

Working the Plate: Another View Part Two

By Carl Childress

Ellis Parker Butler's "Pigs is Pigs" is one of the most famous comic American short stories from the early part of this century. The basis of the humor: Should the railroad charge guinea pigs the shipping fee for domestic "pets" or "pigs"? Two animals are at issue: pets, twenty-five cents each; pigs, thirty cents each. The consignee and the railroad are arguing over a dime. Mike Flannery, the Westcote agent for the Interurban Express Company, is adamant: "Pigs is pigs."

I, too, am adamant: umpires is umpires. If we expect our students to move up the food chain, as it were, we need to give them a "classical" education. It's all well and good to make allowances for the level of the game, but good umpiring techniques work anywhere: in the Little League Park, Ganado, Texas, or Yankee Stadium, New York, New York.

1. *Half Swings.*

Rich Fronheiser, a friend of mine from Iceland (read, Washington state) sent me a quote from the 1942 edition of the Official Rules of Baseball (OBR), 9.03 Case Book Comment: "There shall be no appeal from the decision of the umpire-in-chief on a half-swing. His decision must and will be final, it being entirely the question of the umpire's judgment as to whether the batter struck at the pitch." As my high school English students used to say, "What he said!" Why should we assume that an umpire 90 feet away has any better chance at getting the call right than the umpire on the spot? But, except in high school, when they demand, we have to ask: "Did he go?"

Peter Osborne in his excellent treatise on plate mechanics argues that 90% of the "gross misses," which are calls that both teams think are wrong, occur when the field umpire says "Yes, he went," when he should stick with his partner. I wrote a training piece, called "The Benefit of the Doubt," in which I argue that if you're not sure whether the batter swung, he didn't. Yet the evidence of the video camera and instant reply seems to show that both Peter and I are wrong.

At the major league level, where we TV viewers get to see a half swing five times from three angles while Tim McCarver is blathering nonsense about nothing important, I can't recall many instances where **the batter successfully checked his swing**. When we see some of the world's greatest athletes trying to stop a bat - and failing - we should realize that the lesser mortals in our Senior Little League aren't going to hold up either.

That's not to say that the major league umpires on appeal call every half swing a strike. Rather, it is to say that a yea or nay on a half swing is still umpire judgment. We can't worry about a bat going halfway onto the plate, or "broken wrists," or my personal favorite, the NCAA language where it's not a strike unless the bat crosses the *front edge of the plate* or the batter's *front hip*. We've got to predicate our judgment on one criterion: Did the batter try to hit the ball?

When I first started calling games, amateur umpires always presented a united front. If my partner reversed my call of ball, he'd better be darn sure he had a way home " 'cause he wadn't ridin' with me." Over the years I have changed my tune. I was a little bit country. Now I'm a little bit rock and roll: Field umpire, call what you see. But when it doubt, you're better off calling a strike, for the batter almost never checks his swing..

Peter wants an amateur umpire to say simply "Ball" rather than the professional call of "Ball. No, he didn't go." As anyone who's read my stuff will tell you, I am not welded to the practices of the umpire schools. For a time I, too, simply called "Ball." On reflection I now believe otherwise.

I find tremendous advantages to "No, he didn't go," *especially* at the amateur level. First, it prevents some appeals. "Golly, Bob, he was awfully sure of that call." Second, and most important, its corollary - "Yes, he went" - stops the batter from questioning the "reason" for the

strike you rang up. Just as an umpire must verbalize both "ball" and "strike" for good timing, he must sing out his decision on half swings.

You've been behind the plate when you forgot to say, "Yes, he went." You know what happens. You say "Strike" on a half swing. The batter turns and asks, "Did I swing? Was it on the plate?" Before you reply, you hear el creepo in the back yell: "That's right, Bubba. You tell him. Childress ain't got a clue." Do whatever it takes to cut down on conversation with the batter. (Talking to the catcher? That's also another piece.)

Note: I was an English teacher for more than 30 years, and I am addicted to "he" as the neutral nominative pronoun. When I write "he," then, please understand I am not being sexist. I'm just following the dictates of the grammar that has stood our language in good stead since the time of Chaucer in the fourteenth century.

