

INTRODUCTION

There are many things that contribute to the making of a competent and complete umpire. There is no one thing more important than learning the culture of Plate Umpiring. The Plate Umpire, more affectionately known as the Crew Chief, is often the focus of attention. It will take you time and many top class performances to deflect this attention back to the players were it belongs. The Crew Chief leads the umpiring team and is the central point of communication with managers, players, statisticians and your fellow crewmembers.

*Today's officials above all else are expected to get the call right. We have seen the introduction of television replays to confirm the accuracy of calls in other sports. In softball we rely solely on the **Quality** of an umpire's judgment to deliver this accuracy and client satisfaction.*

Plate umpiring is physically and mentally demanding. The Plate Umpire needs to have game knowledge, presence, and composure and be a clear and confident communicator.

*To develop the skills you will require **"to be the very best you can be"** at Plate Umpiring will take you time. We hope this article, along with your field training and observations of other umpires in action, will assist you to become a more confident umpire tomorrow.*

***"When you compete with a person, you only have to be as good, or better than the person to win. If you compete with yourself, there is no limitation to how good you can be."** Chu Chin-Ning*

BEFORE THE FIRST PITCH

Lets start by looking at what we can do to add **Quality** to our game before the first pitch.

Mental Preparation

- ◆ **Self Confidence** – In everyday life we are faced with new challenges, softball is no different. It is essential for you to develop and outwardly convey your self-confidence in your own ability and the **Quality** of our judgment. Managers, players, spectators, the media and your fellow Blues expect you to be able to do your job. You will feel your confidence grow as you gain more experience on and off the diamond. Just a word of caution, don't become too over confident as this could affect your concentration and ability to listen.

Plate Umpiring will confront you with personal challenges. Remember you will never make it as an umpire unless you can work the plate with confidence.

- ◆ **Physical and Personal Presentation** – The demands of umpiring require **all** umpires to pay attention to their general physical condition. Umpires that keep themselves in shape look the part on the diamond alongside today's athletes. It is well known that good physical preparation helps mental sharpness.

All umpires should dress professionally and comply at all times with their local and national association's dress code. Remember your uniform is recognized internationally, so make sure you wear it with pride. The same attention should be given to your protective equipment. It must fit

you comfortably and be well maintained. Put trust in your equipment, this will boost your confidence.

- ◆ **Mental Toughness** – A game of softball can be recreational or highly competitive. The rules of the game are there to find a winner. One very competitive manager has told me on more than one occasion, that they would do anything to win. Everything from the *Quality* of your judgment to your pedigree may be questioned. You will be intimidated if you are weak and indecisive. At some point in your career you will need to draw your line in the sand. If you make your tolerance threshold known, both the managers and players will seldom challenge you beyond this point. You will need to back this up with firm but fair management.

For an umpire it's not about wining, it's not about losing; **it's about staying in control.**

- ◆ **Rules Knowledge** – With a good working knowledge of the rules, you have one less thing to worry about when you step out on the diamond. With the frequent changes to today's rules, you need to continually study your rule and casebook. Talk through unusual plays with your colleagues. Sit the annual rules examination to get a personal benchmark on the extent of your knowledge. Get involved with rules training at your local association. The *Quality* of your rules knowledge will set you apart from others in the game.
- ◆ **Game Knowledge** – Be a student of the game. Study and learn to breathe the culture of the game. Know as much as you can about your clients the managers, coaches and players.

- ◆ **Visual Awareness** – Today we observe the pitch in a 3D environment (some say a 4D environment as time is the fourth dimension). To successfully work in a 3D environment we need to use both eyes. We set-up to one side of the strike zone and then the other, and view the pitch in flight from release and as it passes through a 3D strike zone into the catcher's glove. It is in our interest to be aware that we all have a dominant eye that influences our judgment. To better understand this subject you should read the article on "The Monocular Vision Theory" included in recent Australian and Canadian Plate mechanic presentation.



We can train to strengthen our mental and visual balance. We can do this by regularly undertaking tasks using our other hand. If you are naturally right handed train by using your left hand. You will find this awkward at the start but you will notice a difference as you become more and more ambidextrous.

- ◆ **Clear Mind** – Arrive at the ballpark with a clear mind and ready to do your game. Leave behind any business or personal problems; you will learn that there is little you can do about them while you're umpiring a ballgame. Thinking about them will affect your concentration and distract from the pleasure you will get from umpiring a good game. I know this is easy to say when you come straight from work to umpire evening game. But with a little planning (and not too much caffeine) you will find it will make a difference.
- ◆ **Being Prepared** – Allow yourself time to check to see that you have all the gear you require before you leave for the ballpark. Arrive in good time; you don't need any extra pressure.

