

In bring this feature articles to you, SNZ would like to acknowledge and thank Merle Butler and our future authors for allowing their articles to be reprinted. Where better to start than at the beginning as we look at Back to Basics and The Plan is Simple.

◆ BACK TO BASICS

When athletes struggle, their problems are often caused by overlooking or taking for granted the basic skills required to perform their jobs. The same problems apply to officials.

Too often veteran ump's get so caught up in the finer points of rules and mechanics that they overlook the basics learned years, even decades ago. The basics are equally critical for rookie officials, who early on form their philosophies and attitudes. Once created, bad habits are difficult to correct.

No matter where you are in your officiating career, following this 30-item list will help maximise your chances of becoming accepted and of being successful.

PREGAME

Before the game day or night, you should:

- 1. Arrive at the game site early.** Arrival time varies by sport and level, but one theme is constant. Never rush to a game, so allow ample time to get there well in advance of game time.
- 2. Park your car in a well-lighted area near the building in which you dress.** Try to leave sufficient room to avoid being boxed in by someone who wants to discuss your officiating ability or lack thereof.
- 3. Hold a thorough pregame conference.** The extra time spent before a game discussing various mechanics, strategies and philosophies is invaluable even if you have worked with your partners before. You will avoid problems during a game by discussing them *before* it.
- 4. Attend to administrative duties early.** If you need to meet with home management, coaches, timers, etc., allow enough time to fix potential problems.
- 5. Dress in proper, clean uniform.** The way you look gives a distinct first (and lasting) impression. Look sharp and you are off on the right foot.
- 6. Examine your equipment.** Make sure you have all your equipment with you and it is in working order before you leave the dressing room. (You should have also checked that you had everything packed before you left for the ballpark)
- 7. Inspect the playing area.** Walk around and look for any potential hazards. Do all necessary equipment checks. Correct **all** problems before you start the game.
- 8. Conduct a brief meeting with team captains or coaches.** Inform them of the "ground" rules. Tell the captains that they are the leaders of the team and may be called on to fulfil that role. Keep it brief.
- 9. Observe players during pregame practice.** Opponents occasionally try to intimidate each other before a game. Be there to nip that in the bud.
- 10. Relax.** If you appear tense and nervous, the players will recognise it.

DURING THE GAME

Once the game begins you should:

- 11. Hustle, but don't over hustle.** Work hard and give maximum effort, but don't over hustle, which can be counterproductive.
- 12. Talk to your crewmates.** Communication is essential for proper game management. Let each other know who's got what, etc.
- 13. Talk to the players as appropriate.** You need to walk that fine line. The goal: To develop a good rapport by being cordial, but not over friendly. Also, use your voice to make players aware that you are in the area and watching.
- 14. Talk to the coaches.** The same fine line must be walked with coaches. Be respectful and don't dodge questions. However, keep conversations brief and to the point. And no glad-handling, which sends the wrong message.

15. **Keep the game moving.** Enforce penalties smoothly, expeditiously and with precision. If you need to confer with a partner, do so, but keep those conferences as brief as possible.
16. **Make clear signals.** There is a direct connection between how you make a call and whether it is likely to be accepted. When signalling, all movements should be crisp and sharp without personal adaptations.
17. **Never give medical aid or advice to a player.** Though the temptation is great to help an injured player, don't. That job belongs to properly trained medical personnel. When a player is hurt, your job is to clear the area around him and summon assistance.
18. **Stop the game if hazardous weather approaches.** It is better to stop a game early than to wait for tragedy to strike. Rule of thumb: If you err, it should always be on the side of safety.
19. **Keep track of major penalties, ejections.** Note the offender, time of the incident, reason for the penalty, etc. Compile that list for all games. It might be helpful if a lawsuit is filed and you are named as a defendant or a witness.
20. **Know where the game manager is located.** In emergencies, he will need to be found quickly. That is impossible if you don't know where he will be during the game. To find out, ask him.

POST GAME

Once your game has ended:

21. **Leave the field together and without delay.** When the game is over, meet your partners and together (safety in numbers) immediately leave the playing surface. There is usually no need to run off the field, but you do want to move with dispatch.
22. **Don't talk with reporters.** In the heat of the moment, the wrong things can be said or you could be misunderstood. Refer all questions to your assigner.
23. **If you wear a whistle around your neck, remove it.** When walking through crowds, it could be hooked accidentally or grabbed intentionally. When the game ends, remove your whistle and place it in your pocket or carry it in your hand.
24. **In most cases, do not comment to fans.** Sometimes, fans will want to talk about your lack of ability. Keep silent and keep moving. However, if a fan is under control and asks a reasonable question, answer it briefly, but be cautious.
25. **Relax.** Take a deep breath and gather your thoughts. No matter what happens, remain calm.
26. **Review the game plays, mechanics.** Talk about any strange plays or other situations. Ask yourself, "Could I have done a better job of handling that case?"
27. **Solicit from partners advice, constructive criticism.** If they are perceptive, they will be able to tell you what you need to work on. If asked, provide them with the same honest assessment.
28. **If appropriate, thank the game manager.** If he took care of you, tell him you appreciate it.
29. **Leave the locker room the same way you found it.** Don't force someone else to clean up your mess. Rookie note: If your partner's shower, you go last. That way, the veterans get all the hot water and you are left with the cold stuff. Be patient, in time you will be the vet.
30. **Walk to your automobiles together.** Safety in numbers, the same as when you exit the playing surface. If problems appear eminent, return to the building and contact the game manager, or, if necessary, local law-enforcement authorities.

◆ THE PLAN IS SIMPLE

When offering basic advice to softball umpires, make sure it is solid advice for anyone who has never heard it before, but make sure it is just as valuable to a veteran who might not be using it consistently. We now look at two basic but very important mechanic principles.

1. **Stop before the play happens.** Your mind "sees" events much like a camera "sees" photographs. An instantaneous image is indelibly imprinted, either on film or in your memory. If you want to accurately interpret the image, it must be clear and sharp.

To accomplish that with a camera, you have to hold the lens steady when you take the picture. The same is true for your mental images: You have to hold the lens (your eyes) still.

Move into a good position to view each play, but learn to stop before the "play" occurs. For a pitch or a force play, that is when the throw arrives; on a tag play, it is when the tag is applied. Lock yourself into a stable stance and observe the action. Pause just a moment to let your brain "develop the picture." Then, after you have looked at the image, announce your decision.

2. Timing. If only one suggestion could be offered, it would be, "Wait." Of the next 100 judgement calls you miss, you will be able to look back and accurately decide at least 90 of the calls were made too quickly.

Behind the plate, let the pitch hit the glove ... *then* decide if it was a strike ... *then* announce your decision.

On the bases, make sure the play is completely over ... wait a moment ... *then* make your call.

On a tag play, there is nothing wrong with asking the fielder to show you the ball if you are ready to rule the runner out. It is a great technique for ensuring that the play is over and that the fielder really has control after the tag. However, there is no need to see the ball if the runner beats the tag. If you ask to see the ball and the fielder has it, *don't* call the runner safe.