2. Calling strikes.

Peter says that on "marginal" pitches during a steal, the umpire can safely call a strike since everyone's attention is on the steal. In my seminars and tapes I have argued the same thing. But both of us neglected to make it clear that you can't do that in a college game. Somewhere back there an off-duty pitcher is charting the pitches. He's not going to watch the tag at second; he's going to be yelling at you. Then the pitching coach will start yelling. Then your Aunt Myrtle, who never liked you anyway, will start yelling.

Peter's notable contribution to plate mechanics is his concept of the *gross miss*: "Gross misses are called strikes about 10 times as often as balls."

For beginning umpires, he's dead on the money. Why? The rookie umpire generally lacks the discipline to hold his call until the pitch is over, that is, until it's safely in the catcher's mitt. Bad timing, more than anything else, leads to his "judging" the pitch in front of the plate (strike) rather than waiting for it to pull the catcher to his knees (ball).

But trained, experienced umpires simply do not make those errors. On those extremely rare occasions when I missed a pitch (<g> as they say on the newsgroups), it **always** happened that I said "Ball" when I should have screamed "Strike!"

High school regional play-off game with a split crew. "My" team batting with "their" team ahead by three in the fifth. One out, two on, two-two on the batter. The pitch skims by the plate an inch or so off the black. The catcher never moved his glove. "Ball!" I yell. Then, quietly, I say, "Shucks." The catcher said, "No, Mr. Childress, sir. It was outside." If he had been one of my regular catchers, he would have known I call such a pitch a strike in a heartbeat.

Still, no harm done, I thought. **Six runs later**.... All trainers believe that every umpire can nail the pitch that splits the plate belt high. Sure, he can, if: he doesn't rush his call and he maintains his concentration and he doesn't freeze and he's not worried that the curve ball broke too late. My experience shows that the more an umpire knows about plate mechanics, the more likely he is to miss a strike.

That's why I counsel umpires to call marginal pitches strikes rather than balls. For a gross error occurs when the UIC begins to squeeze the strike zone.

Every experienced umpire knows it happens - and when. For the first few innings, the umpire is loose, relaxed, fresh. He's ringing 'em up here, and "Yes, he went" there. Heaven forbid! He's even calling strikes three inches off the black or at the bottom of the kneecap in a high school game. Batters are swinging, and so is the ump.

Then, disaster! It's the fifth with a 1-1 score, R2 aboard, and the pitcher has two strikes on the local Hank Aaron. Marginal pitch. "Ball!" Oops. Just like me. And just like that, the game is gone

to hell. My experience has always been that for amateur umpires, when the going gets tough, the strike zone begins to resemble my brother-in-law's bank account.

It certainly happened to me more than once. When Gary Ward was the coach at Oklahoma State, a batter from the University of Oklahoma had an 0-2 count. On the next pitch I said, "Ball. Oh, fudge!" On the next pitch the batter homered. While I was waiting for the **next** pitch and mapping out the safest route to the dressing room, Gary was "whispering" in my ear: "My fault, Carl. All my fault. I should have known you wanted a waste pitch."

Don't be a good guy. Somewhere around the fourth or fifth inning, a pitch is going to come close to the plate. Call it a strike. As John Wayne said in *True Grit*, it will give them to know you are serious.

Besides preventing "plate creep," there is another good reason to call strikes. Don't do it because you've heard it keeps the batters swinging. Do it because, believe it or not, when he wants to, a pitcher can throw the ball pretty darn close to the plate.

3. *Game control*

One problem umpires always face is the anonymous clown in the stands who thinks his two-dollar ticket entitles him to be a real schmuck. I always teach my students the following techniques. First, if the comment is funny, laugh. I called a game in the NBC Texas State Tournament, and the home team won. "You're Childress, right? Boy, you're good. You write those books, right?" On and on and on, and I, smiling graciously, accepted the acclaim with appropriate modesty. In the next game as the third-base umpire in a three-man crew, I called a neighborhood out at second, and those same fans began to clobber me. One particular drunk came down near third and started in on me. "Childress, you suck. You're terrible. You're awful. You suck." Then, a long pause, followed by: "Childress, you know what you can do? You can....You can....You can go write another book!" We stopped play for a few moments while everyone, especially I, enjoyed a good laugh at my expense.