Pay attention to your personal hygiene. Be sun wise and apply sunscreen protection for all the time you will be out in the sun. Take as required, regular fluid intake during the game.

- ◆ **Pregame with your Crew** - If you are not familiar with the ballpark, arrive a little earlier and walk the field, noting any problem areas. If possible ask the ground crew to attend to these problems before game time. Get into the habit of having a pregame with your crew. Allow more time if you are working with a new crew. Do a final *Quality* check on your gear before you leave the dressing room (it maybe a long way back from your diamond if you have forgotten something).
- ◆ **Gear Check** – If this is the first game of the season or a tournament, arrive at the diamond earlier so you and your fellow umpires can complete a check of all playing equipment. Beware of *all* your legal obligations and ensure that they are always cared out.
- ◆ **Pregame with both Managers** – This is a must before every game. If need be introduce yourself and your crew. Check the game cards before you hand them back to the manager for their final check. Record any changes. State clearly any ground rules. Take this opportunity to convey to the managers by the way you handle yourself that you are relaxed and in control. Confirm with the managers that they are clear on your instructions and ask if they have any questions. A little extra *Quality* checking at this point could save you unnecessary problems later.

Check to see that your statistician, media personnel or other game related officials are ready for you to start your game on time.

- ◆ **Start on Time** – There is usually no good reason why you can't start your game on time. See that the home team takes the diamond for the warm-up pitches before game time.

So we have concluded with all our sundry duties before we start the game proper.

PLATE UMPIRING OUR BALLGAME STEP BY STEP

- ◆ **Game Statistics** - Lets look quickly at our potential workload as a plate umpire. We can't predict how long a game will be so we need to be prepared to umpire until after the last pitch, whenever that may be. Our workload will vary from game to game, however as a plate umpire we can expect to be required to make a judgment on about 80 to 85 % of the pitches delivered. For an average seven-inning game we can expect some 210 to 230 pitches to be thrown, say around 180 judgment calls. It sounds a lot but we must remember we only have to deal with one pitch at a time (*OPAAT*). We must peak focus and look for a strike on our next pitch to deliver the *Quality* in our judgment that is expected. You will quickly learn that the more strikes you call the less pitches the batter will leave for you to judge.
- ◆ **Warm-up pitches** - There are a number of ways we can use these five pitches to assist our preparation. Some umpires like to take these pitches from behind the catcher so they can try out their stance and adjust to the delivery. This approach can be viewed from an umpire sensibly adjusting for their game to an umpire needing a pitch or two for their confidence. I prefer to position myself just outside the righthand batters box to observe the pitchers timing sequence and track each pitch from release point into the catches glove. This will assist your concentration on tracking the ball and accustom you to speed and movement. Whilst there commence a simple dialogue with the catcher (only if you know the catcher). A quick few words with the catcher will provide you with information that will assist you with handling the tempo of today's game. As the catcher throws the fifth pitch move-in and clean the plate. Clean a strip 75mm (a good brush

width) each side of the plate this will send a subtle message to the players on the width of your strike zone.

- ◆ **Pre-first pitch** - After cleaning the plate move back behind the catcher's box, glance at the statistician and media personnel to confirm that they are ready. Now check all is in order down the third base line and repeat down first base. Make eye contact with your crewmember at first. Allow the batter, pitcher and catcher to get settled before you move into position. Often the batter and catcher will exchange pleasantries as the batter goes about preparing the batters box. Complete a last *Quality* check to see that all the players are ready. Now step into position and focus in on the pitcher and signal playball.

- ◆ **The Stance** – Let us now look at our stance in some detail. Getting your own stance position right is the most critical field mechanic for any umpire. We have been created or have naturally developed into many different shapes and sizes. When we move into our set position we will need to make finer adjustments to suit our own circumstances. There are a number of generic principles that we all must follow. Here is the list.
 - Set-up in the slot between the batter and catcher. We must have an unobstructed line of vision from the pitchers release point (just below the knee) through our strike zone to the catcher's glove. We must be able to see the full profile of home plate. Adjust your position as required but do not set-up too far inside or tucked in behind the catcher.
 - In the set position our eyes should be set at the top of each batter's strike zone with our outer eye lining with the inside edge of home plate. When in position visually in-print this batters strike zone.
 - In the set position we must be comfortable and relaxed, and most of all singular focused. We must be well balanced with our weight slightly forward of our centre of gravity. This will allow you to push off either foot to clear the catcher. Don't balance on the balls of your feet as this adds stress through your calf's to the rest of your body.
 - We should set-up as close to the catcher as practical, providing just sufficient clearance for the catcher to operate without making contact with you.
 - Our back and neck should be as straight as possible with our height adjustment achieved by bending at the knees and lowering our buttock.

