

SNZ would like to acknowledge and thank Merle Butler for allowing this article to be reprinted. The subject of *When and how to get help from your Partner* will help you understand more about getting help at the most appropriate time. Merle's words of advice will give you a wider understanding and how to best handle yourself in these situations.

When and how to get help from your Partner

Let's face it, there are times when every umpire experiences some doubt. He might observe a play and wonder for a moment, "Did the foot hit the bag first, or was the ball in the glove?" "Was that a great diving catch or did the ball scrape the grass?" "Is it chalk dust puffing up down the leftfield line or is it just dirt?"

Those are several instances where an umpire might need assistance from his partner.

Before we go any further, let's set the record straight. There's a big difference between getting help when you really need it and copping out on a tough call. No one wants an umpire to seek help every time there's a close play; virtually everyone wants umpires to make their own decisions. At the same time, we know that strange things happen. Experience tells me those strange things occur more often to umpires who don't know where they belong on the field or don't get there at the right time.

If you move promptly to a good position and establish a proper angle to the play, seldom will you have to ask for help. Yes, there will be times when you're unexpectedly blocked out on a play. However, if you understand where to be and when, those times will be rare. Now, let's examine when and how to get help from your partner.

Deciding when, think about the three plays mentioned at the outset of this column. If one occurs and it's your call, you might be tempted to ask for your partner's help. Will you? Generally, no. Without question, the biggest factor is doubt; perhaps the second biggest factor is the reactions of players and coaches; finally, consider your partner.

If you're absolutely certain that you've seen the whole play and ruled correctly, there is no reason to ask for your partner's opinion. No level of pressure or protest from anyone should tempt you to waver. Stand by your decision. Show confidence, remain calm. Do what you can to diffuse a difficult situation, but if you're certain of your call, it's final.

Next is the most difficult: You've seen the play and made the call, but in your heart you're either not sure or you know you're wrong. One of two things will happen: The decision will be accepted or one team will argue.

There's no real challenge if no one complains about your decisions. Usually you were right, even if it was more luck than good technique. If your call draws an angry reaction and a visit from a manager, your choices are simple: Stand by your call or, **if your partner was in a position to see the play**, ask for his help. (More on that in a moment).

Finally, there are plays every season when you just don't get good looks. Whatever the reason (a fielder steps in your path at a key moment, the angle of the play changes due to a bad throw or an unusual slide, etc), you just don't see the entire play. Again, you have two choices: If your partner was in a position to see the play, get his help **before you make any call**. If you can't reasonably expect help from your partner, call the play to the best of your ability.

As we discuss the "how to" aspect of getting help, we'll work backward through those three deciding factors.

Screened out, Let's focus on a "routine" play: Bases empty, ground ball to shortstop. As the base umpire, you move promptly to establish a 90-degree angle to the play. As the shortstop releases his throw, you've got a great look at first base, the fielder's foot, and B1 (batter-runner) approaching. Then the nightmare

begins. The throw is wide. You don't adjust quickly enough. The first baseman stretches directly toward you for a throw to the outfield side of the base. Alternatively, he reaches toward home and **maybe** gets the ball while he's still touching the bag. Alternatively, he **maybe** nicks B1 with a swipe tag that's hidden from your view by the first baseman's body. Result: Choose your poison.

You know what's going to happen. B1 will flash past the base and try to act as if he belongs at first. The first-base coach is waving "safe", the first baseman is tossing the ball around the infield, and anyone with any doubt about the play is looking at you, waiting for a firm, confident decision. You'd better give them....what?

That situation can be solved. There's nothing else going on; your partner should be trailing the play and watching it. **Your best option:** Make some kind of verbal announcement, and then ask your partner a question. For example: **"Time! The throw pulled him off the bag. Bill, did you see a tag?"**

Notice the elements compressed into **short** sentences. First, you call time to ensure nothing else will complicate the matter. Next you announce what you did see. Finally, you ask your partner about his view of the play, what he saw; you **don't** ask him if B1 was safe or was out.

