

# THE FASTPITCH PLATE UMPIRE

## INTRODUCTION

*There are many things that contribute to the making of a competent and complete umpire. There is no one thing more important than learning the culture of Plate Umpiring. It will take you time and many top class performances to earn and develop respect and to maintain the focus and attention on the players. The Crew Chief leads the umpiring team and is the central point of communication with managers, players, statisticians and your fellow crew members.*

*Today's officials above all else are expected to get the call right. We have seen the introduction of television replays to confirm the accuracy of calls in other sports. In softball we rely solely on the **Quality** of an umpire's judgment to deliver this accuracy and client satisfaction. Plate umpiring is physically and mentally demanding. The Plate Umpire needs to have game knowledge, presence, and composure and be a clear and confident communicator.*

*To develop the skills you will require "to be the very best you can be" at Plate Umpiring will take you time. We hope this article, along with your field training and observations of other umpires in action, will assist you to become a more confident umpire tomorrow.*

## BEFORE THE FIRST PITCH

Let's start by looking at what we can do to add **Quality** to our game before the first pitch.



### Mental Preparation

**Self Confidence** – In everyday life we are faced with new challenges, softball is no different. It is essential for you to develop and outwardly convey your self-confidence in your own ability and the **Quality** of your judgment. Managers, players, spectators, the media and your fellow Blues expect you to be able to do your job. You will feel your confidence grow as you gain more experience on and off the diamond. Just a word of caution, don't become too over confident as this could affect your concentration and ability to listen.

Plate Umpiring will confront you with personal challenges. Remember you will never make it as an umpire unless you can work the plate with confidence.

**Physical and Personal Presentation** – The demands of umpiring require all umpires to pay attention to their general physical condition. Umpires that keep themselves in shape look the part on the diamond alongside today's athletes. It is well known that good physical preparation helps mental sharpness.

Attention should be given to your protective equipment. It must fit you comfortably and be of good quality. Put trust in your equipment, this will boost your confidence.

**Mental Toughness** – A game of softball can be recreational or highly competitive. The rules of the game are there to ensure fairness and ultimately find a winner. One very competitive manager has told me on more than one occasion that they would do anything to win. Everything from the **Quality** of your judgment to your pedigree may be questioned. You will be intimidated if you are weak and indecisive. At some point in your career you will need to draw your line in the sand. If you make your tolerance threshold known, both the managers and players will seldom challenge you beyond this point. You will need to back this up with firm but fair management. For an umpire it's not about wining, it's not about losing; **it's about staying in control.**

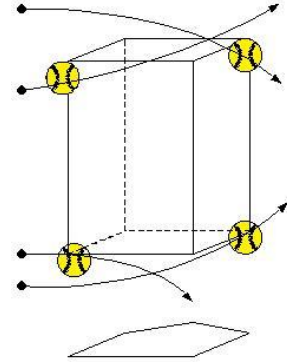
**Rules Knowledge** – With a good working knowledge of the rules, you have one less thing to worry about when you step out on the diamond. With the frequent changes to today's rules, you need to continually study your rule and casebook. Talk through unusual plays with your colleagues. Sit the annual rules examination to get a personal benchmark on the extent

of your knowledge. Get involved with rules training at your local association. The **Quality** of your rules knowledge will set you apart from others in the game.

**Game Knowledge** – Be a student of the game. Study and learn to breathe the culture of the game. Know and understand as much as you can about the roles of the managers, coaches and players.

**Visual Awareness** – Today we observe the pitch in a 3D environment (some say a 4D environment as time is the fourth dimension).

To successfully work in a 3D environment we need to use both eyes. We set-up to one side of the strike zone and then the other, and view the pitch in flight from release and as it passes through a 3D strike zone into the catcher's glove.



**Clear Mind** – Arrive at the ballpark with a clear mind and ready to do your game. Leave behind any business or personal problems; you will learn that there is little you can do about them while you're umpiring a ballgame. Thinking about them will affect your concentration and distract from the pleasure you will get from umpiring a good game

**Being Prepared** – Allow yourself time to check to see that you have all your gear before you leave for the ballpark. Arrive in good time; you don't need any extra pressure. Hydrate before and during the game.

