



Each week for the next 8 weeks Referee will be sending advanced baseball play-calling tips and techniques. We hope they instruct, inspire and help you perform to the best of your ability.

Yours in Officiating,

The Staff at Referee.com

EARLY GAME MIND-SET

Use visualization techniques.

On the way to the game or while waiting for your partner(s) to arrive, visualize yourself calling plays. If you're due to work the plate, imagine fast balls, sliders, changeups and curves being thrown to upright and hunched-over batters. "See" pitches just nicking the plate's corners or the bottom of the batter's knees as well as being slightly out of the zone. If you're working the bases, imagine yourself watching the pitcher's motion. Think about whackers at first base — how you'll listen for the ball smacking the glove while watching the runner's foot.

Once you're in the game, you have already visualized and thought about situations so carefully that your performance and consistency can't help but be better.

Have a thorough pregame.

A pregame meeting is essential for a good performance on the field. When you start your pregame discussion, make sure it fits the crew that you are with for that game. Three veteran college umpires who have worked together before probably don't need a complete discussion of all rotations. However, if it's one veteran and one new guy on a varsity game, going through the whole pregame not only ensures coverage, but it will likely put the newer umpire at ease. The newer umpire will hear things he's heard before, and will grow more comfortable.

Start thinking baseball.

Before the game is not the time to discuss the latest gossip, movie or news from home. Cell phones should be put away and the discussion should center on the task at hand. Discuss odd situations or plays from recent games. It gets the whole crew thinking about rules or mechanics.

Keep the plate conference brief.

When meeting the coaches at the plate conference, don't hold a rules clinic. Coaches don't want to hear it, and the more you go on and on about this or that rule, new or old, the more they will get antsy and their eyes will glaze over. The umpire who prattles on endlessly creates the perception that he is one of those hyper-technical umpires that coaches cannot abide.

The same philosophy applies when going over the ground rules. Ask the home coach to do it. It's his yard, and it saves him having to correct an umpire who has made a mistake. More important, he now controls the conversation. If he wants to expound at length, that's his prerogative, but he can't blame the umpires for it. If you don't understand something, chime in. But otherwise it's the coach's show; keep quiet.

Check the lineup cards.

The plate umpire must review each lineup card. Start with the nine fielding positions. If there is a DH, announce to the coach, "You have Smith DH'ing for Jones in the four spot." The only positions that officially matter are the pitcher, the DH (if one is being used) and the player being DH'd for. But checking for all the positions helps ensure the coach didn't include two first basemen in his lineup and leave out his slick-fielding shortstop. Then quickly scan the names, again looking for same last names that might need first initials. Although numbers are not required, look to make sure they are listed and there are no duplications. Substitutes are not required, but it does make it easier if they are on the card.

For NFHS games only, ask the legal question: "Are all of your players properly and legally equipped, and does all of your equipment meet rule specifications?" When the coach answers, "Yes" and only then, make a mark in the upper right-hand corner of the lineup card. That way you'll know you asked and should there be an issue, the mark will remind you that you did so.

Get acquainted, not chummy.

When the teams take the field for the first time, the plate umpire should introduce himself to each catcher. Most umpires prefer to be called by their first name instead of "Blue" or "Sir." If he doesn't offer it, ask the catcher his name. A few additional personal questions are OK, but you should avoid an extended social gabfest, such as, "Where are you from? What year of school are you in?"

Once the catcher knows you are interested in him, it's time for business. "Who's on the mound? How many pitches does he have? What's his 'out' pitch?"

Tidy up.

When brushing the plate prior to a game, clean off the corners of the plate and smooth the dirt between the plate and each batter's box line in front of the plate with your foot. That kind of grounds work will make the plate appear wider and likely please the catcher, who will have a smooth surface in front of him for any pitches that bounce in the dirt in front of the plate.

UNDERSTAND STRATEGY

Consider the count.

Beyond the obvious, you need to know the count to anticipate the next pitch or play. If the count is 3-0, in most cases the batter is taking and the pitcher will throw a “get-me-over” fastball to avoid the walk. If it’s 0-2, the pitcher will often throw a “waste” pitch, hoping the batter will chase it. Neither is automatic, but it happens often enough that you have a leg up in preparing for what’s coming next.

With a full count and two out, runners may be moving on the pitch. The pitcher may hold in his stretch longer, hoping runners will break early so he can step off and attempt a pickoff. If the pitch results in a hit, you can anticipate the base at which a play may occur based on the head start for the runner.

Think situations.

Mentally keep track of where the batting team is in the order. The cleanup hitter is almost never going to be asked to bunt. But the eighth or ninth hitter will be.

With a runner on third and less than two out, depending on who is at the plate, a squeeze may be in the offing. Runners on first and third may portend a double steal.

Considering all of those and other possibilities helps you prepare for your next movement and/or call.

Understand what’s logical.

