



Francisco Villegas, Renton, Wash., calls a runner out on a tag play at the plate. Timing is important on any tag play. Make sure the ball is secured by the fielder before making the out call.

BAG TAGS

Get an Angle, Make the Necessary Adjustment

By Jerry Fick

Many people think that calling a tag play is easy. All you have to worry about is out or safe — there are only two choices. But umpires want to establish a high degree of accuracy. Actually there are several key items that umpires can work on to improve that part of their game.

First, whenever possible keep all

elements of the play in front of you. By properly using the inside-outside theory, an umpire can maximize his or her ability to do that and should rarely have a situation where the ball, the base, the fielder and the runner are not all in his or her line of sight.

With an initial position outside the baseline, softball umpires have an advantage over baseball umpires

on certain types of tag plays, such as steals and pickoffs. That is beneficial not only in making the safe/out call but in making a judgment on potential obstruction violations. The most common situation where the ball might be coming from behind

MY REFEREE **Angles and Distance**

For more on this subject, use the advanced search option on MyReferee via www.referee.com

an umpire is after a short overthrow where the ball is thrown from the opposite direction than originally expected.

In establishing an initial position on a tag play, try to get a 90-degree angle to the path of the runner and observe the leading edge of the base (the side of the base that the runner is approaching). Obtain a position just short of the base the runner approaches, about 10 to 12 feet from the play. You can get closer to a tag play than a force play because you have a narrower focus directly on the base, the tag and the sliding runner without having to get the wide view of a wild throw or pulled foot. Some umpires like to get a bit closer than that, but in doing so can get so close that a runner's hook slide forces movement to take away the proper angle. Those umpires can also hamper their ability to make a final adjustment prior to viewing the play.

Secondary movement. When necessary, make a slight adjustment called "secondary movement" to get the best possible view of the play. That is probably the most difficult part of developing good mechanics for a tag play. The secondary movement not only enhances your angle, but it also ensures that you get an unobstructed view of the play. Many throws are somewhat off-line and require an adjustment by the covering fielder, and dictate some adjustment by the sliding runner. When you ignore that aspect, it's easy to lose your view of the play and it is no surprise that the call accuracy is greatly diminished.

Developing secondary movement comes through experience, but umpires can also practice those skills. That is important as that aspect often is overlooked in teaching umpires to handle those plays. For example, a runner is approaching second base and sees that the throw from the outfield is headed to the outside or outfield side of the bag. The fielder must make some position adjustment to catch the ball and the runner likely will slide toward the inside of the bag. In most cases that will mean that an umpire moving to his or her left will pick up a better angle on

the tag by the fielder and the runner touching the base.

Umpires should strive to be stationary when observing plays and often will have an opportunity to reset when making a secondary movement because it does not entail moving a great distance. However, even if you are still moving slightly, you are better off than being blocked from seeing the play.

Timing. After reading the play and digesting what has been seen, the umpire is almost, but not quite, ready to make the call. Timing is important in all umpiring but even more so in calling a tag play. Those are the plays in which the ball most frequently comes loose, even momentarily, and a good umpire will keep with the play to be sure not only of what he or she has seen but that the ball is securely held. Take the extra split-second, keeping your nose on the play before making the call.

Only rarely will it be necessary to sell a call when the ball comes loose, but do so if it's quickly recovered and the action was not obvious to others. If necessary, use the left hand as an indicator and point to where the ball came out. In other situations use a sell when needed and step into the play. That creates the perception that you were closer to the play than you actually were, but clearly had a good look at the entire play.

Remember that whether working alone or in the two- or three-umpire system, it can be a challenge to obtain an ideal position on every tag play. There are situations in which you have to deal with multiple plays, or possible plays, as throws are cut off and directed elsewhere around the diamond. Always know the location of the ball and let it take you to the play and the best possible position, knowing that your angle and distance will not always be perfect. By following those guidelines umpires should be able to improve their accuracy on tag plays.

