

Tips for the Amateur Umpire

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During the course of many years between the lines, I've seen actions by my partners that either have or will get them into trouble, or just plain look bad. Some of these put undue responsibility on a partner to cover a play errantly missed through a lapse in proper mechanics, or put a partner in the position of having to bail them out when avoidable problems cause trouble. Others, as I stated, just unmistakably look awful. □ Subsequently, I have put together these tips, in no particular order, listing the things I have seen my partners do that they should not be doing, or things they should do, but are not.

Arrive on time and be prepared. Nothing is more aggravating than a partner that arrives two minutes before game time already dressed for the bases. In general, one should arrive a minimum of 15 minutes before game time. Whether or not your position has been assigned, you should always be prepared to work the plate. You should be on the field for ground rules and ready to go 5 minutes before the scheduled start. And, no, you can't borrow my cup.

Always have a pre-game with your partner. This is a great routine to establish. It is an absolute MUST when you are working with an unfamiliar partner. I must admit that I am sometimes lax in this area when I am working with a familiar partner, but it should always be done. It gets you on the same page and helps to get the crew focused on the coming contest. Assumes that both umpires have arrived on time (see above). If one partner has arrived late, have a brief conference between innings.

Look sharp and dress the part. We've all heard that you are judged before you make your first call. This is VERY true. Spend some of your fee and replace those pants and shirts that have been around for the last ten years. And wash your uniform EVERY TIME it gets dirty and keep your shoes polished. Perception is reality.

ALWAYS put the ball back into play. With runners on base, each occasion that time is given or a ball is fouled, the ball MUST be pointed back into play. This may or may not be accompanied by the verbal "PLAY" mechanic. The batter must be in the box and the pitcher on the rubber with the ball. I've had numerous pick-off attempts as the base umpire, I had no idea if the ball was live or not. Not a good situation. Also, a sharp pitcher will see you point the ball into play and immediately throw to first hoping to catch the runner napping. If you've made the ball live, there is no question that you have a valid play.

Get your butt out from behind the dish. Unless a play at the plate is imminent or a time play is possible, there is nothing for you to do staying behind home plate. This means on EVERY PLAY. Get down the first base line on a grounder, down towards third on a 1st to 3rd situation or follow the ball if hit into the outfield. Do you think that players and coaches don't notice that you're lazy? Nothing makes you look worse than trying to make a call at third from 5 feet in front of the plate because you didn't think the situation would allow the runner from first to advance. If the circumstances allow, get down the base line and help your partner out with half of a run-down in progress. This is one of the things that will be noticed, which leads me to....

Always hustle. It distinguishes you from the poor or average umpire.

ALWAYS STAY FOCUSED on the game. If you want to count the spectators or admire the scenery, do it between innings. Your lack of focus is noticed, and sooner or later you will get a late start or miss a play. This lapse can come up and bite you when you least expect it and in a matter of seconds.

As the base umpire, NEVER leave the infield with runners on base while the ball is live. Your primary responsibility is the base runners. If you go out there, you will never get back in time, and your partner cannot handle multiple base runners. Never go out any farther than the edge of the infield grass.

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As the base umpire with no one on base, only leave the infield on fair/foul calls down the first base line or possible trouble balls from the right fielder towards the foul line.

Everything else is the plate umpires' responsibility. If the batter-runner continues to second, you will in no way be able to get back into position and the plate umpire may not notice that you can't cover the play, since he should be watching the ball, not you. Come into the infield, pivot and glance over at the touch at first while following the ball. If you are leaving the infield, let your partner know by saying "I'm going" or "I'm going out".

If you are the base umpire, stop making out calls on balls hit to left or center field with no one on base. It's the plate umpires' call. And you never want an even number of umpires making a call.

Be humble. Never try to "run" the game or coach a player. It's not your job at any level and real players will resent it. You will also come off as an egotistical know-it-all, and no one wants to work with an egotistical know-it-all or have one working his or her game.

Be aware. That the strict and literal interpretation of the rulebook is not always the way it is done. This comes through experience. Remember the level of the game you are working. See above.

Use, give and respond to signals with your partner. Not just in an infield fly situation. It is very important that you and your partner are on the same page, and this is a reminder of the current game situation for the crew. No one is above this. The signals should be repeated each time the situation changes, even if just one runner replaces another on a base. Sadly, I am often giving signals to myself on the field. They are not required when there are no runners on base. Learn what a time play is, when it applies and the appropriate signal.

NEVER turn your head away from the field when calling balls and strikes. This may be difficult to overcome, but sooner or later you will miss something. Slick strike-three mechanics may look brilliant, but there is no reason to turn your head or turn your back toward the field.

PLEASE stop coming in and talking to the plate umpire between every half-inning. Get out to short right field where you belong. If you have something to discuss relevant to the game, fine, but we can shoot the breeze after the game. Circumstances permitting, I do like to talk to my partner once or twice during the game just to see what's up, but not every half-inning. Never come in after a controversial call has been made (especially to explain it).

Watch EVERY touch of the bases by the runners. This means EVERY touch of 1st and 2nd as the base umpire and EVERY touch of 3rd and home as the plate umpire. I have seen umpires asked for an appeal on a runner leaving early, and I KNOW they have no clue. Missed bases and runners leaving early do happen and you MUST see it. Never call a runner out unless you are SURE a base was missed or he left early.

