

BASEBALL PLATE UMPIRE MECHANICS

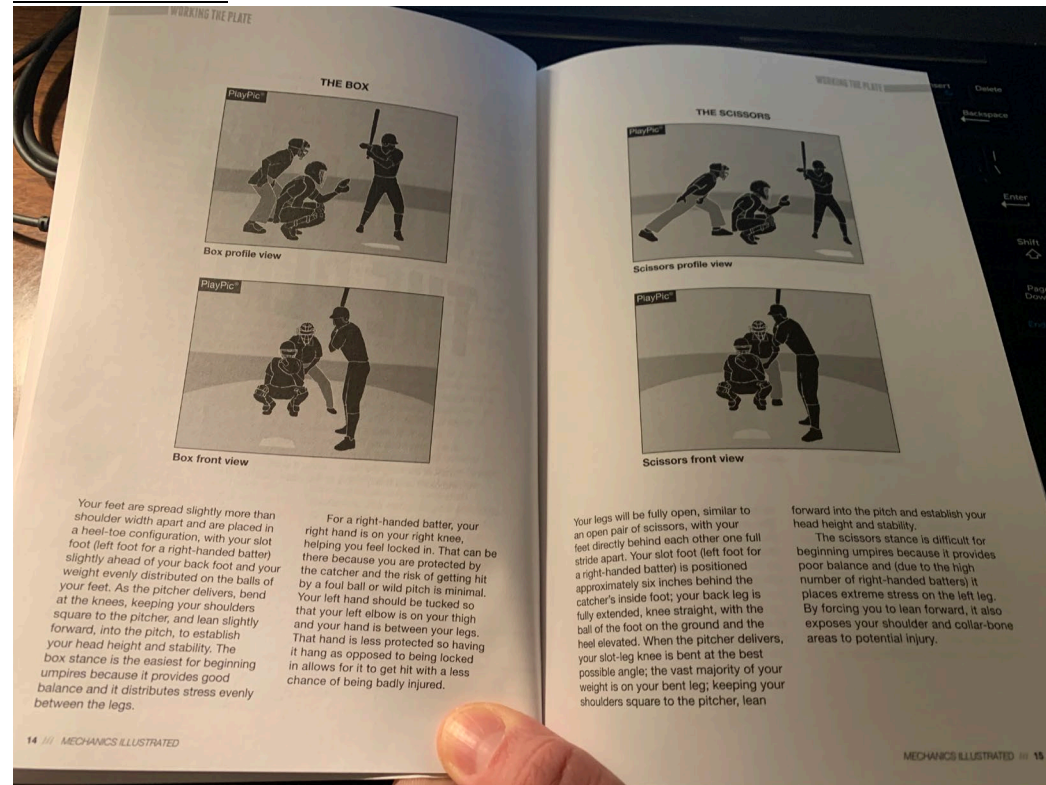
Without a state meeting or our traditional local meeting series this season, never mind all the youth and spring league high school games to shake off the rust, we have to rely on printed and online materials and video to prepare for what we still hope is a full 2020 summer high school season. The first material to present is about mechanics specific to the plate umpire. Much of what you'll see in this review is from the latest "Baseball Mechanics Illustrated" from "Referee" magazine. It is difficult to show much of this in print or on a screen and not review in-person, but we will do our best to provide this information in a way that still makes sense for all levels of umpires.

CALLING BALLS AND STRIKES

The below graphics illustrate the four primary stances to use when calling balls and strikes behind the catcher: the box, the scissors, the knee, and hands-on-knees.

Newer umpires often ask: Which stance should I use? There's no right or wrong answer to this question; it is very much an individual decision. Much depends on comfort, feel, and the ability to see the pitch all the way from the pitcher's hand into the catcher's mitt. When choosing which stances works the best for you, keep in mind the normal movements of a catcher, and how those can impact your ability to see the pitch all the way into the mitt.

