



On a play at first, Steve Rios of El Paso, Texas, focuses on the base and then shifts his vision to the glove to verify the catch.

STEADY YOUR EYES

Take a Good Look at How to Improve Your View of the Play

By Mike Droll

As a reader, I look forward to articles that provide common-sense tips on things that I can do to make myself a better umpire. So when an article idea comes around that indicates that using your eyes properly will improve your umpiring skills, my immediate reaction is, "No kidding." But upon closer inspection of the topic, there are many benefits to using your eyes properly and, likewise, many pitfalls that can come from improper use.

First base. A play on the batter-runner at first base is one of the most common situations where proper use

of the eyes can make the difference between getting a difficult call right and having to deal with the argument that follows a blown call. Whether taking a play at first from position A or sliding into position from B or C to make the call, umpires need to get set and focus their eyes on the front edge of the bag as the throw comes to the first baseman. It then becomes a matter of hearing the ball hit the first baseman's mitt and determining if that came before or after the batter-runner's foot hit the bag.

Where do your eyes go next? If the throw to the first baseman is in the dirt or high, umpires may have to rule on catch/no catch by the first

baseman. That requires the umpire's eyes to go directly to the ball after the runner has reached the bag. If the throw pulls the first baseman away from the bag, the umpire's eyes have to stay on the bag to first determine if the ball was caught before the first baseman's foot came off the bag. A throw toward the plate side of first base may result in a swipe tag that will require the umpire's eyes to move to the ball in the first baseman's glove. That may also require a quick read step to get a better viewing angle on the possible tag.

Double play. Another play situation on the bases where proper use of the eyes looms large is on the

front end of a double play at second base. As is the case on most force-play judgments, it's important to have your body set and not to be too close to the play. However, without proper use of the eyes, even being far enough away to have the proper perspective may not be enough to prevent the umpire from missing key aspects of the play.

The umpire's eyes will start on the bag. While the umpire listens for the ball to hit the fielder's glove, his or her eyes need to move up to the ball as the fielder makes the exchange from catch to throw. If the ball falls to the ground, a judgment may be needed on whether there was an initial catch by the fielder and the ball came loose on that exchange. In games where there are more than two umpires, the base umpire will then need to move his eyes to the sliding runner in relation to the fielder. The force-play slide rule will require a good look at the direction of the slide into the bag and whether contact was made that altered the play.

Proper use of the eyes requires good timing. Any time a tag play occurs, umpires are often anxious to sell the out call with an emphatic voice and demonstrative signal. However, if your eyes aren't fixed on the ball's location after seeing the tag, that out signal might be made while the baseball is on the ground instead of the fielder's glove.

Catch/no catch. When viewing a potential catch, an umpire's body should be set. That allows the umpire's eyes to work at their best. Movement can distort the umpire's view of what happened. Umpires, particularly base umpires who decide to go out to the outfield to rule on a catch/no catch situation, should be mindful of that.

After reading the ball off the bat, the umpire's eyes should go to the reaction of the fielder to whom the ball is headed. The fielder's reaction, not the flight of the ball, is the best place for the umpire's eyes to help judge whether or not to go out.

If the decision is made to go out, being stopped and set at the moment when the attempted catch is about to be made will give an umpire's

eyes the best opportunity to see the play clearly and make the right determination. Some umpires believe that continuing to run hard toward the play to get as close as possible will make the play easier to see. However, the closer proximity gained from continuing to run toward the fielder will not compensate for the distortion caused by a moving head. As with plays on the bases, if the umpire sees a catch, his or her eyes should stay on the fielder's glove to make sure any release of the ball is voluntary.

Umpires who are on the foul line when a long fly ball is hit over their heads face a huge challenge to the use of their eyes. Attempting to follow the flight of the baseball from the bat through the air all the way to a possible home run ruling is a very difficult thing to do. Umpires are better off taking their eyes off the ball, refocusing their vision on the foul pole and then repicking up the ball in time to judge its relationship to the pole as it goes out of play.

Plate umpires. Plate umpires will also find that a still head will allow their eyes to better track the ball from the pitcher's hand to the catcher's mitt and make the ball/strike judgment easier. However, there are other important plate responsibilities where proper use of his eyes is critical. Since plate umpires have primary responsibility for judging a checked swing, moving their eyes from the location of the pitch to the bat as soon as possible is necessary to make that ruling properly. When their eyes have determined that the pitch will be out of the strike zone, plate umpires can afford to move their eyes immediately to the hitter. On borderline pitches, plate umpires will have to keep their eyes fixed longer on the pitch's relationship to the strike zone. Fortunately, the rules allow plate umpires to get help from their partner(s) on that difficult call.

