

5 Tips to Be Better Behind the Plate

Good Plate work takes focus and attention to proper mechanics. Here are five things necessary for doing your best work as plate umpire:

Getting in the Slot

It probably goes without saying that if you don't have the best vantage point with which to judge pitches as the catcher catches them, you can't expect to be at your best calling balls and strikes. Although most of us learn very early that the space between the inside shoulder of the catcher and the batter is where you always need to be, it is surprising how many umpires don't get enough into that **slot position** to see all the pitches. You need to be in the slot so you can see the pitch that hits the outside corner at the knees. However, umpires can also miss the pitch that hits the inside corner at the knees because they are not sufficiently up into the slot to see that pitch. They get blocked by the catcher's body and end up having to guess on its location when it is caught. The skill level of the catcher will determine how close you can get. Many lower level catchers will make it very difficult for you to get too close without constantly making contact with them as they come up to catch or throw. Furthermore, most lower level catchers setup way too far away from the plate, which puts you too deep to be consistent. Find ways to move the young catcher closer to the plate. One way is for you to get in your spot before the catcher sets up in his, thus forcing him to setup a little closer to the plate. If that fails, then subtly tell him he would get more strike calls if he sets up closer to the plate.

Proper head height

A general rule of thumb to gauge your head height is to find the place where your chin is roughly even with the top of the catcher's helmet. However, I would not tell any umpire that there is one perfect place to always place your head in relation to the

catcher. Catchers come in all different sizes and use different stances, so your position should be more a function of its relationship to the batter's stance and your ability to see the entire plate than any point on the catcher's anatomy. However, the most common head-height error is to set up too low. An umpire who is too low will lose ability to see all of the plate. Find that position where you are high enough to see all of the plate, but not exposed to the point of being extra vulnerable to foul balls off the mask.

Track the ball with your eyes

An often overlooked but essential ingredient of good plate umpiring is proper use of your eyes. When you get set to see the pitch, have an imagined strike zone etched in your mind and make sure your head does not move as the ball travels to the catcher's mitt. Especially on pitches to the outside part of the plate, if your head moves with the ball, you will have a tendency to push the ball outside of the strike zone on close pitches. Make sure your eyes stay with the pitch all the way through the receiving process by the catcher.

There are other important plate responsibilities where proper use of your eyes is critical. As the plate umpire has primary responsibility for judging a checked swing, moving your eyes from the location of the pitch to the bat as soon as possible is necessary to make this ruling properly. When your eyes have determined that the pitch will be out of the strike zone, you can afford to move your eyes immediately to the hitter. On more borderline pitches, you will have to keep your eyes fixed longer on the pitch's relationship to the strike zone. Fortunately, the rules allow you to get help from your partner on this difficult check swing call.

Good timing

If there is only one thing to emphasize with an umpire to help him or her become good at calling balls and strikes, it is **slow down your timing**. See the pitch all the way into the catcher's mitt, make a decision, and **then make your call**. If you think of those three

steps as separate and distinct aspects of calling all pitches, you will likely find that your timing will improve. On pitches that are not strikes, but rather close to the strike zone, making yourself stay down in your stance a little longer will help your timing and promote the appearance that you are very sure of yourself and your call. It also will help you avoid the infamous “stre-ball” call or “umpire balk” where everyone thinks you are coming up to call a strike, but instead you flinch as you change your mind.

Good timing can also help you avoid many other mistakes. You'll be better at judging checked swings, foul tip, hit batsman, batter interference and catcher obstruction plays. Those plays all take normal human beings time to process and rule on. Don't be afraid to take the time that you need to sort out what just happened so you can rule accordingly.

Proper use of your voice

As plate umpire, outside of calling the balls and strikes, your job is to manage the game. How better to establish your competence in this regard than by using a strong and assertive voice. A strike call should be sharp and quick, not long and drawn out, but it should definitely be something that people can hear. Some umpires will use a strong voice to call a Ball as well. Some don't make much of any sound when calling a Ball. I'm a proponent of calling a loud enough Ball so my base partner and the dugouts can clearly hear me.