



Each week for the next 7 weeks Referee will be sending advanced Softball play-calling tips and techniques. We hope they instruct, inspire and help you perform to the best of your ability.

Yours in Officiating,

The Staff at Referee.com

## **BEFORE THE GAME**

### **Be prepared for your game.**

Do some preparatory work a day or so before the game. Make sure you are familiar with the game site and know the correct starting time.

Make sure your uniforms are clean and your equipment is in good condition. A good time to clean your shoes for the next game is right after the previous game. Check your shoelaces. Pack an extra set in case one breaks during a game or while you are dressing.

Check the weather report prior to making decisions about starting, suspending, calling or continuing a game. In NCAA, coaches of both teams and/or the on-site administrator will decide if a game will not be started because of unsatisfactory weather or field conditions. For a doubleheader in NCAA, the plate umpire for the first game is the final judge about starting the second game. In USSSA FP, the umpires are the sole judges regarding fitness of the grounds. For USSSA SP, the home team decides whether to start the game because of inclement weather and/or an unfit playing field. In tournament play, the tournament director makes those decisions.

### **Arrive well ahead of game time.**

It's important to begin the game at the scheduled game time. That involves you and your partner entering the field at least 15-20 minutes before the scheduled game time, especially if you have to complete payment vouchers.

If a team's arrival is delayed due to unavoidable circumstances, such as a late-arriving bus, work with both coaches to begin the game after a reasonable warmup period. Keep in mind the coach is probably already annoyed because of the team's late arrival.

### **Have a thorough pregame.**

A pregame meeting is essential for a good performance on the field. When you start your pregame discussion, make sure it fits the crew for that game. Three veteran college umpires who have worked together before probably don't need a complete discussion of all rotations. However, if it's one veteran and one new guy on a varsity game, going through the whole pregame not only ensures coverage, but it will likely put the newer umpire at ease. The newer umpire will hear things he's heard before, and will grow more comfortable.

### **Start thinking softball.**

Before the game is not the time to discuss the latest gossip, movie or news from home. Smartphones should be put away. Discuss odd situations or plays from recent games to get in the rules and mechanics mind-set.

### **Enter the field professionally.**

Be businesslike and stride confidently with your partner(s) to the field. Leave any food or beverages behind. Don't stop to talk to spectators or players. If you are acknowledged, give a polite "hello" and keep walking toward your destination. If you must prepare pay vouchers, enter the field about 15 minutes before game time so there is enough time for the bat and/or helmet check.

### **Keep pregame conference brief.**

Conduct the pregame meeting between head coaches and captains about five minutes before the game. Keep the conference professional but brief and to the point. Exchange lineup cards and cover the ground rules. When going over the ground rules, ask the home coach to do it. It's his or her home field, and it saves him or her having to correct an umpire who has made a mistake trying to explain the ground rules.

### **Know what to do after the pregame meeting.**

After the pregame meeting, the plate umpire should move to the side of the plate. If the national anthem will be played, the base umpire should remain with the plate umpire, standing at attention during the anthem without conversation. Otherwise, the base umpire should hustle down the first-base line and move to the neutral zone in short right field. Same with the third-base umpire in a three-person crew, but hustle down the third-base line to a position in short left field about 10-15 feet off the foul line.

The plate umpire should set up about 10 feet beyond the first-base line extended or third-base line extended, depending on which team is up to bat first. He or she should observe the pitcher and may observe the second, third or fourth warmup pitch while in his or her plate stance behind the catcher.

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# GET IN THE ZONE

There are four basic stances utilized by softball umpires. Go with the stance that is most comfortable.