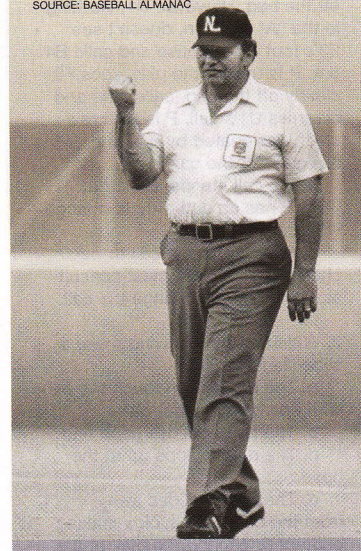
Additionally, judging whether or not the catcher caught a foul tip will require effective use of the eyes. Staying with the catcher's mitt when the plate umpire hears the sound of the ball tipping off the bat is crucial, especially if the catcher is coming

THEY SAID IT

"If they did get a machine to replace us, you know what would happen to it? Why, the players would bust it to pieces every time it ruled against them. They'd clobber it with a bat."

— *The late Harry Wendelstedt, NL umpire from 1966-98.*

SOURCE: BASEBALL ALMANAC



QUICKTIP

In cooler weather, follow military/mountaineering guidelines: dress in layers. The first layer of clothing should be a synthetic fabric that wicks moisture away from the skin. For the next layer, a cotton undergarment is lightweight and warm. That's followed by your outer layer garment: an umpire shirt or jacket. That should keep you warm and dry.

TOOLS

Umpires Quiz

The annual Baseball Umpires Quiz is available on the Internet. To access the 2016 quiz, please visit the *Referee* website at referee.com. You are welcome to print or copy as many quizzes as you need for your association.



TEST YOURSELF

In each of the following, you are given a situation and at least two possible answers. You are to decide which answer or answers are correct for NFHS, NCAA or pro rules, which might vary. **Solutions:** p. 81.

1. B4 hits a ground ball to F6. F6's throw to first base pulls F3 off the bag. However, U1, working in the "A" position, doesn't see F3's foot off the base and calls B4 out. P is trailing the play, sees F3 clearly off the bag, calls time and reverses U1's call. P is the crew chief, designated by rule and/or the assigner for the game.
 - a. P's call stands; B4 is out.
 - b. P has no authority to change U1's call.
 - c. In order for the call to be changed, P and U1 must consult and only U1 can change the call.
2. Which of the following make a slide illegal?
 - a. The runner can touch the base with one hand or foot only.
 - b. The runner slides head first.
 - c. The runner pops up at the base.
 - d. The runner slides away from the base and avoids making contact or altering the play of the fielder.
 - e. The runner slides then grabs the fielder who is attempting to throw.
3. F8 is injured crashing into the wall while making a catch for the third out of the inning. F8 is scheduled to bat fourth in the next half-inning, but is unable to continue. The team has no eligible substitutes for F8.
 - a. The team may skip F8's position in the batting order and it's an out.
 - b. The team may skip F8's turn at bat without penalty.
 - c. The game is over when F8 cannot continue.
4. Left-handed F1 throws to first base in a pickoff attempt. F3 drops his knee to block the base and attempts to tag R1.
 - a. F3 may block part of the bag before possessing the ball as long as he is in the immediate act of receiving the throw.
 - b. F3 may block the entire bag before possessing the ball as long as he is in the immediate act of receiving the throw.
 - c. F3 may not block any part of the bag until he possesses the ball.
 - d. If obstruction is called, R1 is awarded first base.

up throwing. If the catcher drops the ball, the plate umpire must determine whether or not the ball came out on the exchange. With two strikes on the batter, that could mean the difference between strike three or just a routine foul ball.

When working with young umpires, I always suggest that they keep their eyes forward when making a strike call. Many of them have seen plate umpires who will look away from the plate to the direction their right arm is pointing when making a strike signal and want to emulate that look. However, if the catcher comes up attempting to throw out a stealing runner or to pick off a runner straying too far from a base, a batter interference call may have to be made. It's pretty difficult to see all the elements of the play if you are pulling your eyes back after straying away from the plate area. That can be a tough enough call to

make when your eyes stay forward throughout the action.

Base umpires who are positioned on the respective foul lines sometimes find it difficult to pick up the baseball off the bat of the hitter. When that happens the issue may be that they are attempting to follow the ball from the pitcher's hand to the hitter and then adjusting to the ball's immediate change of direction. With the high exit speed balls are making in that turnaround, it's no wonder the ball is hard to pick up. Move your eyes directly to the hitter as soon as the pitch is released. You can pick up the ball when it gets to the plate area. That will make it easier to pick up the ball off the bat while being better focused to help with a checked-swing appeal.

