

# Working the Plate

## I. Introduction

This article is addressed primarily to the amateur umpire who wants to get better. Each of things that I present may or may not work for you. There are no silver bullets. If you are looking for quick fix, you are not going to find it here. It took me years to implement many of these ideas and lots of hard work. As an assignor and evaluator in my organization, I have observed 500-600 umpires work over the last 8 years. I have studied what the good ones do and what the bad ones do. The observations that I am sharing here are based on real experiences and not on dogma or tradition which I have often found to be wrong or just not suited to the amateur game.

Working the plate consistently is more psychological than a matter of mechanics. The first part of this article will be devoted to mechanics; the second half will be devoted to the head game. The information in the second half is what is so often lacking in writings about the amateur game.

\*You may be wondering what the asterisk is for. Everywhere in this article where a particularly important nugget of information is disclosed, I have place an asterisk. If you want to find the important stuff, just look for the asterisks. While I will cover the basics of calling balls and strikes, I will concentrate on things that are not generally discussed in umpire books. I have enjoyed uncovering things that most people think are true which actually turned out to be false and vice-versa.

It may be difficult for a new umpire to understand what is being presented here; you need to see this demonstrated in order to get a good grasp of the basics. If you want to get the basics down in a hurry, go to one of the umpire camps. If you have five weeks and \$2500+ go to pro-school. If you have two weeks and about \$1000, Harry Wendelstedt will let you come to just two weeks of his five week school which is more than adequate for a beginner.

(A note about the pro-schools is in order here. The methods that they teach are suited to an 18-25 year old body in good physical condition who is also a natural athlete.\* Anybody can get in good physical shape but a natural athlete's ability comes from God. Less than 10% of those going to pro-school even get a shot at the **minor** leagues. Although the people who run these schools will deny it, less than thirty percent of the people who walk through the door on the first day even have a shot at a job because of their physical limitations. That being said, I myself have been to pro-school and I got a lot out of it. The instructors spent just as much time with me as they did with the star performers and I got what I came for.)

The following article modifies many of the things that are taught in pro school to adapt it to the older umpire, the uncoordinated umpire, the umpire in less than optimum physical condition and especially to the amateur game. Many of the most important nuggets of information to be found in this article are along these lines.

## II. The Basics

### Overview of the Basics

The following information sounds simple. It is not. It will take lots of hard work to get it right and requires the input of instructors. In my own organization, we spend about 20 hours training new umpires on the basic mechanics of calling balls and strikes. Even then, all but the most athletic are barely competent. Almost all fall back into bad habits without repeated coaching and correction. I will repeat this again: Getting regularly checked out by instructors is mandatory if you want to improve!

## Position: Box vs. Scissors (and Knee)

There are three basic positions for working the plate, box, scissors, and knee. The box is the easiest to learn and is the only one taught at pro school. The scissors is best suited for good athletes who can be continually checked out by their peers because it is so easy to get into bad habits with the scissors.\* The knee is no longer acceptable for top level amateurs. If you are not already at the top and want to get there, do not tilt at this windmill. Two reasons given by the experts are that you cannot see the outside part of the plate because of the catcher's head and you cannot bust out quickly to carry out your other responsibilities in two man mechanics. An unstated reason is that it looks lazy and unprofessional. So for this discussion we will talk about the box. You should master this method before you try any other. (Exception: If all that you work is 60 foot baseball, the knee is acceptable. The kids are so short that one can still see over the catcher's head.)

## The Slot

All good umpires in the USA work what is called the slot. If you do not work the slot, you will be perceived as inferior, regardless of what your actual results are. If you don't work the slot, start today, or realize that you will always work low level baseball. The slot is the space between the batter and the catcher. Many umpires line up their nose on the inside corner of the plate, with the bottom of the chin no lower than the top of the catcher's helmet.

Some umpires line up even farther inside (3 or 6 inches) so that they never have the problem of a strike coming straight at them. Something coming straight at you often explodes in your face. This is why umpires often grossly miss pitches that are obvious to the coaches and fans. Lining up this far inside presents another set of problems, which will be touched on later.

