

Working the Bases More Effectively

As difficult as it may be to believe, umpires do sometimes make mistakes. I'm not talking here about an out that should have been called safe; rather I am referring to poor habits and poor mechanics that will sooner or later get an umpire into trouble. While nothing may have happened during any one particular game, any base umpires showing the flaws discussed here will surely have problems at some point.

These types of errors can unwittingly be repeated over and over again and end up becoming engrained. Keep in mind that practice doesn't make perfect; practice makes permanent. Unless we pay strict attention to our own habits, and are watchful for these flaws in our partners, we can easily fall into these traps.

Here are some examples of poor base umpire habits, with some commentary and suggestions that may help.

Looking at the base rather than tracking the thrown ball across the diamond

This is probably the most commonly made error by base umpires. If you watch for it, you will be amazed how often you will see it happen (or even worse, realize that you yourself are doing it).

Example: Ground ball to the shortstop, who fields the ball and comes up throwing to first. Watch the base umpire. Often, even before the ball is fielded cleanly or shortly thereafter, his head turns and he looks at first base, waiting for the throw to arrive. Three potential problems: a) the shortstop bobbles the ball or boots it and the ball either goes on into the outfield, or the play goes to another base b) the throw is an errant one, wide of first base (and if the base umpire is lucky, it doesn't hit him in the head) c) the fielder ends up making no throw at all. In all three cases, the base umpire is in trouble.

Any time you do not know where the ball is as a base umpire, you are in trouble. It is a feeling that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and bristle.

The cardinal rule when umpiring on the bases is to keep the four elements of a play in front of you at all times. They are: a) the ball b) the base c) the runner d) the fielder. If even one of these elements is behind you where you cannot see it, it can cause difficulty.

In order to avoid this mistake, base umpires must learn to keep their eyes everlastingly on the ball. Nothing happens without the ball; it will always take you to the play. So, follow the ball, let it turn you in the proper direction, and always keep it in front of you. If you do, you can't go wrong.

Calling plays too quickly

Think back over the current or past season. How often did you have to make a two-call? You know an Out-Safe. (Hopefully you did not have too many Safe-Outs, but they can happen too on tag plays) When these happen, you have been a victim of poor timing. You were too quick pulling the trigger, or you had the play decided in your own mind without letting the play happen and come to a conclusion before you made your call.

Even experienced umpires can occasionally be the victimized by not hesitating and not waiting long enough. It is doubly difficult for less experienced umpires to learn to use good timing when calling plays. It is definitely an acquired skill.

While it is possible to be too slow in making a call, almost all umpires have the most difficulty because they make the call too quickly.

Calling plays on the bases should not be a knee-jerk reaction. There is usually no rush to call a runner out, either on a force play or on a tag play. Indeed, it is more important on a tag play to be certain that the fielder has possession of the ball and that he maintains control of the ball after the tag is applied. Therefore, you must wait before giving the out. (I have seen some umpires give a long pause on a tag play followed by a safe signal. Such a delay would be perfect timing for a tag followed by an out, and good mechanics; it has no place in safe calls. What was the umpire waiting for? If the runner beat the tag, there would be no reason in the world to delay the call. Such calls always draw derision from the players, coaches, and fans and so they should. Do not delay on safe calls.)

Umpires use several strategies to force themselves to wait before making a call:

1. You can employ the set position with hands on the thighs or at the waist, making no commitment to make a call until the play is over. Some umpires even grab the fabric of their pants to force themselves to wait.
2. You can use a mental count such as "a thousand and one, a thousand and two..." .
3. On tag plays, some umpires point with the right hand at the tag (some even verbalize the word "Tag" when the fielder applies the tag), then pause and follow with the signal and call.

Find whatever works for you, and use it, and let those occasions you were just a bit too quick remind you of the importance of timing when making your calls.

Poor Positioning

The problem of poor positioning takes several forms. Most often, it is being in a position that does not give the umpire the best possible angle to see the play and make the correct call. Poor positioning can also include being too far from or trailing the play (calling it from the back side) or being too close to make the right call. Some of these problems are the result of lack of hustle. The umpire may have failed to keep the four elements of a play in front of him. Getting too close might be the result of being overanxious.

On any play that requires you to make a call, and especially on force-outs, you want to stand back and get the big picture. When you are too close to a play, you can only see a small part of the picture. Often umpires who are too close experience the horror of having the whole play explode right in front of their faces, making it almost impossible to determine if the ball or the runner reached the bag first.

On tag plays, it is necessary to be sure that the tag is applied, and the ball is in control of the fielder. On these plays, it is necessary to literally stick your head in the play, and to get much closer than you would on a force out. As discussed earlier, timing and delay become very important. An umpire should be "on the play" not "in the play", therefore, don't get too close, or you may find that on a big out call, you are literally "punching out" the runner.

Many umpires may not even realize that they are getting too close to a base on a force play, making the call much more difficult than it should be. You must be vigilant and check to see where you end up on the diamond - not just the distance from the play, but the angle you have as well. Look for your footprints. Anything closer than 10 feet from the base is too close, (usually 15 feet is recommended). Look for your footprints. You may be unpleasantly surprised. I've seen some base umpires making calls at first base who are standing on the infield side of the baseline, or on the baseline itself, rather than being on the outfield side at a good angle.

If you find that you are constantly battling the problem of being too close, try:

1. making sure you stop moving as soon as the infielder fields the ball, follow the throw as it leaves the hand, and let the ball turn you to the play.
2. you may have to adjust your starting position by moving a couple of steps back or deeper before the pitch is made in order to force you to stay back.

On tag plays, force yourself to get your nose on the play. Have a nose for the ball and move into position so that you can clearly see the ball and the tag. It will be necessary to stay on your feet in order to move quickly into position or move out of the way of a throw that gets away or is off line. Following these tips will help to put you in a better position to make the correct call.

Some other pointers for base umpires

- You are not out there alone. Always communicate with your partner(s).
- Keep your eyes on the play even after the out is recorded. Avoid turning too soon, and let the ball turn you to the next play. A lot can happen after you've turned your head.
- Most tag plays call themselves if you let them. If the ball arrives before the runner, and the fielder puts the glove down in front of the bag, the runner is out. Some umpires get into trouble when they pre-judge such plays. Make sure the glove goes down, and that it is placed in front of the bag and not on top of the bag. If the fielder goes fishing for the runner and reaches out to try to place the tag on a sliding runner rather than letting the runner tag himself out, you are rewarding poor fielding mechanics by calling the runner out. Besides, in most of these cases, the runner will not be out, because when the fielder reached out for the runner, the tag was applied mid-thigh or above on the sliding runner, long after the runner's feet had touched the bag. (The only exception to this would be on a throw that pulls the fielder off the bag toward the runner.)
- Be vigilant to ensure that all bases are touched or that bases are not left too early. You must be ready in case of an appeal. However, if you did not see it, you cannot call it, and therefore you would signal safe in response to an appeal.
- Be prepared to give assistance on checked swings when requested by the plate umpire.
- Listen to and watch the infielders. They can often tip you off to a play that may be happening such as a pick-off attempt, allowing you to be ready and in a better position to make the call.
- If the play is a "banger", it is likely an out. Don't fall into the trap of calling too many safes.

Working the bases is a challenging assignment, and equal in importance to working the plate in the eyes of the players and coaches. Umpires who work to incorporate the ideas contained in this article will find that their proficiency and confidence on the diamond will improve immensely.