

We continue to bring you new and helpful articles that will help make you the best you can be. This article "**Covering the Bases**" written by Joel Balderman is sound basic advice for all umpires. Joel is an ISF certified umpire with the Softball Canada programme. Joel hails from Brantford, Ontario, Canada

### Covering the bases – A how-to guide to improving your skills:

As difficult as this may be to believe, umpires do sometimes make mistakes. I'm not talking about an error in judgment – an out that was called safe, or an incorrect rule interpretation. I'm specifically referring to poor habits and mechanics that will sooner or later get an umpire into trouble. Any base umpire exhibiting some of the flaws discussed here will eventually have problems in a game situation.

Here are some examples of poor base umpiring habits, with some commentary and suggestions that may help to correct the problem before it shows up in a game.

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

Looking at the base and not watching the ball is probably the most commonly-made error by base umpires. If you watch for it, you will be amazed how often you see it happen (or even worse, realize that you yourself are doing it!)

On a ground ball, watch the base umpire. Often you will find that, even before the ball is cleanly fielded, the umpire's head turns to look at a base, waiting for the throw to arrive. There are four potential problems that can arise:

- 1) the infielder bobbles the ball or boots it
- 2) the play goes to another base, which is possible in any situation where we have multiple runners
- 3) the throw is an errant one (Heads up, ump!)
- 4) the fielder ends up making no throw at all

In all of these cases, an umpire who is looking in the wrong direction is in trouble.

The cardinal rules when umpiring on the bases is to **keep the four elements of a play in front of you at all times – the runner, the base, the fielder and the ball.** If even one of these elements is behind you where you can't see it, it can cause difficulty. Sometimes, in order to keep the ball in front of us, we have to employ the "ball-out, umpire-in" principle, coming to the inside of the diamond to have the best possible view of the play as it develops.

To avoid this mistake, base umpires must learn to keep their eyes everlastingly focused on the ball. **Nothing happens without the ball.** Rather than turning to look where we think the play is going, follow the ball right out of the fielder's hand, across the diamond to the base. You'll be a lot less likely to get caught with your pants down.

### Calling plays too quickly:

Think back over the current or past season. How often did you make a two-call? You know, the old Out-Safe. When these happen, you have been the victim of poor timing. You were too quick pulling

the trigger; or, even worse, you had the play decided in your own mind without letting the play happen, and you came to a conclusion before the play was over. 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 never 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 control of the ball is maintained after the tag is applied. Therefore, you must wait before giving the call. Often times close plays end up calling themselves, as the ball comes out or is dropped by a fielder. What's the hurry?

Umpires use several strategies to force themselves to hesitate before making a call. Try one of these:

- 1) Employ the high-set position, with hands at the waist. Watch the play until it's over, keeping the hands where they are until your mind is made up. If you have to, touch your abdomen.
- 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, and then follow with the signal and verbal call. This can be very dramatic when followed by a big sell out call.

Find whatever works for you and use it. Also, learn from your experiences. **On those rare occasions that you pulled the trigger a little too quickly, use some self-talk to give yourself a positive mental kick in the butt: Think: "Slow it down a bit" or "You're getting a little too fast"** Work to make a pause before making the call a habit.

### **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, and calling it from the back side, or being too close to the play, making it difficult to make an accurate call. Some of these problems are the result of lack of hustle. **The umpire may have failed to keep the four elements of the play in front.** Getting too close may be the result of being overanxious.

On any play that requires you to make a call (and not all do, as sometimes the call makes itself), 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 to the play 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 the control of the fielder. On these plays, it is necessary to literally **stick your head into the play**, and get much closer than you would on a force-out. As discussed earlier, timing and delay become very important. A base umpire should be **on the play, not in the play**. Therefore, don't get too close, or on that big out call, you may find yourself literally "punching out the runner".

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

into their on-the-field work will find that their proficiency and confidence on the diamond will improve immensely.