

Umpire Plate Mechanics

FASTPITCH PLATE MECHANICS
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PREPARATION

Feel comfortable by being dressed professionally, fully protected by wearing all of the proper equipment and by meeting your own standards as well as those that are required by SOFTBALL CANADA. Set high standards for your own physical fitness levels.

Mentally prepare yourself by eliminating all of the daily distractions that come our way and allow your mind enough time to think about your upcoming assignment and game plan.

Approach your plate assignment armed with all the knowledge and experience you have attained from studying the CERTIFICATION MANUALS, reviewing the RULEBOOK, examining the UMPIRE CASEBOOK and from all those ball games that you have officiated.

Total preparation will allow your PLATE MECHANICS to kick into auto-pilot. Leave your mind clear to officiate and ready to “expect the unexpected”.

Stay relaxed and focused on being the “best that you can be” by remembering that it’s just a game. All that really matters is that you give all you have to offer each and every time you put on the BLUES. Enjoy and have fun!

BEING READY FOR THE FIRST PITCH

While waiting for the pre-game conference to begin, take time to watch both pitchers during their warm-ups. This will allow you time to evaluate each pitcher’s rhythm and motion.

After the pre-game conference, you may want to observe a few warm-up pitches in the first inning. Now is the time to adjust your footwork, balance, and body position. This valuable time also allows you to work on your own timing and rhythm, seeing the movement of the ball, speed of delivery, and making sure you can see the entire strike zone with BOTH EYES.

KNOWLEDGE OF PLAYERS’ HABITS

Sometimes being a student of the game can assist your PLATE MECHANICS in other ways. For instance, knowing a pitcher’s style, being aware of the power hitters, and those most likely to bunt or slap may help you to react a bit more quickly and be able to anticipate how you might get into the optimum position to see a particular situation. The softball generally breaks eight to ten feet from the catcher. Remembering that we see hundreds of different players over the years, it is to our advantage to try and remember some of these variations for later use.

STEPPING INTO THE STANCE

From your relaxed position, pivot on your inside foot. If it is more comfortable for you, then use a few small steps to position yourself in the slot by using an offset square stance, where your outside foot (closest to batter) is a bit more forward than your inside foot (behind the catcher). You must always feel balanced with most of your weight on the balls of your feet. Keeping your feet spread at least as much as the width of your shoulders will put you in perfect position. Having your feet too close together can cause more movement of the upper body. Dig in and get comfortable.

WORKING IN THE SLOT

This is known as being in the driver's seat. It gives you an unobstructed view of the entire pitch and allows you the opportunity to see the ball clearly with BOTH EYES. The catcher should rarely block your view. If the catchers do move, you can adjust as necessary, but never let the catchers work you. Work with them to attain the best look you can. If the catchers take away the inside corner, let them know. If batters take away the inside corner, make a small adjustment to your stance. If you can't see the corner, any pitch that is inside must have crossed the plate. More strikes lead to more cooperation.

Those officials who still hide-out behind the catcher in the perimeter of the strike zone cannot see the ball with BOTH EYES and will lose check swings, double batted balls, batters hit by a pitch, foul tips, balls in the dirt, and I could go on and on. Evaluators refer to these umpires as PEEKERS and sometimes describe them as impossible to see from center field. Because of their position they WILL get hit more often since the majority of foul balls go straight back. Because PEEKERS cannot see the plate at all times, the plate will tend to float and cause an extremely inconsistent zone.

WAITING FOR PAUSE AND FIRST MOVEMENT OF A PITCH

Your next thoughts are to observe the pitching motion and wind-up prior to the pause. The next movement you see will be the beginning of the pitch and you must set up for it immediately. Don't set up too early or your legs and body movement will cause you to become tired in the late innings. If you set up too late you will lose perspective of the strike zone because you will still be moving after the ball has been released from the pitcher's hip area. Supervisors look at this irregularity as a major cause of strike zone inconsistency.

GETTING SET IN THE DOWN POSITION

With a smooth and brisk motion drop into your set position. This will include doing a multitude of things all at once. Keep your head square to the plate.

Bend from your knees to your waist.

Your back should feel a bit straight and stiff, although it never really is.

Your eyes should never be in the zone, but they will be set at the top and inside corner of it.