If you played the game, you remember a coach telling you to think about what you were going to do with the ball if it were hit to you. Similarly, an umpire should think about where the ball might be thrown depending on which fielder makes the play.

With a runner on second only and a ground ball to the left side, you can think about the more likely play — the one at first. Runners don’t tag up on popups, but they do on deep fly balls. Get yourself into position to watch the players most likely to be involved in the play on the batted ball as well as any succeeding play.

BEFORE THE PITCH

Go with the stance that’s most comfortable.

There are four basic stances:

The box — Feet are spread slightly more than shoulder width apart and are placed in a heel-toe configuration, with your left foot slightly ahead of your back foot and your weight evenly distributed on the balls of your feet. While your feet are slightly askew, your body should be square to the pitcher’s mound. You should be about four to six inches behind the catcher’s heel, far enough to not get in his way and close enough so that your view of the outside corner — you should be able to see well into the opposite batter’s box — is not affected.

The scissors — Better described as a modified splits stance, because your legs are in a splits configuration, with your left leg in a similar position as in the box stance, but your right leg is directly behind you, acting more like a kick stand, providing balance but not bearing much weight.

The knee — Left foot slightly ahead of your back foot to start, but instead of remaining in a standing position, you drop to one knee.

Hands-on-knees — Starting position is about six to 12 inches behind the catcher with the feet square (not in heel-toe) facing the pitcher. As the pitcher delivers, bend more at the knees than at the back and lock in.

Which stance should you use? Whichever stance feels the most comfortable. If you are comfortable, you will be more focused on the game. It's about putting your head in the best possible position to see pitches. If you are in the ideal position, it doesn't matter. Your head should be in the same position in whatever stance.

Get locked in.

If you aren't locked in and in a consistent position, you will not be able to judge pitches the same way every time. That's why you want to be balanced and locked in before every pitch. An umpire who "hides" his hands behind him in an effort to protect them is rarely stable or consistent. Another bad spot for the hands is on the catcher. There are some umpires — mostly those who work the box stance — who will tend to put one hand on the catcher, as a guide for maintaining the proper distance. Putting anything more than the lightest possible touch on the catcher can affect his ability to play. Additionally, not having your hand as a locking mechanism as part of your stance will reduce your stability.

Get set at the right time.

If you get set too early, by the time the pitch arrives, you are ready to get out of your stance. That will affect your timing — whether it is moving your head with the pitch or not following the ball all the way into the mitt because you are wanting to move. If you come out of the stance too early, your consistency and concentration are ruined.

Keep your distance.

Regardless of stance, avoid working too close to catchers. If you do, you'll have trouble getting out of the way if the catcher has to chase a pitch back to the screen. It is going to be easier to get out of the way if you give the catcher enough room to maneuver behind the plate.

During a game, if you find yourself making contact with a catcher who goes to his knees or slides one way or the other to block pitches, you are probably setting up too close to him. Getting far enough behind the catcher can also help you with your perspective on marginal pitches on the corners.

Visualize the strike zone.

Do yourself a favor: Get the word "my" out of your strike zone vocabulary. Despite the obvious room for judgment in interpreting the strike zone, the days of "your" strike zone are gone. It is the game's strike zone, as defined by the rulebook to the administrators, the coaches, the players and the umpires. Calling it "your" or "my" strike zone gives the impression that you get to do whatever you want with it, regardless of all those other factors. It has become hot-button phrasing for most coaches and administrators and is best left in history books.

Developing consistency within the rules and finding what works for you and the level of game you are working are what turns the science of the strike zone into the art form. That is what separates the best umpires from the middle of the pack.

TRACKING & TRAINING

Track the ball all the way to the mitt.

To properly call a pitch, you must track it. You cannot focus on the strike zone or catcher's mitt and wait for the ball to enter that area. You must watch it the entire way from the pitcher's hand to the back of the catcher's mitt. Additionally, you must watch the ball with your eyes, and not move your head as the pitch comes in.

Here's a practice drill that will improve your tracking. Have someone hold a baseball four or five feet in front of you and move it around. Your job is to follow it with your eyes.

If you're not tracking the ball, but instead watching the area in front of the plate, the appearance of the ball will cause you to blink. That split second of barely seeing the ball, blinking and trying to pick up the ball again will result in a very inconsistent manner of calling pitches.

Use one of two timing techniques.

Timing goes hand in hand with tracking. Timing is not waiting longer to announce your decision; if that is what you are doing, you are just waiting longer to make a bad decision because you judged the pitch too soon.

Two methods of timing your call:

- **The sound technique** — Listen for the sound of the glove, wait a prescribed amount of time and then make the call.
- **The whisper technique** — Wait for the pitch, listen to the ball hit the mitt, whisper or say to yourself, "That pitch was a strike (or ball)," and then make the call.

Don't be fooled by framing.

Catchers will sometimes move their arm upon receiving a pitch in an effort to deceive you and make a ball look like a strike. That is called framing the pitch.