Mike Droll, Coralville, Iowa, has umpired for more than 20 years and works in the Big Ten and Big 12 conferences. □

Back to the Base

By George Demetriou

The rules allow a runner to retreat along the baseline or to return to a previously occupied base for a legitimate purpose. Thanks to Germany Schaefer, running bases in reverse order is considered making a travesty of the game and is illegal. Schaefer was known for trying to manufacture a run with runners on first and third. Schaefer would try to draw a throw from the catcher by stealing second. However, if his tactic was not successful, he would return to first to try it all over again. The rule also prohibits retreating for the purpose of confusing the opponents (NFHS 8-4-2n; NCAA 8-5n; 2014 pro 7.08i, 2015 pro 5.09b).

If a player is decoyed into returning or believes a fly ball is caught, the runner has the right to return to the last base occupied. Except where noted, the material applies equally to NFHS, NCAA and pro rules.

The act of a runner in returning

to a base to which a runner is legally required is referred to as a "retouch." Runners must retouch all bases in reverse order, except they may go directly to their original base when the ball is dead because a foul ball is not caught (as seen in the MechaniGram on the next page), the plate umpire interferes with the catcher's throw, or a ball is illegally batted. The umpire should not put the ball in play until all runners have retouched their base.

Directed return. When certain types of interference occur, an umpire may direct a player to return to the base legally occupied at the time of the pitch or at the time of the interference. An example is when a runner is hit by a fair batted ball before it passes an infielder other than the pitcher. The ball is dead, that runner is out, the batter-runner is awarded first base and any other runners must return to their original base unless forced to advance (NFHS 5-1-1f, 6-1-5, 8-4-2k; NCAA 6-2e, 8-2g, 8-5k; 2014 pro 7.08f, 2015 pro 5.09b(7)).

Play 1: R1 and R2 are moving on the pitch when B1 hits a slow grounder past the pitcher. As R1 begins his slide into second, the untouched ball hits him. When that happens, R2 has already touched third. **Ruling 1:** R1 is out for interference. B1 remains on first, credited with a single. R2 keeps third in NFHS; runners are returned to the base occupied at the time of interference (Dead Ball Table, item 13). In NCAA and pro, R2 is returned to second; no runner can advance (NCAA 2-50 AR 2, 6-2e, 8-5k; 2014 pro 7.08f, 2015 pro 5.09b(7)).

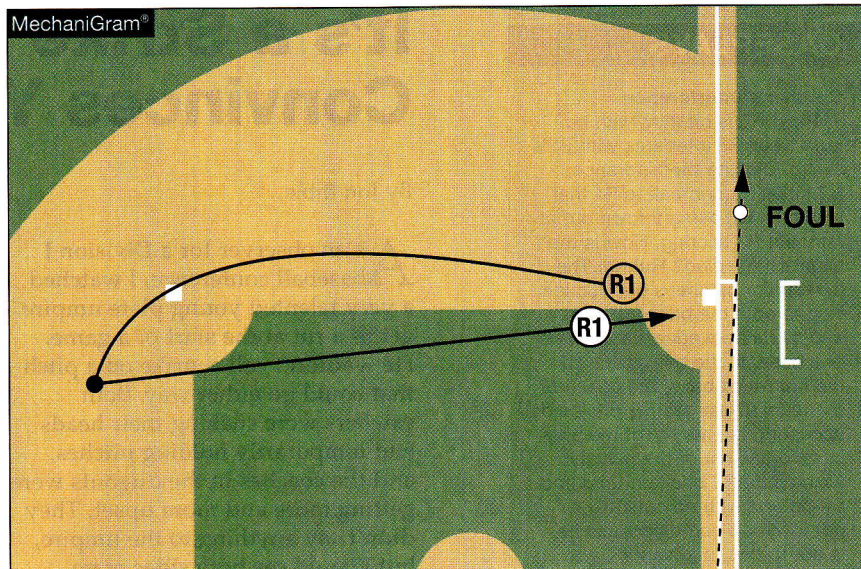
When a runner is attempting to steal a base, the batter can be guilty of interference if his swing brings him over the plate where he interferes with the catcher's attempt to throw out a runner who is attempting to steal a base or if he makes an unnatural movement that interferes with the catcher. If the batter interferes and any runner attempting to advance is put out, the contact is ignored. Otherwise, the batter is out and all runners either remain or return to the base occupied at the time of the pitch. Pro rules state the base occupied at the time of the interference, but that will almost always also be at the time of the pitch (NFHS 7-3-5; NCAA 7-11f; 2014 pro 6.06c Cmt., 2015 pro 5.09).