BOX AND SCISSORS

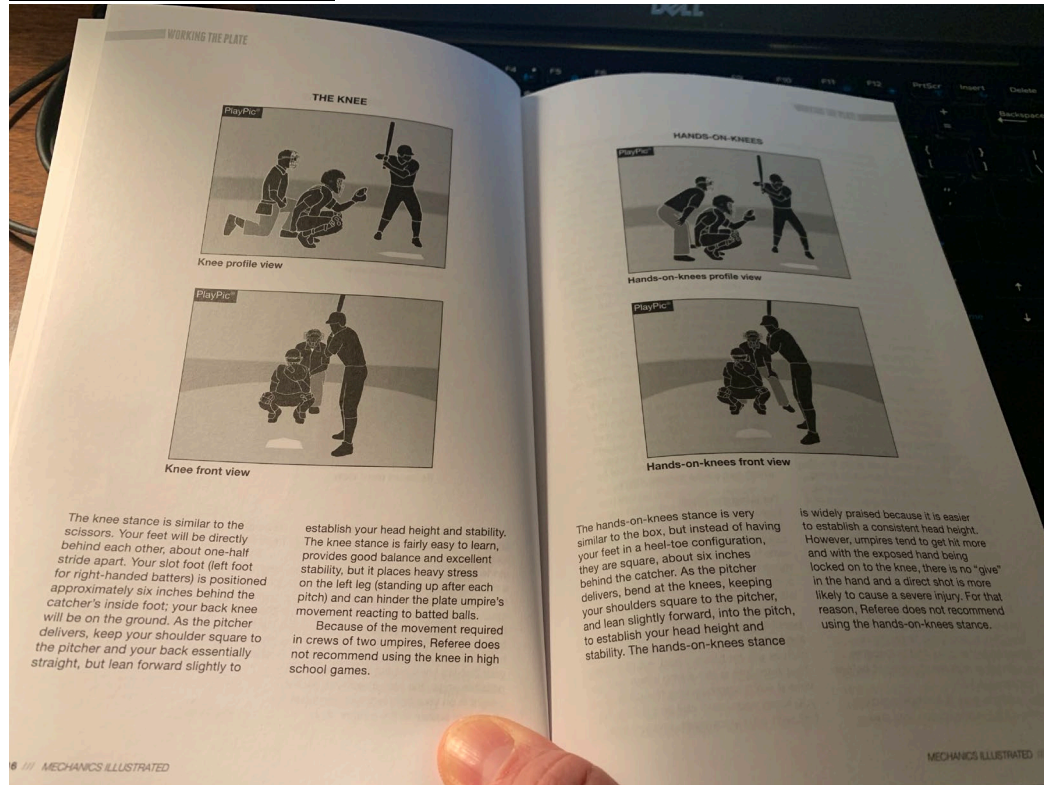


THE SLOT

No matter what stance you use, it is critical to position yourself in "the slot", or between the catcher's head and the batter, positioned so that your chin is on or slightly above the level of the top of the catcher's head.

This is critical for two reasons: 1. It is the most effective area to view pitches from, and 2. It puts you at the least risk of a foul tip coming directly from the bat to your head/mask. In an effort to reduce concussions and head trauma, it is vital to maintain your viewpoint in the slot, versus straying above the catcher's head, or to the outside of the plate.

THE KNEE & HANDS-ON-KNEES



PROTECTING YOURSELF BEHIND THE PLATE

Regardless of stance, putting yourself in a position to minimize the risk of foul tips and wild pitches is essential to reducing both the number and the severity of injuries.

Putting your hands and wrists behind your knees, using a throat guard (regardless of style of mask), and having equipment adequate to the level of baseball you are working, can all help reduce the risk of sustaining injuries behind the plate.

GENERAL PLATE MECHANICS AND POSITIONING

Head Height and Position

Regardless of which stance you use, your head height and position should be consistent and identical.

Your position should be behind the catcher, looking between him and the batter. You must be able to clearly see the pitcher, the entire plate and elements, it is important to move into "the slot" — that area between the catcher and the batter.