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QUICKTIP

When introducing yourself to coaches and players during the pregame conference, or with the game administrator upon arrival, **say your name clearly with authority and conviction while giving them a firm handshake.** Without being too obvious, that gesture helps to set the tone for the rest of the game by giving them an indication of who is in charge.



DID YOU KNOW?

For a period in the 1800s the first-base foul line ran directly through the middle of the base. Also, the plate was called the "dish" because it was symmetrically circular and the pitcher's area was defined as the "box." Pitchers were permitted to deliver the ball from the box with a running start.

TOOLS

Guardian Umpire Chest Protector

The lightweight Wilson Guardian Chest Protector has a soft-shell design that forms to your body. The two-pound chest protector, ideal for fast-pitch softball, has triple-layer protection and is designed to keep you cool on hot summer days with spacer mesh lining for breathability. It is treated with antimicrobial treatment to keep it fresh. It costs \$79.99 and is available at ump-attire.com and other retail outlets.



TEST YOURSELF

Each of the following includes a situation and possible answer(s). Decide which are correct for ASA, NFHS, NCAA or USSSA rules and which might vary. **Solutions: p. 81.**

- Fast pitch. R2 occupies second base when B1 smashes a one-hopper off F1's right leg as the ball directly deflects toward F6 in the baseline between second and third. In running for third, R2 tries but is unable to avoid F6 who is playing the deflected ball and inadvertently knocks her to the ground. R2 reaches third base safely and B1 easily makes first base.
 - R2 is out because the batted ball was deflected off F1.
 - The ball is dead.
 - Both R2 and B1 are out because F6 was fielding the ball in the baseline.
 - R2 is not out since her contact with F6 was not intentional.
 - The ball is delayed-dead until all playing action ceases.
 - The ball remains live.
- It is an infield fly when:
 - With two outs and runners on first and second, B1 hits a fly ball in the infield that can be caught by an infielder with ordinary effort.
 - A properly declared infield fly bounces untouched on fair ground and settles in foul territory before touching first or third base.
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 - An infielder intentionally drops a properly declared infield fly that results in two baserunners being tagged out.
 - R2 from second base interferes with F6 and prevents her from catching the ball.
- Fast pitch. B1 swings and hits a ball straight down on home plate in fair territory. The ball rebounds straight up and again strikes B1's bat in fair territory. At the time of the second contact B1 has both feet in the batter's box.
 - B1 is out for again hitting a fair ball in fair territory.
 - The ball is dead.
 - That is a foul ball.
- Fast pitch. A blocked ball occurs when:
 - A live ball touches non-game personnel.
 - A live ball touches loose equipment that's not part of the game.
 - A live ball touches a tree limb hanging over the playing field.
 - A live ball touches an umpire.

Two Umpires: Pickoff Throw to First

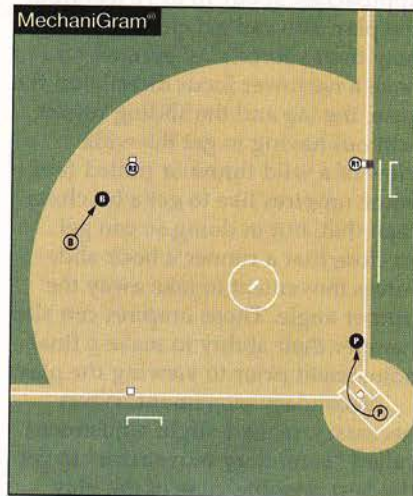
Quite often with runners on first and second base, the catcher will attempt a pickoff throw to first base, which can make for a challenging decision by the base umpire in position "C" near second base.

In that situation, the base umpire should step forward and try to obtain a 90-degree angle to the throw (see *MechaniGram*), then come to a set position and observe the play. If the play breaks down due to a poor throw, be prepared to lead R1 to second base. If R1 is not tagged out and returns safely to the base, observe R1 as long as F3 has the ball. If F3 throws to second base, it is the base umpire's call as the plate umpire takes R2 to third.