**Pregame with your Crew** - If you are not familiar with the ballpark, arrive a little earlier and walk the field, noting any problem areas. Get into the habit of having a pregame with your crew. Allow more time if you are working with a new crew. Do a final **Quality** check on your gear before you leave the dressing room.

**Gear Check** – If this is the first game of the season or a tournament, arrive at the diamond early so you and your fellow umpires can complete a check of all playing equipment. Be aware of all your legal obligations and ensure that they are always carried out.

**Pregame with both Managers** – This is a must before every game. If need be introduce yourself and your crew. State clearly any ground rules. Take this opportunity to convey to the managers by the way you handle yourself that you are relaxed and in control. If you are umpiring at a tournament check to see that your statistician has arrived and introduce yourself, be ready to start the game on time.

## PLATE UMPIRING OUR BALLGAME STEP BY STEP

**Game Statistics** - Lets look quickly at our potential workload as a plate umpire. We cannot predict how long the game will go for and our workload will vary from game to game.

For an average seven-inning game we can expect some 210 to 230 pitches to be thrown. This sounds a lot but we must remember we only have to deal with one pitch at a time. We must peak focus and look for a strike on our next pitch to deliver the **Quality** in our judgment that is expected. You will quickly learn that the more strikes you call the less pitches the batter will leave for you to judge.

**Warm-up pitches** - Most umpires like to take these pitches from behind the catcher so they can try out their stance and adjust to the delivery. An alternative is to position yourself just outside the right-hand batter's box. Either position will allow you to observe the pitcher's timing sequence and track each pitch from release point into the catches glove. This will assist your concentration on tracking the ball and accustom you to speed and movement. Whilst there, commence a simple dialogue



with the catcher. A quick few words with the catcher will provide you with information that will assist you with handling the tempo of today's game. After the catcher throws the fifth pitch over to second base move-in and clean the plate.

**The Stance** – Let us now look at our stance in some detail. Getting your own stance position right is the most critical field mechanic for any umpire. We have been created or have naturally developed into many different shapes and sizes. When we move into our set position we will need to make finer adjustments to suit our own circumstances. There are a number of generic principles that we all must follow.

- Set-up in the slot between the batter and catcher. We must have an unobstructed line of vision from the pitchers release point through our strike zone to the catcher's glove. We must be able to see the full profile of home plate. Adjust your position as required but do not set-up too far inside or tucked in behind the catcher.
- In the set position our eyes should be set at the top of each batter's strike zone with our eyes lining with the inside edge of home plate. When in position visualise this as the batters strike zone.
- In the set position we must be comfortable and relaxed, and most of all singular focused. We must be well balanced with our weight slightly forward of our centre of gravity. This will allow you to push off either foot to clear the catcher. We should set-up as close to the catcher as practical, providing just sufficient clearance for the catcher to operate without making contact with you.
- Our back and neck should be as straight as possible with our height adjustment achieved by bending at the knees and lowering our buttock. An angle of the hips and shoulders approximately 15 degrees to the pitcher – with the navel (belly button) pointing between the centre of the front of home plate and no further than outside front corner of the plate should be used, and the feet should follow the body's natural stance.
- The advantage of the Staggered Stance is that we will be slightly closer to the plate thus enhancing our view of the outside corner of home plate and we will more readily see the ball on the outside enter the catcher's glove.

**Timing** – The timing of when we drop into the set position is very important. We don't want to go down too early nor do we want to be moving down while the pitch is on its way. We take our timing off the pitcher. As the pitcher starts his motion to pitch, drop to the top of the zone with your eyes. Be sure to keep both eyes on the release point as you are going down to the set position.

**Tracking** – This is the terminology given to continually following the ball on its path from the release point, through the strike zone and into the catcher's glove. Our stance position should allow us to do this with our eyes. There should be no need to move our head on inside or pitches at the top of the zone, taking our nose to the flight of the ball on low or outside pitches into the catcher's glove helps to call an aggressive zone. A steady head position gives us a constant view of the pitch.