Ideally, your eyes should be on the inside corner of the plate, although there are times when the location of the batter and/or catcher may force you to adjust. If you must adjust — because for example, the catcher works inside — never move to a spot over the catcher's opposite shoulder; instead, work higher over his head.

Two additional factors have tremendous impact on your view of the strike zone: head height and stability. Your head should be positioned so the bottom of your chin is even with the top of the catcher's helmet. If you work with your head lower, your view of the knee-high pitch at or near the outside corner of the plate will be restricted.

To determine proper head height, use a dining room or folding chair to simulate a squatting catcher. Pretend the top of the chair back is the top of the catcher's head. Practice dropping into your stance until it is a crisp, one-motion movement. Working in front of a mirror is a great technique; so is the use of videotape, if you can find someone who will tape you setting into your slot position. If you have a partner, work on it together.

Practicing Your Stance

You can practice your stance without being on a baseball diamond. In fact, it is a good idea to try those practice techniques and to become comfortable with the movement before you take the field. For example, here is a simple practice method for the box stance (you can

adapt the equipment to the scissors or knee stance on your own):

Get two pairs of shoes and two yard sticks (or any straight sticks, or long). Place one pair of shoes where a batter would stand in the batter's box. Place the second pair where a catcher's feet would normally be when set to receive a pitch. Place one of the sticks in a straight line, parallel to the pitcher's rubber, behind the heels of the toes of your slot foot on that stick. Place the second stick parallel to the first stick behind the heel of your slot foot. Place the toes of your back foot on the second stick, slightly more than shoulder width from your slot foot. Now turn the back foot out, about 30- to 45-degrees away from your slot foot. That will keep you from "kneeling" the catcher when you squat. Make sure the toes of your slot foot are pointed directly at the pitcher, so foul balls and wild pitches will come off the steel toe of your shoe instead of the side of your foot.

Place your slot arm across your waist with your elbow tucked close to your side. Your other hand should grasp the top of your thigh, elbow tucked tightly against your side. Those arm positions will help protect the bones in your arms from pitched and foul balls, which can cause serious injury.

Tracking the Pitch

From the moment the pitcher releases a pitch until the ball arrives in the catcher's glove, your head should remain absolutely stable. If your head moves at all, your view of the strike zone will be blurred and your judgment will be inconsistent.

Here is an easy-to-understand parallel: If you suddenly jerk a camera the instant you press the shutter, the picture will be blurred and out of focus. That principle is the same when you view a pitch approaching the plate. If you keep your head still and follow the ball with only your eyes, you will see

the pitch and location much better.

Follow the ball from the pitcher's hand to the catcher's glove by only moving your eyes. By following the pitch into the catcher's glove, you have the advantage of seeing how and where he caught the pitch. That will aid your ability to call it correctly. If the catcher catches the ball and then yanks the glove back toward the strike zone, he is telling you that he didn't think the pitch was a strike. Conversely, if he holds the mitty still or slightly moves it (commonly called framing), he believes it was a good pitch. Not all pitches that he yanks are balls and not all frame jobs are strikes, but that is an additional tool you can use to aid your judgment.

Practice getting into your set position until you can drop into your stance smoothly and crisply. Have someone "soft toss" a rolled-up pair of white socks, underhand into the strike zone. Follow the ball with just your eyes all the way in and through the zone. Have your partner, who is tossing the ball, watch closely to see if your head moves or if you are drifting into or away from the pitch. Make sure the soft toss drill includes pitches that are up, down and near each of the corners. Have your partner note which pitches cause you to move and when you stay stable. Work on the pitches where movement is a problem.

Do not be concerned with calling balls and strikes until you can remain stable and follow the ball with only your eyes. Again, that practice exercise is well suited for a video camera. You will see yourself drift or move, even though you probably will not feel the movement.

