly the differences between softball and hardball often require accommodations in the umpire's approach and preparation. Regardless of the system you employ it is essential that all officials on the field be on the "same page." If the plate umpire anticipates calling all fly balls while the base umpire takes off down the line the results can be catastrophic including missed tagups, poor fair/foul coverage and no umpire covering the bases for subsequent plays.

If you umpire for more than one league or association, or in different aspects of the sport (hardball, fast pitch softball, slo-pitch etc.) you would be wise to create a series of "style sheets" which you can quickly review before the pre-game conference. Experienced umpires take time before each game to go through their personal mental checklist and review the tasks before them.

Developing rock solid mechanics and technique is as essential on the bases as on the plate. Here are a few guidelines to assist the base umpire, all the

way from how do you stand and what are your priorities to reading the play and making the call.

## 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, and 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: i.e.: 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 um-

pires 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?

- Watching for the illegal pitch or balk if callable.
- Handling pickoff plays to the bases when possible
- Assisting on the check swing appeal
- Handling the "runner leaving early" rules (level / league dependent)
- Watching for pickoff plays from the catcher
- 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

- Do you have a "dead ball" situation (ball hits batter)?

- Assess the ball's flight and position of the ball,
- Call fair or foul if the ball is hit down the first base line beyond the bag
- 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.
- 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.
- 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

- 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.
- 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.
- Be aware of any options the fielders may have and do not commit yourself to one specific play until the fielders have committed themselves.
- 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 eyes 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:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 signaled 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.
- 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 signaling 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, and 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, and make the call. Do it over and over until it feels part of your natural signs and signals vocabulary. Your game can only improve.

## The Plate Umpire - Part One

By Brent McLaren

*"Any umpire who claims he has never missed a play is, well, an umpire." Ron Luciano*

Standing in the bucket is one umpire's example of fun, and another's three hours of trauma. Each of us has had these feelings despite how many times we may have been behind the plate in similar situations. Every game presents the prospect of new challenges that will test our knowledge of the rules, of human nature, of relationships. In baseball there is no such thing as an "average game."

Careful understanding, study and preparation can make each game in this critical position one of consistent application of the umpire's best abilities. No plate umpire can call the game alone. Even though the "umpire-in-chief" for this particular game may make more calls than any other official on the field the key ingredient to a successful game is found in the workings of the entire crew. Again, teamwork is the most essential ingredient in calling a good game.

I divide the responsibilities of the plate umpire into just two areas: Focus and Form. It may seem an over simplification but I have come to know what each of the those words means and when the time comes to bear down I need only say to myself "focus," or when I am caught in the heat of an argument I need only remind myself of the word "form," hopefully before I open my mouth.

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

<b>FOCUS means the umpire...</b>	<b>FORM means the umpire...</b>
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

<b><i>FOCUS means the umpire...</i></b>	<b><i>FORM means the umpire...</i></b>
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 iron man 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:
  - 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 focusing 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.

Let's 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.... consis-

tent. 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 note 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, and 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 choices. 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.

## **The Plate Umpire - Part Two**

By Brent McLaren

*"Umpire's heaven is a place where he works third base every game. Home is where the heartache is." Ron Luciano*

### A Student of the Game

Too often an umpire is told to "learn the rules, study the rules, and 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 be 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. It's 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 top focus on the corners, outside and insides.



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 modeling 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, and 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 crew's potential for error are the daily elements that ensure your growth as an official.

*"I've been trying for perfection all my life in this stupid game. I'll strive for it every day everyday I go behind you; hoping never once to achieve it." Doug Harvey, NL umpire*

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