

Working the Plate: Another View

By Carl Childress

I read Peter Osborne's four articles on Working the Plate with interest and general approbation. He has put together a great many tips for umpires beginning that long trek toward becoming the best they can be. As a long-time trainer of amateur umpires myself, I understand the difficulties facing anyone who tries to cram five weeks of training into thirty minutes of reading. I would say that he and I agree almost all the time. I hasten to point that out because too many readers think that baseball disagreements are like the fights on the Jerry Springer show. As I told one umpire, though, it is possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

I have a few tips of my own, and I freely admit that Mr. Osborne's carefully thought out work was the catalyst. I've quoted a few statements that allow for an alternative view.

"[Don't use the knee.] 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."

I think the experts are wrong. My diaries show I called over 3100 games. Like most umpires my age I began with the raft and later switched to the inside protector. Toward the end of my career I thought I would see what all this rage for the knee was about. Doug Harvey, Tim McClelland, Joe Brinkman all used the knee. So I tried it-- for one American Legion game (high school aged players) in a two-man crew.

Amazing! Those "experts" who say you can't see the outside corner are just flat wrong. An umpire in the slot on one knee can see everything, including the outside corner -- regardless of how far off the black he calls.

I was 58 when I called my "knee game," and I did notice that the 95-degree Texas heat and 100% humidity had begun to take its toll by the fifth inning. Hopping up to follow a runner down the line toward first is good exercise -- for kids who don't need it.

"All good umpires in the USA work what is called the slot."

What Peter means is that these days, practically nobody works behind the catcher. My local association, no doubt swayed by my influence, is a small group of about 80 umpires, over half of whom use the box. Like me, they all use the inside protector, but they station themselves directly behind the catcher and look over his head. They are all varsity high school umpires. Twelve of those are Division I NCAA conference umpires.

The American League used the box, because of the outside protector, for sixty years. Some pretty good umpires during that time looked down over the catcher's head. A careful study of history will show that inter-league politics, more than anything else, lead to the slot becoming the *sine qua non* of umpiring positions. In the major leagues, though, Durwood Merrill is the final holdout.

Let me say straight out: A good umpire can use any stance -- and still be good. Slot, scissors, knee, box: History has proved that a talented official can overcome the deficiencies inherent in any stance. For no umpiring position, save the one where the umpire calls from behind the pitcher, is free of problems. Note 1: An umpire can see so well from behind the pitcher, I believe that if Bill Klem in 1906 had hired two "linesmen" to call fair/foul and watch runners touch the bases, we'd call balls and strikes from the mound today.

Slot deficiency: The outside corner disappears. When I asked Harry Wendelstedt at the NASO convention in Orlando how he could see the outside corner, he replied: "Carl, I don't have to see it. I know where it is."

Scissors deficiency: The strain on one's body is constant and unremitting. Maintaining one's balance requires vigilance for three hours. You'll observe that nearly all of the recent additions to the National League staff, supervised by Ed Vargo, use the scissors. If you had to guess, what stance do you suppose Ed used when he was active?

Knee deficiency: In a two-man crew it's too difficult for the plate umpire to perform his duties on the bases. Imagine a knee umpire trying to cover second base when the field umpire goes out. Most observers say it looks lazy, and in the hands of an untalented umpire that is also true.

Box deficiency: The practical objection is that since few umpires use that stance, it's difficult to find good trainers. The philosophical objection is that the umpire is farther removed from the low pitch. Remember what we said in the 40s and 50s: The American League called high strikes; the National League, low. Box v. Slot was the court case at issue. The Supreme Court, read "umpire's union," chose slot, most likely because the loudest advocates were National Leaguers.

"The low outside pitch is the number one problem for inconsistency in ball strike calling.

That is certainly true for slot umpires though not for those of us who use the box.

The slot umpire must build his strike zone around the low pitch, for the coach/skipper can always tell when a pitch, called a strike, was too low. My experience with the box suggests a different course. Coaches/skipper react not to the pitch but to where they perceive the catcher catches it. As the hitter strides into the pitch, all up/down points of reference that outside observers use will disappear – or at the very least become substantially altered. Only the umpire, who has tracked the ball from the pitcher's hand, can keep perspective. That is, after all, the main reason for tracking the flight of the pitch, rather than simply picking up the ball when it reaches the cutout.

My experience, both behind the plate and in the stands as evaluator, shows that a coach/skipper rarely complains about low strikes, especially in college. In 1992 the NCAA rules committee "legalized" what had already become the southern boundary of the college strike zone: the "bottom of the kneecaps." With an average batter the bottom of the ball can cross more than six inches below the traditional "top of the knees" and still fall with the NCAA boundary. When you hear that Division I coach say laconically, "It wasn't too low," he's probably right.

On the other hand, upper-level coaches – and batters – of my acquaintance go berserk when the umpire misses at the top. That's because the hand is not quicker than the eye. A good catcher can "frame" the bottom pitch with very little glove movement. But when he tries to pull that "high strike" back to the belt, even my Aunt Myrtle sitting behind first base can see that: "Did you see him, Grace? He's pulling the pitch. Quit pulling the pitch, you dummy!"