These generic principles apply to both main stance philosophies, The Square Stance and The Staggered Stance.



- ◆ **The Square Stance** – With the Square Stance our feet are set in position so that they are perpendicular with the line of the pitch. We are behind and clear of the catcher and will not be impeded by any lateral movement made by the catcher. With square feet it will be easier for you to drop to the set position with a straight back, as our feet are not staggered and twisting our back. However if we are not far enough forward we may become lazy and lean forward resting our arms on our legs. This practice locks an umpire into position and restricts reaction time.



The Stagger Stance – With the Staggered Stance our inside foot (the closest foot to the batter) is placed forward so the heel of this foot lines approximately with the toe of our outside foot. The advantage of the Staggered Stance is that we will be slightly closer to the plate thus enhancing our view of the outside corner of home plate and we will more readily see the ball on the outside enter the catcher's glove. However if you set-up too far inside with this stance you will be disadvantaged trying to clear the catcher turning towards the batter to field a popped fly or passed ball. If we remain alert, track and read the pitch or ball off the bat our reactions should match those of the catcher.

To execute either stance philosophy start by stepping our outside foot forward into position behind the catcher, followed by bringing up our other foot into the slot. You will find that you instinctively know how far your feet need to be apart to be able to drop down and adjust in the set position. You will find that your feet will be relatively in the same position throughout the game.

It is also recommended that you take the time to view a copy of the ASA Umpire mechanics DVD. This presentation will introduce you to the term "GPA" (Great Pelvic Alignment) and reinforces the methodology described in the paragraph above.

- ◆ **Timing** – The timing of when we drop into the set position is very important. We don't want to go down too early nor do we want to be moving down while the pitch is on its way. We take our timing off the pitcher. Just before the pitcher starts his motion to pitch, breathe in relatively deeply and hold your breath as the pitch is delivered. This will help you peak focus and give you extra air to add depth and volume to your verbal call. Keep both eyes on the release point as you are going down.

We naturally blink to wet our eyes every 20 to 30 seconds so blink to wet your eyes before you drop to the set position.

- ◆ **Tracking** – This is the terminology given to continually following the ball on its path from the release point, through the strike zone and into the catcher's glove. Our stance position should allow us to do this with our eyes. There should be no need to move our head (unless the pitch is significantly wayward). A steady head position gives us a constant view of the pitch and our body language is not such that it indicates the pitch is wide. Like a batter the umpire, by tracking the ball from the release point will observe the flight of the pitch and better detect the direction of any movement. Stay down in the set position and call the pitch. Stand-up straight before executing your strike signal.



- ◆ **Strike Zone** – This is the big one in terms of umpire judgment. We have included an article by Merle Butler on Survival Techniques to help you with today's view on the interpretation of the strike zone.

["Do you still enjoy umpiring? Many umpires do. Some officials love every minute on the field. These umpires retain their enthusiasm game after game, year after year and decade after decade. Other arbiters struggle from pitch to pitch, play to play and inning to inning. Why is this so?"](#)

[Why do so many umpires leave the avocation after a year or two? Times have changed. Managers, coaches and players are different from bygone seasons. Today's umpires have more](#)

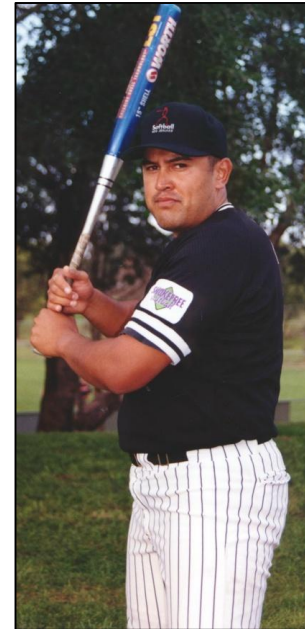
meetings to attend, rules to learn and mechanics to master. Are the demands on the modern umpire so great that many prospective officials drop out?

It's important that you look forward to each ballgame on your schedule. Approach each game as a new challenge. The more you enjoy umpiring, the better you'll become; the better you become, the more you'll enjoy umpiring. Let's examine some survival techniques and mechanics used by veteran officials that elude newer umpires.

