

An **UmpireBible** Publication

Working the Plate, Part 2: Advanced Ball & Strike Calling

By Peter Osborne

This article is Part 2 of a three-part series, "Working the Plate," by Peter Osborne:

Part 1: The Basics

Part 2: Advanced Ball & Strike Calling

Part 3: Myths That Get in the Way of Calling Pitches

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Introduction

If you have gotten this far in the article you are probably a serious umpire or at least want to be. In this section, we will discuss some advanced things that you can do to improve your performance. There is a lot in this section for the casual reader and student of baseball as well as the recreational umpire. Much of what is presented is controversial. It is based on more than 1300 baseball games that I have worked or observed, most of them involving 15-year-olds to adults.

As an evaluator of umpires, I have become a keen observer of umpires and especially their interaction with those around them. Some of these observations are those of our senior evaluator, John Porter, who no longer umpires baseball, but who probably has observed more than 2500 games over the years, either sitting in the stands or as a coach. When you read something, do not dismiss it as outrageous just because it goes against conventional wisdom. There is a lot of careful observation backing it up.

Checked Swings

Checked swings are part of calling balls and strikes. Many macho umpires try to get every one from behind the plate. This is probably for appearance sake or because the base umpire in the "B" or "C" position does not have a good view of the checked swing. However, good ball-and-strike calling is not about getting every pitch right; it is more about avoiding gross misses. Do you want to ruin a good plate game in a hurry? Say, "Yes, he went" when in fact the bat barely moved. The base umpire, although he may not have a great view, is much less likely to have a gross miss. Five or ten marginal misses are to be preferred over one gross miss. A gross miss tells everyone that you are incompetent and can send a good game south in a hurry.

So, use your base umpire for the checked swings when you are in doubt. I have done this with great success over the years. If you are tracking the ball properly, you will not see the checked swing on a low outside pitch. (This is the number one trouble pitch that we talked about earlier.) As a measurement tool, if you have to go to your partner more than 2-3 times per game, then you need to take corrective action. You should see most check swings accurately but never, never guess on this.

The concept of avoiding gross misses is important for later discussions and you may be wondering what the definition is. A gross miss is a call that both teams know was wrong. A gross miss is a call that makes an umpire evaluator, sitting in the stands, want to hide.

Before we complete the discussion of checked swings, a note is in order for base umpires, who have to make the final decision. Intuition would suggest that gross misses on checked swings are split 50/50 between "Yes, he did" and "No, he didn't." This intuition is wrong. In fact, gross misses are weighted about 10 to 1 in favor of "Yes, he went". Therefore, if you are not 90% sure, the correct call if you want to avoid gross misses is to agree with your partner. You have a much better shot of avoiding the gross miss, which is an important goal.

This also prevents the following additional problem from developing. Recently, I was doing a top level game in our area. An undefeated high school pitcher had more than a dozen scouts in the stands as well as 300 fans. Early in the game, I called "Ball" on a checked swing. I was asked to get help. My very experienced partner indicated "Yes, he went." This was a gross miss. How do I know? One of the defensive team's fans said, "That was a good break." An independent scout in the stands commented to another that the pitcher being observed had just gotten a gift. If that was all that had happened, we would not worry about it. However, now every time that the batter flinched, I was asked to get help. Each team hoped that my partner would make another error in their favor.

The Philosophy of the Strike Zone

You may wonder why this subject was not first in this section. After all, we are talking about calling balls and strikes. Checked swings came first in order to develop the concept of "gross misses." It is important to understand this concept as it influences how to deal with the strike zone.

You do not want to have any gross misses in your game. A single gross miss undermines both teams' confidence in the umpire and leads to arguments, ejections, and more gross misses. A deteriorating situation produces inconsistency and consistent ball-and-strike calling is what this article is all about. Assuming that you have the basics down, and that is a big assumption, how do you go about developing consistent ball/strike calling?

1. **Build your zone around the knee pitch** [bottom of the zone]. Before anything else you must call the knee pitch correctly. Umpires have more problems with the low pitch than any other. This is also the pitch that is easiest for the coaches and players to evaluate. They are looking at it from the side and they have two easy frames of reference, the batters knee and the ground, 18 inches away.

When you miss this pitch by more than an inch or two, you are telling everybody that you are incompetent. This leads to all kinds of other problems and destroys your confidence as well. (I wrote this paragraph in fifteen minutes; it took me 18 months of just working on the knee pitch to get consistent in this area.) Consistency is defined as no more than one gross miss per game and none on strike three or other "game breakers".