Don't say, "Strike three-you're out", "Ball four-take your base" or point the batter-runner down to first. "Strike three" and "Ball" will do. A dropped third strike may not be an out. The batter should know the count and generally knows the location of first base. Also, after ball four, pointing the runner to first can easily be interpreted as a called strike.

Appeal to the base umpire on a check swing by pointing with your left hand. Ask him "Did he go?" or "Steve, did he go?" This is another tough one to overcome. Being right-handed, it took me quite a while to break the habit, but once I did, I never went back to the right hand. Can easily be interpreted as a called strike.

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Don't indicate pitch location on called balls. I see umpires all the time that are constantly verbalizing or gesturing the pitch location. It's not needed, unprofessional and you're asking for trouble.

Don't call "time" until the base runners touch up. The play is not over until the runners touch their respective bases on an award. Anything could happen.

Don't call "time" every time a defensive player asks for it. It's not needed, makes a long game longer and you are taking a potential advantage away from the offense. A shortstop should be able to throw the ball back to the pitcher from the infield dirt area.

Never call "time" to get yourself back into position. I've seen umpires that call "time" in every instance that they have to return from the third base area or other positions on the infield. Again, the game is held up for no good reason. The ball could get loose. You've got a partner out there.

Don't hold onto the game ball at the mound and wait for the pitcher to arrive. You're not a porter. It's not your job and it looks silly. Toss the ball to the mound and either gets out to short right field or down the base line. Also, staying there will make you a target for disgruntled players as they take the field.

Slow down your timing!! Nothing is more embarrassing than seeing a base umpire make an out call just as the ball squirts loose, or his right arm coming up just before calling a runner safe. Also, this virtually guarantees an argument. Behind the plate, the ball should hit the catcher's glove, a second or so should elapse and then you should make your call. This gives you the opportunity to really see the pitch.

Work in the slot and keep your chin level with the top of the catcher's head. The plate umpire should see the ball all the way into the catcher's glove. If you are directly behind the catcher or your head is at his head level, there is NO WAY you can see the ball into the glove. Most umpires that work this way cannot properly observe the low pitch and hence many pitches that are far below the strike zone are called strikes. Usually indicates a poor or untrained umpire. Or both.

Keep your head motionless. You must "lock in" your head position. Attempting to accurately call balls and strikes while your head, and hence the strike zone, is moving is virtually impossible. Coaches and players DO notice this. You can also be exposing yourself to being hit in an unprotected area. This can also be a difficult bad habit to break but it MUST be corrected.

Stop constantly looking at your ball/strike indicator. This also looks bad, is not necessary and makes you look like your memory span is less than 15 seconds.

NEVER make a call on the run. Always stop moving before making ANY call. You must have a fixed reference point in order to properly call a play. Remember, angle is MUCH more important than distance. Get the proper angle, get as close as you reasonably can and STOP! Get set and make the right call.

Don't wear a watch. Keep it in your pocket if there is a valid reason for you to have one on your person at all.

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A foul ball is never a foul tip and a foul tip is never a foul ball. A foul ball is dead, a foul tip is live. Repeat after me...a foul ball is dead, a foul tip is live....a foul ball is dead, a foul tip is live...

Don't get talked into asking for help on your call after it has been made. There are times when you may want to ask your partners' take on a call after the fact, but only on rare occasions.... and never let it appear that one side talked you into it. You are asking for WW III from the perspective of one side or the other. If you are unsure of a tag or touch due to the limitations of the two-man system, ask BEFORE you make the call. If there is a need to confer with your partner, do so in private.

Never put your hands in your pockets. Also, don't stand there with your arms crossed. Both are examples of bad body language. Get a pair of gloves if your hands are cold and get into a set position.

ALWAYS confer with your partner(s) before accepting a protest. An umpire's worst nightmare is to be overturned on an appeal after the game. ALWAYS discuss it with your partner(s). The primary goal is to GET THE CALL RIGHT! Even if it means over turning your ruling yourself.

DO NOT become best buddies with managers, coaches or players. This has enormous potential perceptual ramifications. Be pleasant and friendly but not overly familiar. First names are fine. Strangers, friends, or enemies stay objective and apply the rules correctly.

ALWAYS enter and leave the field with your partner(s). You are a team, and should always appear that way. Also, there is strength in numbers.

Don't hold your mask by the strap, and ALWAYS remove it with your left hand. Walking around while your mask swings from the strap is another bad and silly-looking habit that some umpires have. Hold your mask firmly by the lower left side. You need your right hand to make calls, and switching hands is unnecessary and also doesn't look good. And practice taking off your mask without pulling your cap off with it. Make certain that your cap is not too loose or your mask is not too tight.

Always be careful what you say. You never know who is listening (simply a word to the wise). Stories abound dealing with umpire stupidity in this area.

Read the appropriate rulebooks regularly. No one is so good that they can't use a regular refresher.

We hope this list helps the coaching, umpiring, and our BVPB Family improve their knowledge of the game. Original author unknown and revised by Wade Lavery for BVPB use.