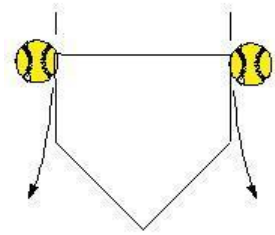
Like a batter, the umpire, by tracking the ball from the release point will observe the flight of the pitch and better detect the direction of any movement. Stay down in the set position and verbally call the pitch. On a strike stand up straight immediately after the verbal before executing your strike signal.

**Strike Zone** – This is the big one in terms of umpire judgment. We have included an article by Merle Butler on Survival Techniques to help you with today's view on the interpretation of the strike zone.

*“Do you still enjoy umpiring? Many umpires do. Some officials love every minute on the field. These umpires retain their enthusiasm game after game, year after year and decade after decade. Other arbiters struggle from pitch to pitch, play to play and inning to inning. Why is this so?”*

*It's important that you look forward to each ballgame on your schedule. Approach each game as a new challenge. The more you enjoy umpiring, the better you'll become; the better you become, the more you'll enjoy umpiring. Let's examine some survival techniques and mechanics used by veteran officials that elude newer umpires.*

**Call the Real Strike Zone** – To survive in fastpitch, you must “open” your strike zone and be consistent throughout the game. Many beginning umpires call a strike zone that's too low and narrow. Those umpires believe the strike zone width is the 17 inch (43.2 cm) white portion of the plate. In fact the zone is much wider. Any part of the ball can pass over any part of the plate and be a strike. The ball is 4 inches wide, so a ball either side of home plate, plus the 17 inches means the zone is actually 25 inches wide (63.5 cm).



*For long-term survival, widen your zone. Judge any pitch passing down the edge of the plate as crossing the white.*

*Don't get a reputation as a “postage stamp” umpire who only calls strikes on pitches from above the knees to the batter's belt. Work on keeping the top of the ball at the top of the zone and the bottom of the ball at the bottom of the zone. Consider a pitch a strike until it convinces you it's a ball, marginal pitches should be called a strike.*

*By calling an aggressive strike zone, the batters will become aggressive. Pitches will be hit. Plays will be made and your game will flow. You'll find some of those three hour games can be over in less than an hour and a half.*

*Your strike zone will be determined according to the level of play. Top-level players hit many home runs that are outside the strike zone.*

*In the lower levels, it is necessary to call strikes on pitches close to the zone to get batters swinging. Many hitters in the lower divisions will not swing until a strike is called.*

*Bases on balls not only lowers participants and spectators interest it also slows the game. So, call strikes and get the batters swinging.*

**Establish your Strike Zone** – Establish your strike zone early in the game. Setting an early zone will help the players play the game. The pitchers and catchers will know what you are calling and the batters will know when to swing. What the players really want is for you to call a good, **consistent strike zone and you to control the game.**”

**Put your last call behind you** – A focused umpire will make each call as it comes, they will have conviction. With each call you make ensure good positioning, because timing is paramount. There is no rush to call outs or safes, the call should be based on all the 4 essential inputs you observed just prior to the play or pitch, without bias (the runner, the fielder, the base/tag and the ball). There will be times on reflection you may have made a different call, however it is of utmost importance you get on with the game with a clear mind. You often cannot change what you have called, and while playing the situation over and over in your head you may find something else happens in the game requiring your attention. Reinforce in your mind that your call was unbiased and without favour and this will help you to mentally deal with it.

The **Quality** of our umpiring at home has a bearing on how well our teams perform at National and International level. Make sure you spend the time to be right up with today's game.

**Check to see that you are delivering the Quality of performance that is expected of you.**

This presentation has been edited by the NUC – The original titled “Working the Dish” by Wayne Saunders Regional UIC and includes the latest International Best Practices. BNOL acknowledges the use, as reference material, including published presentations on Plate Mechanics by the Canadian Softball Associations. The section on “Survival Techniques” was written by the late Merle Butler, Past International Softball Federation Director of Umpiring.