Again, the box is something that an instructor will have to show you in order for you to get it right. Briefly, you walk up in the slot with you feet together. (Assume a right hand batter here.) You kick your left foot out past your left shoulder so that the toe of you left shoe is even with the back of the catcher's feet or rear end. Then your right foot moves out past your right shoulder so that it is pointing up the catcher's rear and the toe of the right foot is in line with the heel of your left foot. This is called heel-toe alignment and it is critical to getting in the proper position. Your nose ends up being lined up with the inside corner of the plate or slightly to its **left**, but never over the plate. Your body, because of the heel-toe alignment is facing the second baseman and pro school teaches that the head should be square to the pitcher. You are now in a position to accept the pitch. As the pitcher winds up you snap down so that the bottom of your chin is no lower than the top of the catcher's helmet.

What are all of the things that can go wrong here? A whole lot. Here are some problems and some solutions:

- Students resist getting in the slot. They start with their right foot instead of their left and then don't step to the left far enough so that they can stay behind the "protection" of the catcher. They also lean back over behind the catcher putting most of their weight on the right leg. We train our umpires with wiffle ball machines so they don't have to worry about getting hurt.\* The underlying problem is that many untrained umpires do not have proper protective equipment so they are rightfully afraid of getting hurt. (How many Little Leagues provide cups for their umpires? Or even tell them to get one?) Not having your feet at least **twice** shoulder width apart creates an unstable platform from which to call pitches.
- Uneven weight distribution between the four parts of support. Your weight should be supported equally by each foot and each foot should have the weight equally supported by the ball and the heel of the foot.\* Dropping down too straight puts too much weight on the heel. Lean forwards a little. Leaning forwards too far puts too much weight on the balls of the feet and again creates an unstable platform. Our ultimate goal here is to create a stable platform so that the head does not move when the pitch is coming in.\* Practice at home getting into the slot with the feeling that your weight is 25%

on each of the four points of support. To distribute the weight evenly between the two feet, take two bathroom scales and make sure that they are in sync. Place them **twice** shoulder width apart and put one foot on each scale. See how it feels when each scale reads the same. (You will need someone else to read the scales.) Practice this so that you can get on the scales and know that they are the same without looking.

- You need a locking mechanism to go down into your crouch the same way every time. Over the course of a game you will get tired and start going down farther each time. This will lead to inconsistent ball/strike calling. For a right hand batter, place your right hand on your right knee to stabilize yourself. Notice that the right hand ends up behind the catcher's back so that it is protected from a foul ball. (Use your left hand for stabilization for a left hander.) Your free hand should **not** be placed behind your back. This creates unbalance and looks goofy. A great part of calling balls and strikes is convincing others that you are confident. Your free hand should be relaxed and hanging in front of your body. (Pro school teaches that the free hand should be placed horizontally across the stomach.) However, if it is not touching anything and is **relaxed**, it will not be damaged if it is hit by a foul ball. (I have thin and bony hands with protruding veins and have been hit a number of times on the free hand. Other than stinging, nothing has been broken but the hand must be **relaxed**.)
- Students get skewed at weird angles and not lined up properly. They quickly unlearn what has been taught them. Multiply this problem by a factor of two or three when the position used is the scissors. The only solution is to be continually checked out by someone else. For most of you, this is a problem because there is no training in your area. Here is a solution. Most good umpires have a buddy; someone who is just as dedicated to becoming a good umpire as they are.\* Work often with your buddy. He may not any better than you, but he will notice when you have subtly changed something. I go to the gym at least twice before the season starts to get checked out by instructors while calling balls and strikes using a pitching machine.\*

## Head Height

A major error umpires make is that their head is too low.\* Thus, they cannot see the outside corner of the plate because the catcher's head is in the way. The bottom of the chin should be no lower than the top of the catcher's helmet. If the catcher lines up inside then the height of the head may be even **higher**.