I suppose this is my day to pick on Texans. I called the American Legion State Championship final game behind the plate in 1984. The college World Series had ended about six weeks earlier. My partners were Jon Bible and Dave Wylie. Early on, Jon had a couple of close calls at first, which he nonchalanted in his most inimitable fashion: "Yep, he's out." In the fourth inning or so the home coach reported some changes to the scorekeeper high in the press box: "We'll send Smith to right and Jones to left." A knowledgeable fan behind first screamed: "And send Bible back to Omaha." The field echoed with laughter again, thankfully, at the expense of someone other than Papa C.

Second, let the loudmouth know you hear him. Don't be casual about it. During the half inning intervals, you might try staring at the stands where the nasty comments originate. He'll notice you looking in his direction. It will infuriate him, and his efforts will double. But about that time somebody will come to tell him to shut up. It always happens. On occasion that "somebody" was my wife, so I finally had to forbid her to watch me umpire.

Peter rightly points out that all umpires "hear" the ragers, regardless of what we claim. Umpires who pretend they don't hear the wisecracks are the ones who get flustered. They are so busy struggling to appear unconcerned that they start worrying about their demeanor rather than their calls. But, whatever you do, unless you feel the fan is inciting a riot, let it go at that. Don't get involved with the home team coach or management. Never address the fans.

I did that once, to a woman who was blistering me about why I didn't call more of her son's pitches strikes. I wandered over to the backstop and allowed as how she should hush if she wanted to stay inside the fence. She hushed, and I was proud of my fan control. When her lawyer and the superintendent of schools showed up at the next association meeting, I discovered her husband owned three-quarters of the town.

The next game I umpired for that school was a playoff contest, twelve years later. If I were still active, I could call there now, though, for the lady and her husband no longer live full-time in Mercedes, not since he became Congressman Hinojosa from the 15th Texas district.

The umpire's road to perdition is even slicker when he starts believing the compliments thrown his way. "Gee, sir, I'm glad you chunked my dad." Or: "Hey, Blue, it's so nice to get a real umpire for a change instead of Childress." Or: "Boy, you certainly didn't have much help out there tonight."

Here's what I require of my students: Call the game, and get the hell out of town. Don't try to please both sides; that's a sure way to please neither side. Amateur umpires who worry about what teams think of them often start trying to "even things up." I made a horrible call in the first inning, thinks Old Smitty. I called out a Lion runner who was safe. I owe them a call. Once an umpire starts down that path, he is soon reduced to keeping count on his fingers. Let's see; it's Lions 4, Christians 2. I might add, Umpires 0.

Everyone knows that occasionally you have to dump a player or a coach. Ejections are a part of baseball. We've all been on the field when a skipper comes to say: "Look, I can't take this anymore. My team is playing like sissies. You're gonna have to toss me." When that happens, oblige him. But otherwise, be wary of the quick thumb.

I teach umpires: "Don't look for an ejection. Look for the opposite, a way to keep the player or coach in the game." The simplest way to do that is simply to shut up when an "argument" starts. Remember our phrase from the 50s? It takes two to tango. If one party in a dispute simply won't fight, it's all over quickly. We're talking here, of course, about judgment, not rules. In a rules discussion you and the coach should both talk and, equally important, both listen.

Here's the way arguments start. You nail a call stone cold, and the feisty little Earl Weaver clone comes begging. **Say nothing.** Sooner or later he will realize the only voice he hears is his own. He will finally stop, and you will see a puzzled look settle into his eyes, almost as if he were trying to remember his phone number - and not succeeding. Alan Christensen in another article on this site advises that the umpire should ask: "Coach, what did you see?" I don't think that works at lower levels because it becomes an excuse for the coach to start yakking again.

I turn that question around: "Coach, do you want to know what I saw?" He says yes, I tell him, and we play. My advice: Never defend your call: "Coach, I got it right." Explain it: "Coach, the ball smacked the mitt before his foot hit the base. No doubt in my mind. It was first the ball, then the foot. Let's play ball." **Turn and leave**, even if it's just three or four feet.

Look, if you want to pretend you're a modern-day Billy the Kid, you should know that some young gunslinger will seek you out, just to test your mettle. To put it another way, a man who wants to make trouble will always latch on to someone who's looking for it.

There's a sure fire way to control games, though. Call good baseball. After a time, your reputation as a consistent, fair umpire will be all that's needed to keep your games orderly and quiet. When that happens, you will no longer require the services of either Peter or Carl.

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.