

Again SNZ would like to acknowledge and thank Merle Butler for allowing this article to be reprinted. This article is a must to read by all in softball. Often the uneducated can be heard offering advice like "why don't you get in the right position to make that call". Recent Regional Clinic presentations on "leading edge calling" and "the four essential elements needed to make a call" are again reinforced by this article. Merle's words of advice will help you understand the reasoning behind today mechanics.

### Umpiring myths

***"The closer you are to the play, the better you'll see it!"***

***"If it works for him, it'll work for me!"***

***"If I screwed up, I should change my call!"***

I'm sure you've heard these statements at one time or another. Are they solid fundamentals on which to base your officiating philosophy? Or, are they part of the myths of umpiring that will hinder your career?

Somewhere in history all of these statements were all part of umpire training programs; some veterans still recall similar remarks from their earlier classes. (A few current classes still offer the same outmoded advice) **Times have changed and changes have been made!**

Many guidelines previously considered umpiring mechanics "*gospel*" is no longer taught by modern instructors. Great strides have taken place in medicine, electronics, the auto industry, and many other fields. Yes, improvements have been made in umpiring techniques, as well. The opening statements in this article are all umpiring myths. Let's examine them and some other umpiring fables.

### The closer you are to a play, the better you'll see it.

In the real world of umpiring, the opposite is true. In the old days, fast pitch umpires were taught to stand behind the catcher, fold their hands behind their back, bend over at the waist and peek around the catcher. Some umpires believed this was the position to use so they would receive the ultimate protection from the catcher. The real thinking behind this practice was that the umpire was closer to the pitch crossing the plate and where the catcher received the ball. Fast pitch umpires now line up "*in the slot*" between the catcher and the batter.

**The theory:** your view of the pitch will be similar to what the batter sees. Working the slot opens your sight lines so you can see the entire plate and it keeps you outside the strike zone's perimeter. The better pitchers in fast pitch throw the "*rise ball*." The catcher has to move up to catch this pitch. A plate umpire using the old "*over the top*" position is repeatedly blocked out on these rising pitches because the catcher (or just his glove) must move up to make the catch. With the glove in your face, you can't see if the pitch crossed the plate or how high it was. You'll also have a less than ideal look at the batter. Was the hitter nicked by the pitch? Did he offer at the pitch? Did he check his swing? Did the batted ball deflect off the batter's foot?

From "*the slot*" you can track the ball all the way to the catcher's glove. You'll be better able to see the entire plate. Your look at the "*money pitch*"—on the outside corner—will be improved. The "*over the top*" set-up makes the low pitch impossible and the outside pitch troublesome. Working "*the slot*" is dramatically better in both fast-pitch and slow-pitch.

Now, let's consider "getting close" from the umpire's point of view. Again, almost anything you'd consider close is too close for comfort.

On the bases, you should be at least 6 metres from a force play or play on the batter runner going to first. Compare your position with the lens of a camera. Close-up pictures are great for head-and-shoulder shots. However, to see the whole picture you need an overview. Like a photographer, move back to get a better perspective.

**For force outs** and plays on the batter runner at first, watch; ***(1) the base, (2) the defensive player, (3) the runner, (4) the ball.*** *(the four essential elements)*. If you are too close a high throw will force you to look up; you'll lose sight of three of the four things you want to watch. The same principle applies if the throw is low or wide. Move back for a panoramic view of the play.

**For tag plays** you want to be closer to the play, but not close. Station yourself 3 to 4 metres away and let the play take you to the tag. Try to establish a position with your line of sight at a 90-degree angle to the path of the runner, just short of the base at the point of contact *(leading edge calling)*.

### **If it works for him, it'll work for me**

This is not always the case. Observe Major League Baseball umpires, top amateur officials and veterans from your local association. Take notes and heed their best features. Study their techniques, mannerisms, and conduct. See how they control managers, coaches, and players. Notice how they communicate with fellow officials.