Correcting baserunning infractions. A runner may return to touch a missed base or one that he left too soon while the ball is dead unless he has advanced to and touched or advanced beyond the base at which the infraction occurred (NFHS 8-2-5; NCAA 8-6a AR 2; 2014 pro 7.10b AR, 2015 pro 5.09c (2)).

Play 2: B1 hits a high fly. While he is admiring his potential home run, he misses first base. The ball lands short of the fence and bounces over it. As he touches second, he decides to return to touch first.

Ruling 2: If the defensive team appeals, B1 is declared out for missing first.

In NCAA and pro, if a runner is attempting to return to his original base after a fly ball is caught and the ball is thrown out of play, he



may retouch and proceed on the award even though he touched or advanced beyond the base at which the infraction occurred (NFHS 8.2.5A; NCAA 8-6a AR 3; 2014 pro 7.10b AR, 2015 pro 5.09c(2)).

Play 3: R1 is on first and moving on the pitch when B1 hits the ball to deep center field. After rounding third, B1 realizes the ball was caught. R1 retouches third and is heading for second, but has not yet retouched that base when F8's overthrown ball goes into dead-ball territory. **Ruling 3:** The fact that R1 was returning is relevant. He may retouch second and first and then proceed to third on the award.

If a runner touches or advances beyond the next base and is not attempting to return to his original base after a fly ball is caught and the ball is thrown out of play, the defense may then appeal the baserunning infraction even though the runner returns to the missed base/base left too soon before proceeding to touch any awarded bases. In NFHS, the "next" base is defined as the base beyond the base at which the infraction occurred, while in NCAA and pro it refers to the position of the runner at the time when the ball went out of play (NFHS 8-2-5; NCAA 8-6a AR 3; pro MLBUM 5.12 Play 5).

Play 4: R1 is running on the pitch. B1 flies out to right and the

throw to first goes into the stands. Seeing the ball dead, R1 stops and proceeds around second into third. **Ruling 4:** The proper award is two bases. However, R1 may be declared out if a proper appeal is made for failing to retouch first even though the ball was dead.

Last time by. Missed bases can be corrected while the ball is dead if a runner is proceeding on an award. That concept is known as "last time by" and is defined as if the runner retouches a base or bases in advancing to the awarded base, or in returning to the original base occupied at the time of the pitch, his failure to touch a base in returning is corrected under the theory that touching the base the last time by corrects any previous error (NFHS 8-2-6L; NCAA 2-51; pro interp.).

Play 5: With no one out, R1 is running on the pitch. B1 flies out to F9. R1 has already passed second. After the catch, R1 misses second in his retreat back to first. F9's throw to first goes into the stands. R1 reaches first safely and is awarded third. He touches second and advances on to third. **Ruling 5:** The appeal for missing second is denied. The base was touched "the last time by" even though it was touched while the ball was dead.

George Demetriou, Colorado Springs, Colo., is the current NFHS rule interpreter for the state of Colorado. □

CASEPLAYS

Catcher's Interference

Play: R3 is on third with no outs when F2 interferes with B2's swing. Despite the hindrance, B2 hits a ground ball to F4 that results in B2 being thrown out at first and R3 scoring. How is the situation handled? **Ruling:** The penalty for catcher's obstruction is ignored if the batter-runner and all runners advance at least one base. In the play, since B2 did not reach base, the coach of the team at bat has the choice of accepting the results of the play or enforcement of the penalty, which puts R3 back on third and B2 on first with no outs. R3 is not awarded home because he is not forced to advance by a following runner (NFHS 8-1-1e; NCAA 8-2e; pro 6.08c).

Coach Gets in the Way

Play: With a runner on first, B1 hits a line drive into the gap in left center. R1 rounds second and thinks about scoring. The third-base coach sees R1 is not going to stop, so he gets in the runner's path and is run over by his player. Both fall to the ground. R1 gets up and barely gets back to the base ahead of a tag. **Ruling:** The coach's action should be considered physical assistance. It prevented R1 from being thrown out at home. R1 is called out for his coach's actions and play is allowed to continue (NFHS 3-2-2, 5-1-2f; NCAA 3-3e, 8-5f; pro 7.09h). Any outs made on other runners count. In NFHS only, all runners not put out must return to the base occupied at the time of interference.

Exceeding Inning Limitations

Play: NFHS rules only. What are an umpire's obligations when it comes to enforcing rule 6-1-6, the requirements for a pitcher to have enough rest between appearances? **Ruling:** Umpires are not required to enforce that rule because they usually have no definite knowledge of when a pitcher last threw or how many innings/pitches he threw. If there is a controversy, record how many innings you observed the pitcher throw and be willing and able to answer that question should it come from the state office.