If a catcher is framing pitches, let him know you're on to him. When he gives you grief about calling that pitch a ball, tell him, "You know that was a ball; that's why you framed it."

CALLING THE PITCH

Use your voice.

You should always verbalize your call of a pitch. The volume should reflect the closeness of the pitch. You don't need to scream, but a good, hard loud call on a close pitch is just like selling a bang-bang play on the bases.

On location.

Old wisdom told umpires to never announce the location of a pitch (e.g., “Ball, low,” or, “That’s outside”) and to never offer an explanation until asked. But at some higher levels of ball, a few umpires are violating the old adage — and finding it beneficial to defuse a potential argument. It’s not a mechanic for everyone; sometimes giving the location before being asked can invite an exchange that otherwise might not have occurred. But in certain situations, such as a 2-2 count and a pitch that’s just off the corner of the plate, noting the location forcefully and with confidence can head off problems.

It’s your choice.

There are umpires who say the word, “Strike,” while others will say, “Yes,” or “Yep.” Others will use a guttural grunt without saying an actual word. Use whatever works for you.

There is less need to vary your voice with a called strike because there is no difference in a “close strike” and one that is right down the heart of the plate. Bringing different habits into your calls can result in you altering your timing, which will affect your game at some point.

“Counting” pitches is optional.

Once you have decided what to call the pitch when the batter hasn’t swung, a call of “Ball” or “Strike” is all that is required. You can “count” the pitches if you choose to, such as “Ball one,” or, “Strike two.” But that is information that can easily be given when you give the count.

Pop up for strikes, stay down for balls.

There are umpires who will call a strike while in their stance and then come out of their stance and give their hand motion. That is very confusing for all participants except the hitter and catcher, who are the only ones who typically hear the call.

Stay in your stance to call a ball, then rise. For a strike, rise from your stance and give the call.

The wrists don’t matter.

On a checked swing, it’s a strike if the batter is deemed to have committed to a swing. If you rule the batter did not check his swing, a wail you will often hear is, “He didn’t break his wrists!” The batter breaking his wrists, crossing the front of the plate or any other so called “defining points” of when an attempt becomes a swing are not in the rulebooks. Don’t refer to them when explaining a call and don’t believe them when presented to you.

THE BASES: WORKING IN POSITION A

Know the best place to be.

When working in position A (no runners on), position yourself where you can still see the top of the first baseman’s shoelaces. That will result in your being about 10 to 12 feet behind the first baseman. You have to rule on the catch/no catch of the first baseman moving toward the first-base line. That play only happens about once a season, but you need to be ready.

Move with the pitch, then stop.

As the pitcher is winding up, you have a couple of options as far as your stance — hands on knees or slightly bent at the waist with one foot in front of the other. You can move forward as the pitcher starts his motion to the plate. However, you need to be stopped and set in either position as the ball is traveling to the plate. Picture what an infielder does as his pitcher throws and mimic that action.

Read the throw, then look at first base.

When a ground ball is hit, read the angle of the ball and start moving into the field of play, about four or six feet off the line. If the ball is fielded cleanly, you need to start reading the fielder and his release point. You will want to track the ball about three-quarters of the way across the infield. The last quarter of the way you want to focus your attention on first base, specifically the front of the base. That's because players are taught to hit the front of the base with their foot. At that time your body and eyes should be set. You are listening for the sound of the ball impacting the glove and watching the batter-runner to make sure his foot contacts the base.

Keep in mind three key elements at first base.

No matter if the play is routine or unusual, there are three things to keep in mind on every play at first base:

- Did the runner make contact with the base?
- Was the first baseman in contact with the base when he secured possession of the ball?
- Did he field the throw cleanly?

Once you've decided on those three elements, you can make your call.

If the throw is off-line, take a "read step."

If the throw takes the first baseman up the first-base line, you will want to take a "read step" toward the first-base line to get an angle on the play. If the throw from the fielder is taking the first baseman up the line, the first baseman will try and stay in contact with the base on the outfield side of the bag. Stop moving and get your body and eyes set. You do not want to take the play while moving.

If the throw takes the first baseman toward the plate, take a "read step" toward second base to open your viewing window of first base. Get your body and eyes set before making the call.

High throw, runner comes into the bag upright.

A runner in that situation will more than likely attempt to go to the foul side of the bag and stab his foot to make contact with the base. The first baseman on the other hand will try to swipe with a downward angle, and if he makes contact it is usually on the upper part of the runner's body, more specifically the helmet or the back. From your initial starting position, take a read step toward second base to open your viewing window to see in back of the runner.

If a tag was made, you must know if the fielder secured the ball throughout the entire process of the play, and if the runner made contact with the base.

High throw, runner slides headfirst.

Normally the runner will be sliding toward the foul side of the base to do that. From your initial starting position, take a read step toward the line. By doing that, you will be in excellent position to make a proper ruling on the play. Again, be aware of where the swipe tag will take place. More than likely it will be on top of the helmet or shoulder.