After ruling on the pitch, the plate umpire should step back to obtain a clear view of the play at first base and observe the play. If the throw is errant, move as necessary and rule on

an overthrow near the dead-ball area.

In NCAA, the offense can ask the plate umpire for help in the event of an out call by the base umpire on a pickoff. □



How to Make 'Uneventful' Game Happen

By Jay Miner

Most umpires hope for uneventful games. They wish that troublesome rules situations will not arise. They pray coaches will be on their best behavior and hope to have good partners. They hope rabid fans will not become intolerable. They want the weather to be good, but not too hot nor too cold. They would like the field to be in good condition and properly lined.

All of those desires are understandable but some are not under your control. Nevertheless, uneventful games do not always happen by fate. You must work and be thoughtful to try to make your game an uneventful game.

To have an uneventful game you must be a good game manager, use common sense, good judgment and thoughtful reasoning throughout the contest. Here are some suggestions:

Procure enough game balls to avoid delays. Often a coach will hand you two or three balls to begin the game. It is no longer considered overkill to wear two ball bags. Ask the coach for some good playable softballs. That way you won't be the umpire that stands dumbfounded at the plate with his or her palms toward the sky or looking to both benches for a ball because of successive foul balls.

Conduct a snappy pregame meeting. Meet with coaches and captains at home plate and find out the names of the head coaches. If

I don't know them, I'll write their names on the scorecards. Tell them that only the head coach can discuss game situations with the umpires.

If coaches claim they are co-coaches, ask them who will be the "speaking coach" that day. Ask the head coaches if their players are properly equipped and if their equipment is legal. That statement makes the coaches responsible for any illegal equipment and absolves the umpires from equipment liability situations.

Ask the home coach to explain any ground rules. If the coaches disagree over a ground rule, the plate umpire, with counsel from the base umpire, will formulate the ground rule.

Do not suggest that fielders raise their hands if a ball goes under a fence. That implies that fielders can rule the ball dead. How are you going to fix it if a fielder raises her arms and the ball is not dead under the fence? You can always send runners back if the ball is dead, but it is a nightmare if you attempt to advance runners after they've stopped running.

Ascertain and confirm any time limits or run rules in force. If a coin flip for home and visiting teams is required, save the toss for just before the conclusion of the meeting.

Work with the catcher. Show some courtesy when the catcher is struck by a foul ball. Brush the plate even if it is clean. That gives the catcher a little time to recover from being hit.

Brush the plate at opportune times like between batters and during a timeout that doesn't interrupt the game.

Manage substitutions.

Assertively announce the player's name and number (and batting order position when necessary) when taking substitutions. Calling out "19 for 24, 18 for 6 and 17 for 9" as is common, is very risky. After noting changes on your scorecard, ask the scorekeeper to verify such changes with the opposing team's scorekeeper.

Jay Miner is a longtime umpire and rules interpreter from Albany, N.Y. □

CLEARLY OBSTRUCTION



Obstruction is an act committed by a defensive team member that can occur in different ways. If the defensive player hinders or impedes a batter from striking or hitting a pitched ball, or hinders or impedes a runner or batter-runner who is legally running the bases, unless that defender is in possession of the ball or in the act of fielding a batted ball, it is obstruction.

Basepaths



Obstruction can occur on the basepaths, especially in rundown situations, when a fielder obstructs a runner from advancing or returning to a base.

PHOTO CREDIT: DALE GARVEY

Base



In NCAA, the defender is legal because she is about to receive a throw from the catcher in an attempt to tag the runner out. In NFHS, ASA and USSSA, the defender is obstructing the runner from reaching second base because she does not have possession of the ball as the runner attempts to steal a base.