- **The box** — Feet are spread slightly wider than shoulder width. The non-slot foot is placed on the ground about a foot behind the catcher approximately in line with the center of her back when she is directly behind the plate. The slot foot is parallel to and in line or even with the non-slot foot at a distance that places the head in the slot. Both feet are pointing at the pitcher. Drop set by bending the knees.
- **Heel-Toe Stance** — The legs/feet are wider than shoulder width. The shoulders and body are close to square to the plate where a line drawn down the middle of the umpire's waist would bisect the plate. The slot foot should be in the slot pointing directly at the pitcher's plate and in line with or slightly in front of an imaginary line drawn from the catcher's heels to the toe of the slot foot. The non-slot foot is angled no more than 45 degrees. You should be no deeper than a closed fist between your non-slot foot and the catcher's back when you drop set.
- **Gerry Davis** — Start with your hands on your knees; feet/legs wider than shoulder width, feet approximately parallel to and generally even with each other, hands gripping thighs above your knees. Your upper body weight rests on your knees with your elbows straight providing consistent head height. Adjust head height with the width of the feet. Begin an arm's length behind the catcher with your nose in the slot. As the pitcher commits to the deliver, drop your butt slightly about two to three inches to bring your line of sight parallel to the ground and to eliminate neck strain.
- **Modified Gerry Davis** — Start with your hands on your knees; feet/legs wider than shoulder width, feet approximately parallel to and generally even with each other, hands gripping thighs above your knees. Your upper body weight rests on your knees with your elbows straight providing consistent head height. Adjust head height with the width of the feet. Begin an arm's length behind the catcher with your nose in the slot.

## Know when you're in the slot position.

A commonly used position among plate umpires is the "slot," the area between the catcher and batter. To get a consistent look at each pitch, place your feet at least shoulder width apart with your non-slot foot (right foot on right-handed batters) about midway between the catcher's feet. Your inside ear should be in line with the inside edge of the plate with your belt buckle on the batter's box line nearest the plate. Be sure to see the outside corner of the plate and the batter's knees.

## Get locked in.

If you aren't locked in and in a consistent position, you will not be able to judge pitches the same way every time. That's why you want to be balanced and locked in before every pitch. An umpire who "hides" his or her hands behind him or her in an effort to protect them is rarely stable or consistent. Another bad spot for the hands is on the catcher. Keep your hands off the catcher.

## Get set at the right time.

If you get set too early, by the time the pitch arrives, you are ready to get out of your stance. That will affect your timing — whether it is moving your head with the pitch or not following the ball all the way into the mitt because you are wanting to move. If you come out of the stance too early, your consistency and concentration are ruined.

### **Establish a routine.**

Being in the zone takes thought, preparation and discipline by the plate umpire. Establish a pregame routine that includes both physical and mental items, like wearing the same socks or putting on your equipment in the same order before every game. It helps to bring the game into focus from the beginning. Once you take the field, make routine a part of your game. Get set the same way, at the same time for every pitch.

### **Make it clear to the batter.**

Most fast-pitch associations want plate umpires to verbalize a ball or strike in the down position and signal in the up or going-up position. But a called third strike must have a finish and be different from a routine strike. The plate umpire should send a clear message that it's time for the batter to sit down with a combination of voice inflection and mechanics in the up position. That can be accomplished by putting a strong emphasis on "strike" and an even stronger emphasis on "three." Be loud and proud of the call.

## **TRACKING PITCHES**

Most umpires track pitches the same way they did when they batted as players. That means they have acquired the dreaded malady of "tunnel vision."

Tunnel vision occurs when an umpire looks down the tunnel to the pitcher's release point with his or her eyes fixated ahead and allows the ball to pass through the tunnel while reading the pitch the same way they did as a batter. Batters must read pitches that way while attempting to hit the pitch. Umpires have the luxury of only having to call the pitch.

When an umpire has tunnel vision, he or she decides the status of the pitch by predetermined destination. That is where the umpire expects the ball to go based on his or her read from in front of the plate. The umpire should track the ball with his or her eyes all the way into the catcher's glove before making a decision.

Tracking a pitch with the eyes takes practice and constant self-reminding. See the outside corner of the plate with both eyes and try to stay "on" the pitch to the end. That will help to see tails and breaks of the ball when it passes the plate.