He should answer the question you ask: He either saw a tag or he didn't. If he saw a tag (before B1 reached first), you respond by ringing up the out; any other answer leads you to a "safe" call. It's a fundamental: A runner is safe until an umpire sees a play that makes the runner out.

Quickly now, here's another version of the verbal announcement: **"Time. The throw beat him. Bill, was he on the base?"** Anyone paying attention will know who **"he"** and **"him"** are; it's the answer that's important.

You can modify that technique to fit your needs on force and tag plays anywhere in the infield if you're confident that your partner is in a position to offer aid. Remember, by asking for his help you're admitting you did not see enough to call the runner out; if your partner can't help, your only choice is to rule "safe."

Finally, please don't commit the **"rookie blunder"** of making a call, then asking for help. If you need help, get it first and then announce decision.

Simply uncertain. I don't want to confuse you with these next paragraphs. Getting help **before** making a call is the best method when you're screened. However, if you're in a bind and just not certain your call is correct (or if you know you're wrong); I believe you have an obligation to discuss the play with your partner. Here, though, the technique is quite different.

Game situation: R1 on first, R2 on second when B1 hits safely to the outfield. The throw goes home but you realise R2 will score easily. As the base umpire, you're drifting toward third, expecting a cut-off and a relay. Instead, the relay throw goes to second, where B1 slides in on a close play. All you see is the shortstop with the ball, diving to reach B1.

"He's out!" you call and the first base coach levitates 10 to 12 feet (or, **"Safe!"** you call and the second baseman breaks the state long-jump record, headed directly toward you). **"Hummm,"** you think to yourself, **"I wonder if I got that right?"**

Whichever team rep is headed your way, you'll do your best to listen to a complaint and remain calm. Use those moments to decide whether your partner should have been in a position to see the play. If that team rep asks; and you believe you might be able to get help from your partner, agree to ask for help, but set some conditions.

For example: *"Coach, you've asked and I'm willing to check with my partner on this play. Here's what will happen. My partner and I will talk privately about what happened. Then I'm going to announce the decision. If my call stands, you have to agree that this discussion is over and you're not going to start a new one. All right?"*

Again, several elements are compressed into a few words. You've been polite; you're going to do as the coach requested, but only if he promises to accept the call even if it does not change. If he won't agree with that condition, you won't ask for help.

Next, talk alone and quietly with your partner. Make sure no players or coaches are within earshot. Ask for his honest opinion of what happened and how certain he is of what he saw. Then, use your own judgment to decide whether to change your call.

Absolutely certain. If you see a play clearly and are sure of your decision, **do not** let a player or coach coerce you into asking for help. Listen to his complaint, remain calm, but explain that you had a good angle, were in position and there is no doubt in your mind. If you waver, the coaches will want you to check virtually every close play. Your credibility, if ever established, will disappear.

While it's limited almost exclusively to fast-pitch games, let's review the method for handling check swings.

You're behind the plate and the pitcher fires a big-time riser; B1 leans in and starts the bat forward, but the catcher straightens up to reach the ball and your view of the pitch is partially blocked. Surprise! You have three options:

1. If you see enough to rule a strike, call it without hesitation.
2. If you feel the batter may have offered but you don't really know, ask your partner.
3. If you feel there was no swing, call a ball but don't be surprised if the catcher asks you to get help.

Any time you call a ball and are asked to check, check. They see it on TV; they see it all the time; you'll create more problems by resisting than by complying. Whether it's your idea or the fielding team's, step out, get your partner's attention and ask, **"SWING"** He should give you an honest answer. If he says **"NO"** your call stands; if he says **"YES"** it's a strike, and so be it. Treat the situation as routine and there will be few problems.

I'm sure we can all recall situations when Merle advice would have come in handy. Review those situations in your mind and having read Merle's advice, consider how you might have handled the situation better.