PHOTO CREDIT: DALE GARVEY

Plate



Obstruction often occurs in the plate area when the catcher attempts to prevent a runner from scoring by blocking the plate. In NFHS, ASA and USSSA, if the catcher receives the ball before the runner reaches the plate, that is legal. In NCAA, the catcher can be in the act of receiving the ball (ball is between the catcher and runner) while blocking the plate as the runner attempts to score. Mario Orozco, Buena Park, Calif.

PHOTO CREDIT: BOB MESSINA

Rounding



The defender is obstructing the runner from rounding third base. In NCAA, the umpire shall issue a warning to the offending individual and notify her coach. If it happens again by the same defender, it is a one-base award to the obstructed runner and each other runner forced to advance.

PHOTO CREDIT: DALE GARVEY

CASEPLAYS

Runner Removes Helmet

Play: Fast pitch. R1 occupies first base when B2 hits safely to right field. While running to third, R1 deliberately removes her helmet. **Ruling:** In ASA and NCAA, R1 is out and the ball remains live. In NFHS, the umpire will issue a team warning. The next offender and the head coach will be restricted to the dugout/bench for the remainder of the game. In USSSA FP, the umpire will issue a warning to the coach. For a subsequent violation the offender is ejected and confined to the bench area (ASA 3-5E; NFHS 3-6-1, 1.6.2A; NCAA 3.8.1; USSSA FP 2-1).

Batter Hit By Pitch

Play: Fast pitch. B1 is at bat with a 1-1 count. A pitched ball touches the ground in front of the plate and then hits B1, who makes no attempt to avoid getting hit by the ball that is completely in the batter's box. **Ruling:** In NFHS, NCAA and USSSA, B1 is entitled to first base. In ASA, if in the judgment of the umpire no attempt is made to avoid being hit by the ball, the batter will not be awarded first base unless it is ball four. The count goes to 1-2 for B1 (ASA 8-1F Except.; NFHS 8-1-2b Pen. 1; NCAA 11.15.1 Effect, Note 1; USSSA FP 8-4D).

Bluetooth Speakers

Play: Team A is streaming music through smart phones in the dugout/bench area. Is that legal? **Ruling:** All codes prohibit artificial noisemakers in the dugout/bench area (ASA Code for Championship Play; NFHS 3-6-8, NCAA 5.11.2 Effect; USSSA FP 11-2S; USSSA SP 5-9E Effect).

Three-Foot-Lane Interference

Play: The defensive coach argues that the batter-runner interfered with a throw going to first base because on her last step to first base she stepped into fair territory. **Ruling:** It is permissible for the batter-runner on her last step, stride, reach or dive to leave the three-foot-lane to touch the base in fair territory (ASA 8-2E Effect; NFHS 8-2-5 Pen; NCAA 12.2.8 Effect; USSSA FP (8.17E, USSSA SP (8-4I Effect).

Get Zoned In

The top of the fast-pitch strike zone differs slightly among the four major associations, but otherwise it is the same. The zone for all codes starts at the top of the knees in the space over home plate and rises to either the sternum (NCAA) or the forward armpit (ASA, NFHS and USSSA), as shown in the PlayPic.

Any part of the ball passing through the strike zone in flight shall be considered a strike. That means if part of the ball crosses over the edge of the plate within the zone, no matter if it is the horizontal or vertical plane, it is a strike, unless the ball touches the ground before crossing the plate.

If the batter crouches or leans over to make the shoulder lower, the umpire determines height by what

would be the batter's normal stance.

When working the plate, use a balanced stance, one that allows you to drop to a solid set position to see the entire zone. Set up in the slot with your eyes positioned at the top of the zone and your chin no lower than the catcher's head. That should be your starting position in order to see the pitch, and adjust only when a batter is legally crowding the plate and/or the catcher is legally setting up inside. *Be sure* to be set when the pitch is released and if you need to, adjust your position for a better view. Track the pitch using only a slight head movement; do not indicate pitch location with your body.

Accountability to call an accurate and consistent zone rests with each umpire at every level. □