### **Head height and positioning.**

Position yourself in the slot with your nose or your inside ear on the inside corner and your chin just above the catcher's head or marginally higher. Never drop your chin below the ear hole in the catcher's helmet. Your body weight will be mostly forward with your stance comfortable and balanced. Comfort and balance are critical for long-term success.

### **Double-check the outside corner.**

Before the first pitch and periodically throughout the game, perform a self-test to be sure you are seeing the outside corner with both eyes. You can do that by dropping to your ready-set position in exactly the position you would use to call a pitch. Then close your outside corner eye. Many umpires will not be able to see the ground next to the outside corner or they find their nose will obstruct their view of the outside corner. With your outside eye still closed, turn your head until you can see the dirt next to the outside corner. Then be sure to open both eyes for the next pitch. Now you are seeing the outside corner and the entire strike zone with two eyes. Your accuracy on balls and strikes is immediately and dramatically improved with that 10-second check.

### **Tracking the pitch as the plate umpire.**

To become an exceptional ball and strike umpire you must master the six steps to calling a pitch. Those six steps are (1) on the rubber; (2) get set; (3) track; (4) read; (5) hold; and (6) call it. However, once the umpire tracks the pitch he must continue tracking with his or her eyes through the read and hold modes. What that means is the umpire must track the pitch with his or her eyes all the way to the catcher's glove. You must read the pitch like an umpire and not a batter.

### **Tracking the pitch as the base umpire.**

While tracking a pitch from the bases, flash your eyes to the barrel end of the batter's bat before the pitch reaches the plate. That technique provides an exceptional view of checked swings. Be aware that some softball associations teach the base umpire to track the ball all the way to the catcher's glove to rule on dropped-third strikes.

### **The 10-strikes theory.**

One sure way to improve your plate umpiring is to find a way to call an additional 10 strikes a game (per team) without cheating. Mastering the 10-strikes method will show immediate improvement in your umpiring and the flow of the game.

### **Follow the dots.**

If you are seeking ways to improve your ability to track a pitch from the pitcher's hand into the catcher's glove and improve your strike zone consistency, mark four balls with four different colors — red, yellow, black and blue. Place a dot about the size of a dime with a different color on each ball and practice tracking the dot on each ball into the catcher's glove. Call out the color of the dot after the ball is caught.

## **ON THE BASES**

Most umpires who are trying to advance at any level are at least pretty good ball/strike plate umpires. However, what will separate you from the pack of good umpires is your base work.

### **Routine ground balls.**

As contact is made, you read the angle of the ball and start moving into the field of play, about four or six feet off the line. You see the fielder gather the ground ball cleanly. At that time, you need to start reading the fielder and her release point. You will want to track the ball about three-quarters of the way across the infield. The last quarter of the way you want to focus your attention on the base, specifically the front of the base. That's because players are taught to hit the front of the base with their foot. At that time your body and eyes should be set. You are listening for the sound of the ball impacting the glove and watching the batter-runner to make sure her foot contacts the base.

No matter if the play is routine or unusual, there are three things to keep in mind on every play at first base: First, did the runner make contact with the base? Second, was the first baseman in contact with the base when she secured possession of the ball? And third, did she field the throw cleanly? Now you are ready to rule on the play.

### **Thrown ball that takes the first baseman up the line.**

Those types of plays can happen at any time. When you read a ground ball off the bat, you will repeat your footwork to get in your initial starting position. When you are in the process of tracking the ball and realize the throw is going to take the first baseman toward right field, what do you do? On that type of play, take a “read step” toward the first-base line to get an angle on the play. If the throw from the fielder is taking the first baseman up the line, the first baseman will try and stay in contact with the base on the outfield side of the bag. When taking the “read step,” it is extremely important to stop moving and get your body and eyes set. You do not want to take the play while moving.

### **Thrown ball that takes the first baseman toward the plate.**

When you read a ground ball off the bat, repeat your footwork to your initial starting position. When you are in the process of tracking the ball, you realize the throw is going to take the first baseman toward the plate. What do you do? You will want to take a “read step” toward second base to open your viewing window of first base. Again, when you take a “read step,” get your body and eyes set.