With the marking sticks still in place, step back from the slot position, as you would when the ball is being returned to the pitcher. Get back into your slot position and proper foot position for several pitches. Practice getting into and out of the slot until you can place your feet into position without having to look down at them. Practice the "soft toss" with the chair, until you can sit down in your set position crisply, without having

to check if your head is positioned at the proper height.

Practicing those techniques, either in front of a mirror or with the aid of a video camera, will enhance your ability to get into the slot and will help your confidence — in your calls and in yourself.

Calling the Pitch

Timing is critical on the pitched ball. Watch the ball with your eyes all the way to the glove, and watch the catcher catch the ball. Then make up your mind on the ball's location and call the pitch: ball or strike.

If the pitch did not cross through any part of the strike zone and the batter did not swing, it is a ball. To call a ball, remain in your stance and call, "Ball." The call should be loud enough for the pitcher, catcher and batter to hear. Only after you've made the call, should you come out of your stance.

If the pitch did cross through any part of the strike zone and the batter did not swing, it is a called strike. To call a strike, come out of your stance and call, "Strike." Again, the call should be loud enough for the participants to hear. In conjunction with your call, you should make an arm motion.

The two common ones are the hammer (like you are calling an out) or pointing out to the side. If you point to the side, it is imperative that you do not take your eyes off the action in front of you. Dropped third strikes and trapped foul tips are easily missed when plate umpires fly out of the plate area to emphasize a called strike. For that reason, Referee recommends calling strikes using the hammer-fist call until you have enough experience to develop your own strike call without taking your eyes off the action in front of you.

If the batter swung at the pitch, you do not need to judge whether the pitch itself was a ball or strike. You also do not need to verbalize, "Strike," since everyone saw the batter swing. Come out of your stance and use the same signal as when calling a strike, only with no voice.

DROPPED THIRD STRIKES

On a dropped third strike, the most common signal is to point at the ground to signal that the ball was dropped, and then give the safe signal. This makes it easy for the base umpire to notice that the batter/runner has the opportunity to gain first base using the white bag. If the batter/runner gives himself up and enters the vicinity of the dugout, then give the out signal.

If you see the catcher cleanly catch a third strike, then give your signal as indicated to the left.

When in doubt, base umpires can be of great assistance. If the base umpire has information that it was a dropped third strike, put one arm and hand down, with the palm parallel to the ground. If it was caught, put one arm down with a fist. This is helpful for a plate umpire whose vision may be blocked.

Half swings and the proper procedure for appealing them is covered later in this book.

Making Adjustments

If every catcher and every batter positioned themselves exactly the same on every pitch, your job as plate umpire would be easy. You could establish a "groove" in the slot, sit down in the same spot every time, and call all the pitches. In reality, it doesn't happen.

Catchers will "squeeze" the inside corner for their pitchers and take away your slot space. Batters will crowd the plate and take more of that space from you. Some catchers, especially those with little experience, work high and block your view of the plate.

As you gain experience, you'll read those situations and adjust your slot position to accommodate calling balls and strikes. Remember, the most important thing is to keep your head stable so you can see the plate area. If a catcher's position takes that view away, adjust. Your first adjustment is up: Work higher above the catcher's head when he crowds the inside corner. That will allow you to look down onto the plate area and improve your view of the plate, compared to the view you would have if you made no adjustment.

The second adjustment you can make on a catcher who sets up inside is to move farther into the slot, toward the batter. That will increase your viewing angle to the plate and reopen the plate area (and strike zone). That move pushes the outside-corner pitch farther outside, but again, your goal is to see as much of the strike zone as possible.

Never move to the catcher's outside shoulder.

Keeping and Signaling the Count

The plate umpire is responsible for keeping and signaling the count during a batter's plate appearance.