Your shoulders will be a bit offset, due to your footwork but could even be square if you prefer. This may give you the feeling that you are just about to sit in a chair, but it is much more effective than bending your back and trying to look up.

Always protect your hands and arms as much as possible. Most officials keep them in front, but a few others prefer one or two hands behind their knees. As crazy as it may sound, it seems that the more exposed you are in the slot the less you will get hit. The bottom line is to do what is best for you.

Keep your entire body STILL while preparing to judge the pitch, even if the catcher moves in front of you after you are set.

Leave enough room between the catcher and you. There should never be contact, other than a light touch with the fingertips of your inside hand. This will allow you to react to any sudden reverse movement.

ANNOUNCING THE PITCH WITHOUT YOUR VOICE

Never use any hand movements to announce the location of a pitch. The use of a strong verbal call will help to sell it and accomplish the same thing allowing the umpire to look and sound more professional. Often times our body language can tip off what we were thinking of calling rather than what we actually call. My point here is a subtle reminder not to hurry your decision making process. See the pitch, DELAY, and then deliver the call with confidence.

TRACKING THE BALL

Begin to pick up the ball from the pitcher's hip.

As the ball leaves the pitcher's hand, try to pick up the rotation of the ball, much the same way as a quality hitter would. Next you should lock in the batter's normal zone.

Follow the ball through the zone and watch the ball all the way into the catcher's glove, using the pop of the glove as a timing tool. A slight tip of your head will help you see the ball hit the glove. This technique is a great way to double check the location of the ball, create a natural delay in your timing, and ensure that you have seen the ball with BOTH EYES into the glove. Never blink your eyes as you could miss a number of important actions taking place around the plate.

TIMING AND RHYTHM

It is very important that an umpire develop proper timing and rhythm in making decisions. That timing and rhythm should never vary. Only the emphasis of various calls will differ. It is said that the plate umpires set the tempo and control the game, but to do this the umpires must first be in control of themselves. Umpires who makes calls quickly on every pitch will appear to be guessing. DELAY! DELAY! DELAY! Timing must be slow, deliberate, repetitive and consistent. CONCENTRATE!

Everyone appreciates the umpire who has developed proper timing in administering decisions as a plate umpire. This sets the tempo of the game more than any other facet of umpiring.

THE COUNT

How often the count is given depends on a number of different situations. If the field is equipped with a scoreboard, it is only necessary to give the count periodically, or when requested by a participant or to correct the scoreboard. If there is no scoreboard then the count should be given:

- when requested
- after a delay in the normal flow of the game
- after all dead ball situations and
- whenever the next pitch may be a base on balls or a strikeout.

Generally, a higher caliber of play requires that the count be given less often. Help keep the crew in the game by sending and/or acknowledging the number of outs whenever another out is added. If you are struggling to keep the count right during the game simply say it verbally more often to yourself. Briefly glance at your counter, trying not to hold it up too high. Cleverly looking down at it is less noticeable and much more professional.

Give the count visually and display it slowly and deliberately. Some umpires prefer to send the count towards center field ONLY by simply rotating their fingers methodically. When base umpires have a runner on base that is attempting to advance, often times they will not have seen the pitch. A super mechanic is to ALWAYS send the count to your partners anytime there is action or movement by base runners that would cause your partners to look away from your call. Often a player will ask the base umpire for the count after the action stops. This mechanic will get the count to your partner before they are asked.

DECISION TIME

If you have a called strike, verbalize it. Either start in the down position and finish as you stand up or verbalize it as you are standing up or verbalize it after you stand up. The level one manual suggests the latter. Strike, strike two, or strike three. Finish these calls with a sharp, crisp hammer along with your sell signal when needed. Always face the diamond when you are selling strike three.

If you have a ball, stay down and verbalize it. Ball, ball two, ball three, or ball four. Do not point towards first.

If you have a swinging strike three, just use the hammer.

In all the above verbalizations, let the closeness of the pitch and its relevant importance dictate the required volume.

Foul tips – give the hammer followed by the fingertip to fingertip brush away signal.

Balls touched in foul territory – foul ball signal with the verbal.

Ground balls that are hit foul – if past a base or hitting anything – foul ball signal with the verbal.

Ground balls hit fair beyond a base – signal by pointing repeatedly towards fair territory – NO VERBAL.

Fly balls that are hit close to a foul line

If fair and caught – point fair and give the hammer.

