

5 Time-Tested Tips to Be Great Behind the Plate

There is nothing quite like the feeling of walking off the field after a stellar performance behind the plate. But having a great game calling balls and strikes — and executing impeccably on everything else that goes with the plate umpire position — is not easy.

It 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 good umpires don't get enough into that slot position to see all the pitches.

I recall learning as a young umpire that you need to be in the slot so you can see the pitch that hits the outside corner at the knees. However, I believe more umpires 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 impossible for you to get too close without constantly making contact with them as they come up to throw.

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 I get set to see the pitch, I already have an imagined strike zone etched in my mind based on the hitter's stance. As I pick up the pitch from the pitcher's hand, I want to make sure my 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(s) on this difficult call.

Good timing

If there is only one thing that I can share 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 "stee-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, 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. One of the best bits of advice I ever received from one of my umpiring mentors was this: "If you are in the middle of what you think is a great game calling balls and strikes, tell yourself to slow down."

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. I consciously make it a point to be a little louder when I call a strike on marginal pitches, and this is especially true when that marginal pitch is called for strike three.

Some umpires will use a strong voice to call a ball on a marginal pitch. One caution I would suggest to umpires who use this method is make sure you use it sparingly. An over reliance on using your voice to sell your call of "ball" can create a belief that you are afraid to call strikes on the edges of the plate. I used to occasionally employ that tactic, until I was convinced that it was unnecessary. The argument that swayed me was that if the pitch was so close that you need to sell it, maybe you should have called it a strike.