Call the Real Strike Zone – To survive in fastpitch, you must “open” your strike zone and be consistent throughout the game. Many beginning umpires call a strike zone that's too narrow. Those umpires believe the strike zone width is the 17 inch white portion of the plate.

For long-term survival, widen your zone. Technically, the black border around the plate is not part of the plate. However, judge any pitch crossing the black as crossing the white. Remember, for a ball to be considered over the plate, only part of the ball needs to pass over the black.

Don't get a reputation as a “postage stamp” umpire who only calls strikes on pitches from above the knees to the batter's belt. Work on keeping the top of the ball at the top of the zone and the bottom of the ball at the bottom of the zone. Consider a pitch a strike until it convinces you it's a ball. By calling an aggressive strike zone, the batters will become aggressive. Pitches will be hit. Plays will be made and your game will flow. You'll find some of those three-hour games can be over in less than an hour and a half.



Your strike zone will be determined according to the level of play. Top-level players hit many home runs that are outside the strike zone. At the upper levels, a pitch outside the zone can be called a ball since you know the batter will be swinging and not taking. In the lower levels, it is necessary to call strikes on pitches close to or outside the zone to get batters swinging. Many hitters in the lower divisions will not swing until a strike is called. Bases on balls slow the game. So, call strikes and get the batters swinging.

Establish your Strike Zone – Establish your strike zone early in the game. Setting an early zone will help the players play the game. The pitchers and catchers will know what you are calling and the batters will know when to swing. What the players really want is for you to call a good, *consistent strike zone and you to control the game.*”

GENERAL PLATE UMPIRING DUTIES

Below we have listed the other duties that are the responsibility of the Plate Umpire. We have not gone into the duties in detail but bullet point them with helpful hints to remind you that the Plate umpires role is more than just calling Strikes.

- ◆ **Fair/foul** – Your head will turn as you *follow the ball off the bat*. Move to and look down the line before you signal a foul ball.
- ◆ **Hit pitch** – If you have the call, kill the play. *Don't guess this call*, your base-umpire can help here.
- ◆ **Catch** – Get out and away from behind home plate to make this call. Get an angle on this play or move to the fence. Watch that the ball is not trapped against the fence. Delay your signal.

- ◆ **Interference/obstruction** – Don't be too hasty with these calls. Your base umpire can and will assist with this call on the bases. These calls are frequently big calls *we must get them right*.
- ◆ **Trailing the runner to first** – Your help will be needed here if we have interference. *It's your call so make it*.
- ◆ **Substitutions** – Check the coach's instructions against the team card. Don't accept instructions that are illegal. *Use a little preventive umpiring here* and help the coach.
- ◆ **Batting out of order** – *This is an appeal play*. You must ignore any comments by an over enthusiastic statistician.
- ◆ **Conferences** – Make sure the coach knows when you have charged a conference.

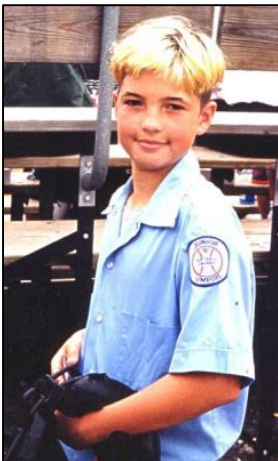


- ◆ **Strike Signal** - Don't move your right-hand upward unless you are going to signal a strike. Your signal must be above your head, strong and sharp reflecting your confidence in the *Quality* of your call.
- ◆ **Check Swing** – *Don't guess a strike*, if in doubt call a ball. If requested to check, check with your open-side base umpire.
- ◆ **Count** – If in doubt verbalize to the batter and catcher before you signal. Provide the visual count as frequently as required and when the pitcher has eye contact with you.
- ◆ **Game control** – This is what umpiring is all about. You will be required to make judgment calls, call strikes and outs, and apply the rules of the game. *Each time we take the diamond let's hope the game is remembered and not just the umpire*.

The *Quality* of our umpiring at home has a bearing on how well our teams perform at National and International level. Make sure you spend the time to be right up with today's game. *Check to see that you are delivering the Quality of performance that is expected of you*.

Acknowledgments

This presentation is an update of the Softball New Zealand 1992 presentation – Working the Dish and 2001 Presentation - The Fastpitch Plate Umpire and includes the latest International Best Practices. Softball New Zealand acknowledges the use, as reference material, published presentations on Plate Mechanics by the Canadian and Australian Softball Associations. The section on “Survival Techniques” was written by Merle Butler, International Softball Federation Director of Umpiring.



Are you tomorrows umpire?

Legion Fields, Cobourg, Ontario, Canada