Here are some hints:

- a. If the catcher turns his glove down then it is a ball. (Remember that you are seeing the ball into the glove and you are waiting one second after the ball hits the catcher's mitt to call the pitch. See the importance of tracking and timing.)
- b. If the catcher pulls the ball up after catching it, then it is a ball. If he asks why, tell him that by pulling the ball up he is telling everyone else that he thinks that it was low and that you do not want to disagree with a great catcher like him. Likewise if he dips his glove into the dirt, call that a ball. (At this point you may hear "It is not where the catcher catches it." Forget that. To a large degree, if you want to survive as an umpire call what the catcher catches. If he catches it like a ball, call it a ball; like a strike, call it a strike.)

c. If he drops or misses a close pitch then it is a ball. Good coaches know this and you will not take any flak.

d. While learning to call the low pitch, when in doubt, call a ball. You can indicate that the ball was inside or outside if someone questions the pitch. There will be some doubt in their minds as to what really happened and that is the point. You never want them to be 100% sure that you missed a pitch. We will talk more about this when the mental aspects of the game are discussed. (Exception: On a steal, all marginal pitches can be called strikes. The focus of the play is on the runner and no one will remember exactly where the pitch was.)

e. Depending on the level of ball, you have to adjust the strike zone. Adjust high, adjust inside, and adjust outside a lot, but do not play with the bottom of your zone. This is your foundation. Do not undermine your foundation. In low levels of baseball you are probably going to get some flak if you stick to the knee as the bottom of your zone. Almost all low level umpires call a pitches 4-6 inches below the knees, strikes. This is mostly due to poor timing as was discussed earlier. Low level coaches have come to expect these strikes. However, you are trying to get better. The number one way that higher level coaches spot a plate umpire who does not belong at that level is low strikes.

2. **Next, work on the high pitch.** It is also relatively easy for the coaches to determine when you missed the high pitch but it is not as easy as the low pitch. This is because the coaches' second point of reference, the ground, is 40+ inches from the ball rather than 18. In addition, different umpires have different definitions of what is high and these are usually in conflict with the strike zone as written in the rulebook. So, you have some room to maneuver here, but you still must be consistent.

It is easy to have a gross miss here. This is because some high pitches come right at your face and explode. You have no clue and have to guess. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. First, we must determine what is high. Different levels and leagues expect a different definition of high. For 13 and under, the shoulders are probably a good definition or you will be there all day. This gradually moves down so that for NCAA baseball it is within an inch or two above the belt. Now, we umpires say that this is because that is where the coaches and players want it. I don't think so. This is zone we umpires call it because it is too difficult for us to call a higher zone consistently. We have conditioned the coaches and players to accept the waist as the top of the zone and then we blame them for the present state of affairs with regards to the strike zone.

Follow me for a minute here. In our base work, we constantly emphasize getting an angle. We know the disasters that can befall us when we see a play move directly at us or directly away from us. Yet this is exactly what happens when we try to call a pitch at

the letters consistently. The ball is coming straight at our face. For the zone that is called in NCAA or the major leagues we are looking down on all strikes. Working the slot also means that we also have an angle on all pitches over the plate. One other point before we move on: Short batters consistently get shafted on high pitches. When a batter who is noticeably shorter than the other players comes to bat, take an extra few seconds to mentally adjust your strike zone.

3. **Inside and outside is easy.** Call as wide a zone as you can get away with. This is much easier than it used to be. Years ago fans and coaches would give you flak about calling a pitch 6 inches outside a strike. Now with the overhead camera in Major League Baseball, Eric Gregg is ringing up the 6-8 inch outside strike for everyone to see. Many umpires use batter's box to batter's box as the strike zone for kids under 15.

4. **Calling a big zone consistently is more difficult than calling a small zone consistently.** You might think you should thus call a small zone. While you are in your learning phase, you want to call a big zone. This will improve your performance in the long run. It is easy to make it smaller later on; the reverse is not true. (For years, I was known for having one of the biggest zones in my association. When I got to NCAA baseball with a huge zone, I got some flak, but not a lot, since it was consistent. However, over the years I have made it a more conventional size. The discipline of calling a huge zone has made me ultra consistent on the traditional zone.)

5. **Avoid the two plane miss.** Nothing convinces people faster that you are unqualified than missing a pitch low and outside or high and outside. You can miss a little low and get away with it, likewise a little high, and a lot outside if it is at the hips. But combine an inch low with an inch or two outside and it looks really ugly.

6. **When in doubt, call Ball.** An axiom of plate work is to call strikes when in doubt. Do exactly the opposite. Why? It goes back to the concept of gross misses. Think about umpires that you have watched from the stands. Are the disgusting calls that everyone knows were blown strikes or balls? Gross misses are called strikes about 10 times as often as balls.