I have always called and taught by this philosophy: Give 'em a little at the knees, a lot on the side, and nothing at the top. My games were, I think, remarkably quiet. I ejected five high school coaches (one man twice), and two Division I assistant coaches, though I should have dumped Marty Pattin once when he was head coach at the University of Kansas.

I teach the beginning amateur umpire to build his strike zone AROUND the corners. In one city where I trained umpires for Pony Baseball, Inc., the final "exam" for each prospect was a double-header with me at Mustang, aged 9-10. One memorable night I showed up dressed for the plate for the first game. I was watching the pitcher warm up when the catcher said, quietly so as not to embarrass me, "Sir, do you call the corners?" Nine years old – and he's worried about the corners!

So is his coach. That's when I began to require my trainees to "begin" with the box stance. Point your feet directly at the pitcher's plate and plant them slightly wider than your shoulders. You don't need double-width when your feet are parallel rather than heel to toe. Set up about twelve inches behind the catcher. At your lowest point be certain your chin is just above the top of the catcher's helmet. Be prepared to adjust your stance, based on the skill of the catcher. The main idea is to **see the outside corner**. You'll track the ball from hand to mitt with both eyes.

Note 2: When the catcher looks good, when he catches the pitch rock solid with his mitt dead stock still, you can call a strike three inches or so off the black on the outside corner without any complaints, assuming there's no overhead camera. That's because the batter loses perspective on the outside pitch. You're limited to an inch at most on the inside part of the plate simply because the batter can look down and watch that ball skim by.

Many trainers want the bottom pitch to define the strike zone. I want the top. Slot umpires always say that the low outside pitch is the most difficult to call. That's because a slot man **can't always see the low**

outside pitch. As a box man, I find that the most difficult pitch to judge is the one that is high outside. There's a reason that's built in, and it's due to the nature of baseball.

Umpires have two landmarks by which they judge pitches: the batter and the plate. The high outside pitch is farthest from both. I have always evaluated the competence of my trainees by how consistently they called that pitch. Everyone misses low occasionally, calling "ball" when it should be "strike." But an umpire in the box (or on the knee) cannot miss a corner. So the difficult pitch is up and out. Since higher-level amateur umpires have been warned repeatedly about the high stuff ("Nothing above the belt, now!" harps their trainer), they often freeze on the pitch that nicks the northeast corner. It's an error caused not by the stance but by culture, tradition, and training. Note 3: Umpires also use the catcher as a point of reference for calling pitches, but that's a piece in itself.

"Good timing is rarely seen in amateur umpires."

What Mr. Osborne means is that we rarely see good timing in *untrained* amateur umpires. I was an amateur umpire. Early on, I learned that nobody ever complained that I was too slow. They used to say that sometimes the pitcher had the ball back before I got around to calling the pitch.

Here's a quick tip about timing. The umpire should listen for the ball to smack into the mitt; "Ball!" says the umpire *internally*; "Ball!" says the umpire out loud. As Peter rightly points out, one must verbalize the decision on every pitch, even those that go untouched to the backstop. Otherwise, consistent timing is impossible.

Further, Peter is dead on when he argues that "bifurcation" of voice and signal is essential for beginning amateur umpires. Call "Ball" and stay down. Call "Strike" and then stand and signal. Teaching a beginner to pop up, signal and call strike simultaneously – and still maintain consistent timing – is like trying to teach a pig to sing. You don't get very far, and it annoys the hell out of the pig.

"The eyes are best capable of depth perception when they are pointed straight ahead."

How wonderful! Right there you have the most telling physiological reason for using the box. Peter correctly points out that "low outside" is tough because the pitch slides down behind the nose so that the umpire trades binocular for telescopic vision. The farther the umpire moves into the slot, the longer that telescope becomes.

Try this experiment. Go early to your next game and stand directly behind home plate. Put your hands two inches outside the black on either side of the plate. That's a span just one inch short of two feet, which would be a good liberal east to west strike zone. Look directly at the middle of the plate and close first one eye, then the other. **Don't move your eyes.** Assuming you have normal peripheral vision, you will continue to see both hands. A pitch crossing at those points remains in view, then, of both eyes. It's binocular vision from start to finish. The loss of the low outside pitch, then, is directly correlated with the umpire's stance, not his eyesight – whether corrected or not.

When I read Peter's piece, I thought he was picking on me when he intimated that coaches don't make passes at umpires who wear glasses. When I called the plate in the 1991 New York City High School All Star Game in Yankee Stadium, I felt very proud to be there, even though I was looking at the House that Ruth Built with four eyes. I think the next time I see him, I'll punch him in the nose. No, I can't do that; he's wearing glasses too.

Carl Childress is a major contributing editor and columnist for baseball for Referee Magazine. His resume includes two trips to the NBC World Series and over 400 NCAA Division I games. He is also the umpire-in-chief of the NBC Southern Regional Tournament. Writer of nearly 20 books on baseball rules and mechanics, he is most proud of his unique Baseball Rules Differences, carried by Gerry Davis Umpire Education.