To keep the count, use an indicator. The plastic or metal device is about the size of a pack of chewing gum

and is designed to be used in your left hand with knobs to keep track of balls, strikes, outs and sometimes innings. Here are some guidelines for indicator usage:

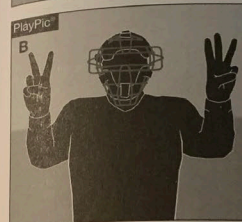
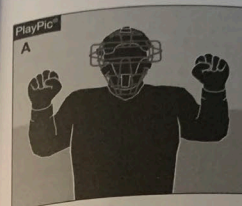
Use it. Even with the best of memories, it's possible to lose the count. That is especially true after a conference that occurs during the middle of a batter's plate appearance or a pickoff play at a base.

While scoreboards are great for fans, they do not display the official count. A plate umpire should be diligent in displaying the count and trying to ensure that what is displayed on the scoreboard is correct. But the only count that is official is that of the plate umpire.

Not the focus. The plate umpire should never bring the indicator up to eye-level as if it is the only place he is focusing attention. The umpire should keep the indicator below chest level and glance at it while keeping the playing action as his main focus.

Say the count frequently. One way to avoid losing the count is to say it frequently during every plate appearance. Some supervisors recommend saying the count on the third pitch and then on decision pitches. Others recommend showing the count after the second pitch and every pitch thereafter. Either way, showing and saying the count frequently will avoid the problems of the base umpire and players not knowing the count or the count being lost.

At one time it was acceptable (or at least popular) for baseball umpires to indicate a full count by raising both fists (PlayPic A). That is no longer recognized as a proper mechanic. A full count should be indicated by extending three fingers on the left hand and two on the right, as seen in PlayPic B. Fists should only be raised to indicate no balls or strikes, as in a 3-0 count. When using the hands to signal the count, give it verbally as well. The batter and catcher can't see your hands and need to know the count as well.



A full count should not be indicated with two fists (PlayPic A), but just as any other count, by extending three fingers on the left hand and two on the right (PlayPic B).

Lost count. Even with using it every pitch, sometimes the plate umpire can lose the count. Usually, the catcher or batter will quickly correct the error and the plate umpire can announce the correct count.

If a dispute remains, then the plate umpire should consult with his partner and go through the pitch sequence.

As a last resort, get with the official scorer or person keeping the pitching charts to see what count they have and if they can provide information to help get the correct count. Of course, they can't make you change what you have, but their input could have value.

WORKING THE PLATE

Reset it. Make certain at the end of each batter's time at-bat to reset the balls and strikes to zero and update the correct number of outs. That is especially true at the beginning of each half-inning. Before dusting off the plate and resuming play, make sure you have all zeroes.

Some umpires have notched the wheels on their indicator so they can reset the indicator without looking at it. They simply turn the wheels until they feel the notches, and they know it's back to zeros.

Location. Another reason that the indicator should be held in the left hand is that one-handed calls (putting the ball in play, signaling strikes and outs and pointing for obstruction and interference) are made with the right hand.

As more umpires go to a hands-on-knees stance behind the plate, it is more comfortable to not have anything in the hands.

In those cases, umpires will keep the indicator in their pocket or ball bag. That is OK, as long as umpires are maintaining the count and outs actively. Relying on the scoreboard is a bad idea because the people in the press box will get distracted or will inadvertently reset the count after a pickoff.

Plays at the Plate

One of the most exciting moments in a baseball game is when a runner is trying to score and the catcher is about to get the ball and make a swipe tag on the runner, producing a huge dust cloud.

Time suddenly stops while everyone waits for the umpire's call. And as much as the umpire wants to rush that call and fuel the excitement, it is imperative that the umpire have excellent timing.

To get set up, the plate umpire should be just off the clay circle, behind the plate and lined up with the point of the plate. That starting position enables the plate umpire to move toward either the first- or third-base line extended to get the proper angle for the throw as it arrives.

TIMING

Perhaps the most important part of calling balls and strikes is timing. Call a pitch too quickly, and you can be accused of predetermining your call. Take too much time, and you're indecisive.

Before you make your call, make sure you see the ball all the way into the catcher's mitt, not just when it crosses the plate. This will naturally slow your timing down to prevent calling a pitch too quickly. Come up out of your stance if a strike, and give your signal (hammer or point).