Think about it. It is rare for some pitch to come it between the belt and two inches above the knee, where at least a quarter of the ball touches the white of the plate, and the catcher catches it perfectly, and then have the umpire say "Ball". Even mid-level umpires rarely make this kind of gross miss unless that happens to be their normal zone and their games take over 3 hours. Therefore, when in doubt, call a ball except when the runner is stealing. Avoid gross misses.

7. **If you get into trouble, then focus.** When you get in trouble and can't seem to get anything right, concentrate on each pitch as if it was the last one of the game. If

even that fails, here is a tip. Forget tracking the ball. Just look at the catcher and where he catches it. This alone will produce results superior to most varsity umpires. Move the catcher up as close to the plate as you can force him and call the pitches based on the location of the glove at the time the ball is caught. You must be able to see the glove at the moment that the ball enters it so you must be in the proper position as outlined in part II. (We used to have an umpire in our association that had a glass eye and he did not see 20/20 out of the other eye. No one knew that he had the glass eye and he cracked into NCAA baseball just by observing where the catcher caught the ball.)

Physical Aspects of Working the Plate

Calling balls and strikes consistently through seven or nine innings is a physically challenging task. You must be in reasonable shape to have a shot at success. In pro school, one is taught to hustle everywhere on the ball field so as to make a good impression on the coaches and players. Minor league umpires hustle everywhere and this works fine for four or five innings. Then, especially on hot days, they start to make minor mental mistakes that only another umpire would spot. Mental mistakes can lead to gross misses and we know where a gross miss leads.

Now, if even these 22-29 year old athletic bodies in excellent shape cannot keep up the pace for 9 innings without making a mistake that will lead to problems, what chance has the average guy got. (Note: The minor league umpires will vehemently deny that they tire and make mistakes, but close observation shows that they are engaging in self deception. We will talk more about self deception under mental aspects of ball strike calling.) So, hustle for the first inning and call your strikes emphatically, likewise in the last inning in a close game, in order to show everyone that you care. Conserve energy in between. Hustle to get in position but slowly walk when the play is over. If a fly ball is hit down the left field line, bust out as far down the line as you can to make the call. However, unlike the minor league umpire who trots back to the plate when the play is over, slowly walk back to the plate. You do not want to be winded when you have to call the next pitch.

Some good advice:

- Bring at least two quarts of water to the field when the temperature is over 80 degrees and you are working the plate. Put the water in a place where you have a view of it, probably on the ball field unless this is a high level game. In a real high level game you will be able to ask for water from an attendant. You do not want to go into a dugout to get anything. Studies that the military has done show that mental abilities decline sharply when the body fluids are out of balance. Water is critical to maintaining your concentration. Be careful about people tampering

with your water. Do not allow anyone to touch it or place it out of the playing field where fans can tamper with it.

- A towel to wipe the perspiration is also a good idea. While we are on this subject, overheating is a big problem for plate umpires. One minor item that can help is a shorter inside protector. The inside protector needs to come 1 inch below the bottom of your sternum, which is about four or five inches above your belt. I often see umpires with a protector down to their belt. Not only does this trap in more heat, but it does not look professional. The fat around your gut will protect you unless you are ultra thin. I took an 85 mph foul ball off of my gut and although it stung, I continued the game with no adverse effects. We will discuss the importance of looking professional later.
- If a foul ball or a ball in the dirt hits you, do not be macho and brush it off. Stop for at least a minute even if you do not need it. Just stand on the sideline and decline medical attention. Gross misses follow a blow to the umpire because it destroys his concentration. You must gather your wits at this point and use the time to refocus your concentration. Now, at this point after a one minute break, everyone will think you are hurt so you have a perfect excuse for a gross miss!
- Umpire within yourself. We all have physical abilities and limitations. Many umpires have great athletic ability and look really cool doing a certain strike three call or some other antic on the field. We, less athletic umpires, see this and so try to imitate it, thinking that we will also look cool. We actually look foolish and out of our element. However, since we cannot see ourselves, we continue with our ridiculous strike three call or whatever. Develop a style that is consistent with your athletic abilities. Put more time and money into a good looking uniform. This is something that everyone can do.
- As we age our athletic abilities decline. Sometime in our 50s we are over the hill as far as umpiring is concerned. Many umpires refuse to acknowledge this and try to stay active at a level for which they are not suited. The on-the-road job of MLB umpires is especially hard on the body. In a recent survey of MLB players, notice which umpires were, in general, the lowest rated by the players – the old guys.