If fair and dropped – just point fair and repeat.

If foul and caught – point foul and give the hammer.

If foul and dropped – signal and verbalize foul ball.

Pop-ups to the catcher near the line – get a proper look.

Pop-ups to the catcher when you must vacate – do not watch the ball – watch the catcher's eyes and shoulders and get out of their way.

On all hit balls remove your mask with your left hand.

Foul balls that are hit close to the screen or towards a dugout – HUSTLE – get in position and look at your partner to see who got the best look. If you have the best look, delay and make a call. Make sure you get to the screen quickly.

On all fly balls hustle out to get a good look for possible traps or who knows what. Come to a stop, delay, and then make your call with a crisp hammer when out. If there are any runners on base or if the out is not obvious, add a loud verbal to your hammer. If you have no catch and have a trap situation, give the 'no catch signal' and always add a strong verbal to it.

CHECK SWINGS

Umpires should use the mechanics of hitting to assist them in judging check swings. Did the batter do any of the following?

pass their bat through the zone

roll their wrists or turn their hips,

Was the bat in front of their body, and did they convince you that they made an attempt to swing? If you can answer YES to any of these questions then you usually have a strike. Not sure? Then ask your partner. Don't forget to remove your mask, take a few steps toward your partner, point and say "did he/she swing?" If the catcher asks you to check, go ahead and check. Some umpires are reluctant to ask because they are positive they saw it right. Maybe so, but there have been occasions when umpires have missed not only a check swing, but a full blown swing. Once you have started checking and the response is constantly NO, then you have no choice but to limit your requests. This method is by no means the only way to operate, but it is definitely a good part of preventative officiating. One good point to remember is that if you concentrate too hard on a check swing, you may forget about the pitch itself and end up calling no swing – "ball" on a pitch that was in the strike zone. Your timing and rhythm go haywire, and

you're left in a jam. The answer is to take the check swing scenario 'IN' by watching the big picture, and not concentrating on just the bat. Some National Teams (Asian) never ask the plate umpire to check as they feel that the umpire may take it as an insult. The bottom line is, of course, to get the call correct.

An additional point-of-emphasis is to visually look at your partner on the batter's open side whenever a batter has swung at strike three and the ball was down where it may have skipped into the catcher's glove via the dirt, off something other than the catcher's glove or hand, or was caught. A strong partner will be ready to assist you with a fist or an open hand on their thigh to advise you of the correct result. This would also be a benefit on foul-tip calls made by the plate umpire.

LEAVING THE PLATE AREA

Develop the habit of leaving the plate area from the left side of the catcher. This fits into one of the umpire's priorities that should include avoiding a collision with the catchers and allowing the catchers their freedom to roam. With no runners on base or a runner on first base only, leave the plate area on the left side and trail the batter-runner toward first base in fair ground. Ideally you should go about twenty to thirty feet, stop close to the line and observe the play at first. You could look for:

- Collisions between the catcher and batter-runner.
- Tags made by the catcher or infielders on the batter-runner.
- Assisting with possible swipe tags or pulled foot scenarios.
- Spiking committed by the batter-runner.
- Overthrows or blocked balls.
- Violations of the three foot running lane.
- If the base umpire turns to go to the outfield, you are in perfect position to make calls or watch for the touch of first by the batter-runner if necessary.

After moving toward first base with a runner on first base only, be aware of a possible play at third base with the lead runner, since that would be the responsibility of the plate umpire in the three umpire system. If the umpire has a runner starting at second or third base, the umpire must view the actions up the first base line from a position that will not impede any base runners. If you must, watch home plate for the touch, glance up the first base line for action and then proceed to the next potential call. In a three umpire system, the plate umpire must observe a variety of things that would include missed bases, obstruction, interference, tag-ups and pure no-fault unintentional collisions that occasionally occur. WRECKS!!!

CONFERENCES

It is the responsibility of plate umpires to enforce rules governing offensive and defensive

conferences. The plate umpire shall inform the offensive or defensive team that a conference has been charged. While a defensive coach is visiting the pitcher during a charged conference, a super MECHANIC is to move down the foul line, stopping where the coach must pass on their way to the dugout. Inform him/her of the charged conference and be on your way back to the plate area. A conference will not be charged to the offense during a charged defensive conference. An offensive conference is one in which the offense (involving a player) delays the game to communicate. Do not allow more than one offensive conference per inning. If the offense insists, allow it and remove the offending coach. Remember it is not a charged conference if the defense takes advantage of the time during a charged offensive conference, as long as there is no communication between the pitcher or any other team member that is not in the game.