Make sure to maintain the same timing from pitch to pitch throughout the game. This will provide both you, the teams, and the fans a natural rhythm to your calls. It also allows you the opportunity to take an extra half-second if you have doubt on a pitch before making a call.

PLAYS AT THE PLATE

The umpire should let the throw take him one or two steps in either direction from his starting point.

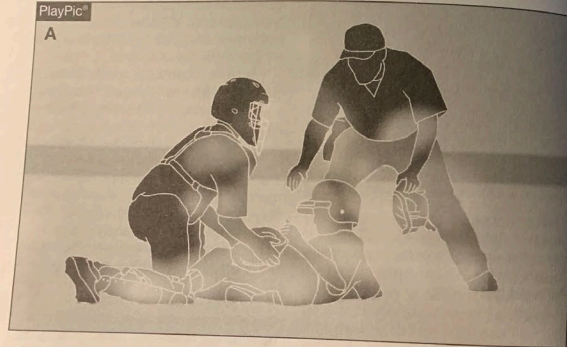
In PlayPic A, the umpire is in position to rule on a tag play at the plate. If the runner has beaten the tag, it doesn't matter whether or not the catcher has the ball and the runner should be called safe (PlayPic B). If, however, the umpire is certain the tag was made first but the ball cannot be seen, he should point to the catcher and say, "Show me the ball!" (PlayPic C). If the catcher has possession of the ball, sell the out with an enthusiastic

pump of the arm and a loud out call. If, as the dirt clears or the catcher shows the umpire an empty mitt, a confident and demonstrative safe call as in PlayPic B is appropriate.

If the ball is on the ground, many umpires indicate that by pointing and saying, "He doesn't have it! Safe!" Do not ask the fielder to see if the ball if you're already sure the runner is safe. That conveys lack of confidence in your decision. You should only ask to see the ball if the tag was properly applied but you cannot see it in the fielder's glove.

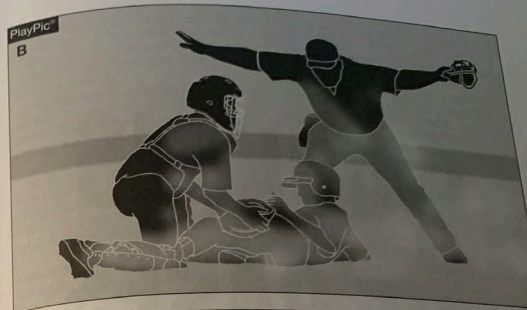
PlayPic®

A



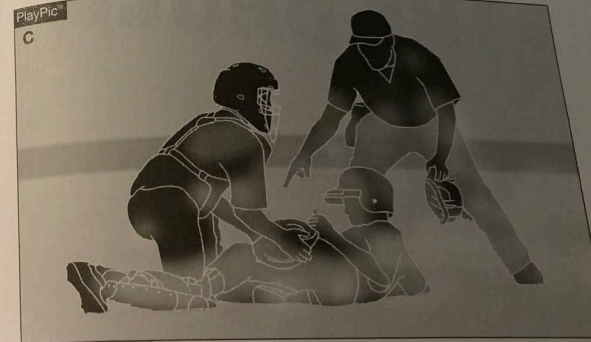
PlayPic®

B



PlayPic®

C



On a play at the plate, the umpire not only has to see tag applied (PlayPic A), but must also ensure the catcher holds on to the ball. When the umpire sees the ball on the ground, he can call the runner safe (PlayPic B) and should then indicate the ball is on the ground (PlayPic C).

OTHER TIDBITS

Notice that the umpire's distance to the play in each of the PlayPics is not to scale. An umpire should not be on top of a play, but about 8-10 feet behind the play in order to properly see the ball being thrown to the catcher, the catch, tag, and/or touch of the plate.

On a play coming in from left field, move behind the plate in line with the left field foul line extended.

On a play coming in from right field, move behind the plate in line with the right field foul line extended.

Move with the play, and adjust as the play dictates.