However, the way one umpire handles a situation may not work for another. ***Try to utilise positive traits you see in umpires you admire, but develop your own style. Establish your own identity. Do not try to be someone other than yourself.***

Top umpires have earned the respect of managers, coaches, and players. A method that alleviates a situation for them may exacerbate a situation for you. You will become more comfortable as you gain confidence. Remember, ***“be confident, but not cocky.”*** The fans come to see the players, not the umpires. Develop, expand, and fine tune your style as you gain experience. If you are having difficulties, listen to the suggestions of your training officer, or a respected and trusted friend.

### **If I screwed up, I should change the call.**

Never change a judgement call! Once called, you wouldn't change a strike call. Do you honestly believe your partner (who did not have responsibility for the call and was much further away) saw the play more clearly? Changing a judgement call can lead to chaos as players, coaches, and managers spend the remainder of the game in an all out stampede with requests to reverse decisions.

Amateur umpires change far too many calls. In the lower levels of play, opposing managers rarely dispute the reversal of a call. Some managers in the lower divisions will praise the change even if the decision favours the other team. Do not be duped by this phenomenon. ***Don't believe me? Try reversing one judgement call in a competitive fast-pitch contest. You won't do it again!***

On the rare occasion that you do need help on a play, request assistance from your partner before you render a decision. Talk to your fellow official privately and away from all participants. When you ask for help, gather all pertinent information and then announce your decision. ***Don't “give” the call to your partner!***

At some time you will call a runner out on the bases and an entire frenzied team will jump up and down and vociferously claim the fielder's foot was off the base. This usually occurs when you are making the call from the opposite side of the diamond. It can also happen when you call a play too quickly.

If you are convinced you missed a pulled foot and changing the call will not have ramifications about what did or did not occur after, it is defensible to go for help. This should not occur more than once a season.

**Tip: *Hedge a little when explaining this type of play. Tell the defensive team you are not changing your judgement that the ball beat the runner. Inform them that your partner had additional information—that the fielder's foot was off the bag.***

### **Calling the play as quickly as possible makes me look good.**

As an umpiring neophyte I was taught: ***“Call ‘em quick! Be decisive!”*** The thinking was that a swift signal and quick vocalisation would sell the call and leave no doubt about your decision. Time has proven the quick call is often an incorrect call. Every umpire has called plays too soon. Some umpires do it all the time.

Anyone who claims he has never called a runner out and then safe is either a rookie yet to work his first game or a veteran with an extremely selective memory. Don't rush the judgement! Develop good rhythm and timing. Drop to the ***“down-set”*** position as play unfolds. Position your hands on your thighs just above your knees. This will help to slow your timing. Make sure the fielder is in control of the ball before you make a call. If necessary, ask the fielder to show you the ball.

**See the play: *find the ball: make the call! Remember, it's nothing until you make the call. Try to get it right the first time!***

### **Move with the pitch to sell the call.**

One of the worst habits a plate umpire can develop is leaning toward the pitch to show its location. Last summer I watched a plate umpire who had more gyrations than a traffic cop at a busy intersection. While ducking and dancing around behind the plate he pointed inside on some pitches, motioned outside on others, and apologised for high pitches with a looping swan-like gesture.

Old manuals recommended you use body language to sell your calls on close pitches. Again, mechanics have changed. ***We now know head and body movement during a pitch leads to an inconsistent floating strike zone.*** Don't add to your problems with unnecessary motion behind the plate.

Move to your set position just before the pitcher releases the ball. Keep your head steady; track the pitch with your eyes all the way into the catcher's glove. Don't move! Stay on the pitch! Make your decision! Then, announce your call!

### **Never go for help on a checked swing.**

Old timers with this archaic thinking are still working games. Some veterans will check with the base umpire on a possible swing but insist their partner agree with the original call. We want the best possible chance to get the pitch right. If you call the pitch a ball and the defence asks that you check, do so. Ask your base umpire, ***“Swing?”***

Encourage you partner to respond honestly: *“No,”* or, *“Yes”*

***Don't forget, if you call a strike, it is a strike forever! Do not be coerced by the team at bat and go for help after a strike call.***

**Have a great season and work had at being the best you can be!**