Another good MECHANIC is if a pitcher appears injured, walk around near the pitcher to make sure that the only communication taking place is the discussion involving the pitcher's injury. Inform the opposing coaches of the situation and tell them that the visit to the pitcher was not charged. However, once the umpire instructs the team that is charged with the conference to "play ball", the other team must immediately 'play ball' or be in jeopardy of having a conference charged against them.

NOT TO PITCH SIGNALS

There are a few points of emphasis governing these signals. The first signal of 'not to pitch' is conveyed to the pitcher only if he/she is ON the pitching rubber and about to quick pitch the batter. Do not over-use this signal. A quality mechanic is to use it only when necessary. The signal is an open hand aimed at the pitcher's face with the fingers spread wide. You must always use the hand that is FURTHEST away from the batter (towards the empty batter's box). If a pitcher constantly rushes you or the batter, advise the catcher to please slow down the sign for the pitcher. If that doesn't work, step forward and explain to the pitcher that they are rushing the batter. The second 'not to pitch' signal is used if you are not ready to work or if you have granted "TIME" to the batter before the pitcher has broken the pause. Remember, a batter must request 'TIME' and not be granted it just because they have their hand up in the air. The 'TIME – NO PITCH' signal is given physically (with two hands) as well as verbally while you are hustling AWAY from the batter in the direction of the open batter's box. Wait until it is safe to return.

HITTING THE BALL A SECOND TIME

The problem that most umpires have is that this can be extremely tough to see. It occurs most often on bunts and slaps, but it can also happen when the bat, after it is dropped by the batter and still moving, contacts the ball a second time. Remember that if the ball hits a dropped bat that is stationary, we disregard the contact. Also remember that when a ball hits a bat that is still rolling, you disregard the contact.

NOTE: The double batted ball must occur in FAIR territory. Signal and verbalize "TIME – BATTER IS OUT" and point towards the infraction.

BATTER HIT BY A PITCH

Batters are awarded first base anytime they are hit (unless, of course, they made NO attempt to avoid the pitch) and the award is valid even if the ball only contacts their uniform. Do not let batters wear sweaters or jackets at the plate just for that reason, although it's up to you what they wear in the field. At times, the batters' reaction can assist your decision as there is no substitute for PAIN. A batter cannot be awarded a base when hit by a pitch if the ball is in the strike zone.

NOTE: Preventative officiating dictates that you must "SELL" this call when necessary. Step out in front of the catcher and point to first. This is an awarded base. You must always be prepared immediately to step in between the batter and the pitcher in case the batter's temperature begins to rise and TAKE CHARGE.

Once the situation has been diffused, walk the batter to first base, positioning yourself between the two. Most supervisors will tell you that strong game control in situations like this is often the difference between 'excellent' and 'elite' officials. Your partner may help you decide if the batter was hit by the pitch.

In confrontations, another important task is to make sure that you only have to deal with one person at a time. We call this CROWD CONTROL or creating a one-on-one situation. If you are involved in the discussion, only speak to one person (preferably the coach or a captain that attended your pre-game conference). Your partner or partners should jump right in and create a one-on-one situation for you. If your partner happens to get in a similar situation, you must immediately react to it and create the same one-on-one match-up for them. Never look at your partner's confrontation, just control the traffic for them. They will appreciate your professionalism.

BALL OFF THE BAT HITS THE BATTER OR BATTER-RUNNER

Make SURE that you see it. If not, your partner can be of great assistance on this call. The ball is usually off the batter's front foot or it will come off the ground, come up, and contact them. Once again BE CERTAIN that you see contact. Don't guess. You can always get help from your partner later, unless you killed the play. A batter's feet must both be on the ground COMPLETELY outside the lines of the batter's box if you are to get an out here. The ball must also be in FAIR territory.

NOTE: This is a tough call sometimes, but an out is an even bigger call for the batter. If you're not positive that they were out of the box, then they must have been in it. FOUL BALL!