## Tracking

The next part of calling balls and strikes is keeping your head still. Your eyes are like a box camera and a box camera cannot take a good picture of the ball if the box is moving. Many umpires move their head without realizing it. We often have to literally hold our students' heads still because they cannot tell themselves that their head is moving.. The **eyeballs (as opposed to the head)** follow the ball from the pitcher's hand and see it all of the way into the catcher's mitt.\* This is called tracking. It is **not** easy and it is unlikely that amateurs who have not been specifically schooled in this will do it correctly.

Tracking is not natural or instinctive. Here are some problems and proposed solutions:

- Some people follow the ball to the plate and then quit. We call this "zoning the pitch" and it produces inconsistent results. As a new umpire you must have someone else watch your eyeballs to make sure that you are tracking properly.\* (i.e. all the way to the catcher's mitt.) Obviously this must be done in a controlled situation (in a batting cage with a pitching machine) and not in a ballgame. If you still have problems, have the instructor hold the ball with his hand and move it slowly through the strike zone and into the catcher's glove as you track it.
- As we age, each of our eyes develops different vision and each deteriorates at different rates. For young umpires this is not a problem and the pro school method of having the head square to the pitcher works well. However, with this method, as the pitch crosses the plate it will pass out of the vision of one eye just before it enters the catcher's glove. This is because the nose gets in the way of the one eye. Try this experiment right now. Stand up with you head straight-ahead. Now, **without moving your head**, focus on a point on the floor about 8 feet away that is 75 degrees to your right.

Your eyeballs will move that far. Keep focused on this spot. With your right hand, cover your right eye. You can no longer see the spot that you were focused on with your left eye because your nose is blocking the view. Your right eye only was seeing that spot. This is what would happen to you on a low outside pitch. **The low outside pitch is the number one problem for inconsistency in ball strike calling.** So, to see this pitch with two eyes, square your head with your body.\* Remember, your body was pointed at the second baseman for a right hand batter, so now your head is too. Rotate your eyeballs 10-15 degrees left to see the ball leave the pitcher's hand. Your eyes will now be pointed straight ahead as the ball moves across the plate. The eyes are best capable of depth perception when they are pointed straight ahead. (Warning: Do not attempt to do this without help. I have seen a number of umpires rotate the head too far or rotate the shoulder at a weird angle. If done correctly, the earflap on your mask will protect you. If done incorrectly, the phrase, "IN YOUR EAR" could have a whole new meaning that you do not want to know about.)

- Glasses. To track properly your eyeballs must rotate over a range of about 75 degrees. (Either that or your head must move, which is a big no-no.) If you wear glasses, somewhere along the line, your eyes are going to have to move outside the range of your lenses, especially on the low outside pitches, which is the big problem pitch for umpires. In evaluating umpires, I can tell you that those with glasses are inferior. This is not to say that some with glasses are not good, only that those with glasses are, in general, inferior to those without. I wear bifocals. When I discovered this bit of knowledge, I went and got contacts for umpiring baseball only.\* At this time, I also discovered that contacts produced superior results on the bases but that is another story. I have a vision problem and my eyesight can only be corrected to 20/25 with contacts. Extensive experimentation still leads me the conclusion that 20/25 contacts are better than 20/20 glasses. A number of the umpires in our association have been convinced of this and replaced glasses with contacts at least for baseball. One fanatic, after seeing the improvement in his umpiring with contacts, went out and had the laser surgery. Another umpire, even though he did not wear glasses, upon discovering that his aging eyes had different vision, got one contact to bring his two eyes into the same vision. He credits this to raising his status from that of a good umpire to that of a great umpire. Other umpires have experimented with athletic glasses, which are a combination of a lens wrapped around your eye and safety glasses. I have seen ballplayers wearing them. They tell me it allows them to track the ball to the bat better! If you must wear glasses for whatever reason, you should try to get ones with a large frame and lenses. This prevents you from having to look "outside" of the lenses as you track the ball. When getting fitted with large frames, take your mask to the optometrist, to make sure it fits over the glasses being prescribed.