It's a Strike Until It Convinces You Otherwise

By Jon Bible

As an observer for a Division I baseball conference, I watched a very talented young plate umpire get in a rut at the start of a game. He wouldn't call a strike on a pitch that could go either way. Both catchers were shaking their heads and temporarily holding pitches, and the coaches in the dugouts were getting more and more upset. They didn't say anything to the umpire, but I could see both sides were frustrated.

No one goes to a ballgame to see batters walk. The defensive players don't like it either; they tend to lose focus and fall asleep when the only thing that comes out of the plate umpire's mouth is "Ball."

Sometimes, of course, there is nothing to be done about that because one or both pitchers can't throw strikes.

But when they are right around the plate, the plate umpire can't afford to be "too fine" in terms of calling pitches strikes.

A veteran umpire once told me, "From the moment a pitch leaves the pitcher's hand, assume it's a strike until it convinces you otherwise." He said his zone had been too small, and it wasn't until he heard that statement and put it into practice that his career took off.

Pitches not in the zone. When I say call more strikes, I don't mean call pitches that the batter cannot hit and are completely outside the zone. We all have been guilty of that at some point in our careers.

In fact, my partners have said that if the catcher wasn't prone on the ground when he caught a pitch, there was a good chance I'd call it a strike.

Looking back on my career, I probably called too many strikes on pitches that were too far off the plate.



Steve Sanders of Dover, N.C., can establish his strike zone early by calling the borderline strike.

It's easy to do because the dugouts can't really tell how far off the corner a pitch may have been.

Borderline pitches. It's important to call strikes on the borderline pitches. It goes back to assuming a pitch is a strike until it convinces you otherwise.

The catcher. How a catcher catches the ball should be relevant in amateur ball, but not conclusive.

We can't be as demanding as professional umpires of professional catchers, who are rightfully expected not to flip mitts to catch low pitches, reach across their bodies to catch an outside pitch when they are set up inside, and the like.

Instead, we need to try to find a happy medium between calling pitches strikes no matter what a catcher does and not calling them unless he receives the pitch just as a professional catcher would.

Consistent. Consistency throughout the entire game is important. Some umpires like to start out with a big zone, forcing the batters to swing the bat, and then rein it in after they get the batters swinging.

Some umpires are more liberal with the first two strikes than the third one, which they really insist on being there.

I advocate starting out by calling borderline strikes and then sticking with that zone throughout the game — no change depending on the inning or count, and no favors to catchers when they are hitting so that they'll continue to be friendly.

I know umpires who believe in doing that. The problem with changing the zone midstream is that there is no reasonable way to announce what we're doing.

We cannot start out with a huge zone and then, before the fourth inning, grab a microphone and tell everyone, "I started with a big zone to get batters swinging, but now I'm going to collapse it to its proper dimensions."

That being the case, players, coaches and fans will simply assume that the plate umpire is being inconsistent.

It's the same with altering the

zone depending on the count. The plate umpire has effectively told the pitcher where the zone is on strike one and two. When the pitcher throws the third pitch to the same place, there's a reasonable expectation for another strike.

Again, there is no way to tell the pitcher that there is a method to your madness, so he simply assumes inconsistency on your part.

Some umpires expand the zone when the game starts getting lopsided. As a lawyer I'll never say "never" do that, because sometimes things get so bad that it's the only way out. But be very careful.

I was working an NCAA regional tournament where one team was up, 15-0, in the seventh inning, only to lose, 18-15. There's nothing worse than loosening your zone when the score seems to be getting out of hand, only to have to bring it back in when things suddenly tighten up.

As for the plate umpire in the beginning of the article, he told me afterward that he just wasn't tracking the pitch into the catcher's mitt properly, so he went back to the old mantra that he learned at umpire school: "On the rubber, get set, call it."

He slowed his timing and made sure to watch the ball all the way into the catcher's mitt before making a call. And he let the "assume-it's-a-strike" philosophy take over.

Just as pitchers can be too fine in terms of spotting the ball around the plate, umpires can be too fine in distinguishing between balls and strikes.

The "assume-it's-a-strike" philosophy will serve umpires well no matter the level of baseball they work. But it will be especially helpful to less experienced umpires who are trying to establish themselves, get a good reputation and move up the ladder.

I can't recall ever in my career seeing a player, coach, supervisor, conference coordinator or national coordinator get enthusiastic about an umpire with a tight strike zone.

Jon Bible, Austin, Texas, is a veteran umpire who has worked six NCAA Division I College World Series. □

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