STRIKE ZONE – MIND SET THEORY

Our game tends to go slowly at times and I believe that this topic is the key to getting the game off and running at a decent tempo. Set a brisk pace by calling more STRIKES.

The plate is: 42.5 cm 17.0 inches wide. The beveled edges are 5.0 cm (2.0 inches) together. The widths of two balls are 18.75 cm (7.5 inches) together TOTAL OF ALL THIS 66.25 cm (26.5 INCHES) !!!

The point here is to go into your game LOOKING FOR STRIKES, saying to yourself over and over, there's one, "STRIKE" and there's another one, "STRIKE" and yet again, there's one, "STRIKE". If you do this enough times you will forget about 'looking for balls', begin to realize how wide the plate really is and start 'LOOKING FOR STRIKES'. More often than not, the batters will begin to swing more, rather than sit on pitches that are close. You will have more strikes, fewer walks and the entire Rhythm and Tempo of your game will improve. It is better for the game, better for the spectators, and most of all BETTER FOR US...THE HARD-WORKING BLUES!

POINTS OF EMPHASIS TO SPEED UP THE GAME

Don't let the batters wander away from the plate to get signals from their coach

Get a batter in the box within ten seconds

Hustle players constantly during the entire game

Don't let the pitchers eat up the clock by wasting time

Speak to a coach if he/she is too slow sending signals (pitches to be called by the catcher)

Encourage a team to have another person not in the game receive warm-up pitches until the catcher (who is not wasting time) is dressed and ready

Conserve our precious time IN BETWEEN INNINGS. Shaving off one minute each half inning would cut down every game you officiate by thirteen minutes. Something can and must be done to pick up the pace. As umpires, let's try to do our best to make the game more interesting for the spectators, while we still have them.

POINTS OF EMPHASIS ON USING THE NEW PLATE MECHANIC

As with anything new, it will take a lot of thought and effort to implement. You won't be able to rely on your natural instincts (auto-pilot), but a few small points will help assist you in deciding when and where to be, when and where to move, what to look for when you get there, and what to do with the on-deck batter who will be coaching the incoming runners and most likely be in your way.

We must now understand fully how important it is to keep all the 'ELEMENTS' (home plate or base, ball, offense, defense) in front of you at all times. Without all the 'ELEMENTS' we would only have part of the picture.

Set up for this new call near the THIRD BASE LINE EXTENDED and pick up the elements. You will have to decide what spot is best for you to move to so that you will have the best look possible, depending on where the catcher fields the throw, where the runner is in relation to a possible hooking slide, where the catcher is physically standing, and once he/she has the ball in their possession, exactly what you think they will do.

The optimum position to end up at seems to be at about a 45 angle from the plate, backwards from the diamond. This position is rarely the same. It will vary each and every time. That very important relationship with the 'ELEMENTS' will be your guide.

In a two person system that requires you to be in the third base – home plate holding zone, you will most likely have to use the standard position for calls at home plate.

In all experimental techniques it is important that you do what works for you. Although you're expected to try to incorporate these guidelines, remember that with this NEW PLATE MECHANIC there is really no MAGIC SPOT from which to make this call. You have to be able to adjust and improvise.

Imagine the ball getting away from the catcher and where you may have to be. The only correct answer is ADAPT, ADAPT and then ADAPT. The main key will be the ball and from where it is coming. By following the 'LITTLE WHITE PILL' (thanks to George Rayment), we will all learn the best way to prepare to make a call using this NEW PLATE MECHANIC. GOOD LUCK!

CREDITS:

I would to thank the following people and organizations for their time, thoughts, innovative ideas and publications. Alphabetically: Dr. Gregg Anderson, Bob Bargiacchi, Jimm Barr, Tom Bell, Bruce Bierman, Ed Bitz, Don Bracey, Jim Bradford, Wayne Brown, Merle Butler, Ron Cooke, Ron Clarke, Ken Culpitt, Keith Hazel, Doug Hadley, Gerry Howard, Chris Lee, Brent McLaren, Gene Mc Willy, John Masco, Les Novac, Max Pye, Bob Reid, Mike Renney, Bill Smith, Roy Stout, Brian Van Os and Tony Walsh.

Also, the Amateur Softball Association of the USA, the International Softball Congress, the International Softball Federation, Metro Umpires Association of Vancouver, Softball Australia, Softball British Columbia, Softball Canada and Softball New Zealand.