## TIMING

The ball must be seen all the way into the catcher's mitt and then your eyes locked onto it for about one second before you make a decision – ball or strike. Let your "after-vision" make the call for you. See the pitch a second time in your mind's eye. This also helps with seeing the dropped third strike and other weirdness around the plate. Good umpires wait .75 to 1.15 seconds after the ball hits the catcher's glove until they call the pitch.\* We call this "timing". As a new umpire, you should be nearer the 1.15 seconds. Good timing is rarely seen in amateur umpires and adopting it is as close as you are going to get in finding a silver bullet in this article. There is probably no one thing that you can do which will immediately improve your performance as quickly as adopting good timing.

Adopting good timing will produce other payoffs, which I will discuss in the next section, but for now we are going to go into a few helpful hints on how to accomplish the above:

- Seeing the ball into the catcher's glove sounds easy but it can be difficult to accomplish. It requires tremendous concentration and practice. Tiring in the late innings can cause one to "zone" pitches instead of track them. Even if you lose the ball during the pitch, snap your eyes to the catcher's glove and lock in on the ball as it strikes the glove. Let your after-vision see the pitch again, then call the pitch. Umpires are taught to snap up to call a strike and stay down to call a ball. On a strike call the voice and hand signal should be synchronized. The problem here is that you have to have two different "timings", one for a strike and one for a ball. It is tough enough to get one down, much less two, so here is a training hint. For two years while I was trying to develop good timing, I bifurcated my strike call – voice then hand signal. Many umpires do this but it drives the purists crazy. It does

however, help in developing good timing so it produces superior results. How does this work? Call both strikes and balls verbally while in your crouch.\* This develops the same timing for strikes and balls. On the strikes, almost as an afterthought, come up and give your strike signal after the verbal call.

- Some people do not call balls. To develop good timing one should at least say "ball" loud enough for the batter and catcher to hear.
- Once you have learned how to track consistently, you will discover that there was only so much of it that you can do well in a week's time.\* (For me, I cannot work more than four plate games a week.) Too many umpires ruin their skills by working too much. Assignors put great pressure on umpires to work two to four games a day, seven days a week during the busy part of the season. Resist this and your game will improve. Likewise there is a minimum that you must work to stay proficient. Umpires who work less than forty to fifty games a year decline in skill level.
- Late in the game you may get excited and your timing will speed up. Be aware of this and actually add a little bit of time that you need to call the pitch. Do not call the obvious pitches quickly just because you do not need the time. This gives away to the players that you are not sure on the close pitches. As a matter of fact, if your normal timing is exactly one second, take 1.25 seconds on a strike right down the middle, belt high.\* This will establish a buffer that you may need on a close pitch. How many times have you heard groans from the stands when an umpire takes extra time on a close pitch? Take extra time on the obvious pitch!
- Blinking. Many umpires blink as the pitch comes through the strike zone. For some, this is caused by dusty conditions around the plate. This causes dirt to be thrown into the face as the pitch strikes the catcher's mitt on an inside pitch. Others get the blinks for no apparent reason. Open your eyes extra wide and lock them open on each pitch until the urge to blink goes away.
- If you know that you missed a pitch, it is obvious that you missed the pitch not because of poor judgement, but because of poor timing. If your judgment were the problem, then you would not know that you missed the pitch – you would think that you got it right. Somehow your timing caused you to miss it. Most often this is caused by mentally calling the pitch before it touches the catchers glove. Make no decision on the pitch until one second after it hits the glove. Do not even have an opinion until this point.
- Concentration. Concentrate on every pitch. Thinking about anything other than the next pitch is deadly to calling a good game. Later on, we will discuss the distractions that can get in the way of good pitch calling.

## **Summary of the Basics**

We have now covered the basics of good ball and strike calling. To put this all into practice will take a good athlete at least a year, the rest of us 3-5 years, and this is only if one has access to instructors who can correct bad habits along the way. At this point, many people reading this are saying that they umpire for fun and this sounds like too much work. It is hard work but just remember the basics. Proper position – box in the slot, head height, tracking, timing, and concentration.

*Peter Osborne is an assistant assignor of 8 years for Mid Atlantic Collegiate (MAC) Officials Association and a member of its affiliated union, Northern Virginia Baseball Umpires Association. Many of the above observations come from MAC owner, John Porter, and the union training committee.*