### **High throw, swipe tag.**

When you are in the process of tracking the ball, you realize the throw is going to be high and the first baseman is going to have to leave her feet to secure the throw and then make a swipe attempt at the runner. Where do you go from there? When a runner realizes there is going to be a high throw, she normally stays upright. When a runner does that, she will more than likely attempt to go to the foul side of the bag and stab her foot to make contact with the base. The first baseman on the other hand will try to swipe with a downward angle, and if she makes contact it is usually on the upper part of the runner’s body, more specifically the helmet or the back. From your initial starting position, take a “read step” toward second base to open your viewing window to see the back of the runner. You will have to keep in mind the following: Was a tag made? If a tag was made, did the fielder secure the ball throughout the entire process of the play? Did the runner make contact with the base?

### **Pressure.**

When you are in the “A” position, you should take as many plays in fair territory as possible. However there are times when that is just not possible. Only then is it acceptable to go into foul territory.

When a ball is hit to the second baseman or right fielder and she has to make a play toward the first-base line, that is called “pressure” from a fielder. In that case, it is acceptable to take a couple steps into foul territory to make your judgment on the play. That will allow you to track the ball from the second baseman and read the throw. The last thing you want is to be in fair territory and have a throw from the second baseman hit you in the back. Get your body and eyes set and take a read step, if you need it.

### **Did she go?**

Most base umpires watch the pitcher and track the ball into the catcher’s glove. They should also know, especially on third strikes, if the ball was cleanly caught by the catcher. However, the base umpire doesn’t have to call the location of the pitch. The base umpire only needs to know if the batter offered at the pitch and if it was cleanly caught. Thus, the base umpire should first track the pitch and then flash his or her eyes to the end of the batter’s bat while keeping the ball in his or her peripheral vision.

# ILLEGAL PITCHES

Making an illegal pitch call is often very subjective. There is a lot of gray area to manage, so it is important that umpires have a clear understanding and vision of what is legal and what is illegal. The benefit of the doubt should always go to the pitcher or another player involved, but that shouldn't be the reason for not making an illegal pitch call. It is important to have a clear view of the pitcher when making the call. If there is doubt whether a pitch is illegal or not, watch the pitcher closely or move to gain a better angle. If the possibility of a violation is vague and you cannot make an exact determination, then consider the pitch to be legal. The violations are usually quite discreet and happen quickly. Those umpires who are on top of the rules and put themselves in position to see the violation are more likely to make those calls than those who take a deep breath and pray that the pitcher doesn't do anything wrong.

## **Move to improve your look.**

An umpire can eliminate some of the doubt about whether a pitcher is illegal by moving to a better position on the diamond. Be certain of your call before calling a pitcher illegal. If you are not sure a pitcher is illegal, watch the pitcher closely for a few more pitches and try to adjust your position slightly for a better look. Continue to watch the pitcher, but maintain your concentration on the game.

## **Some common pitching violations:**

### **Leaping**

The pitcher may not become airborne with both feet at the same time on the initial drive from the pitcher's plate. The pivot foot must slide or drag on the ground. If a hole has been created, the pivot foot may drag no higher than the level plane of the ground. Leaping is legal in ASA adult men's fast pitch but is illegal in all other codes. The main reason that leaping is illegal is because a pitcher who leaps into the air on her push off from the rubber gains an advantage by releasing the ball closer to home plate and she can often cause the pitch to rise more. Also, some individuals claim a leaping pitcher is exposed to increased danger of being struck by a batted ball and potential joint and muscle injuries.

### **Crow Hop**

A crow hop occurs when a pitcher steps or hops with her pivot foot completely off the front of the rubber and replants the pivot foot and establishes new impetus to push off in a new delivery motion not related to the original movement from the pitcher's plate. The base umpire must combine his or her rulebook knowledge, experience and careful observation to rule on crow hops. With that, the umpire must be careful not to make phantom calls.

The base umpire has to watch and decide if the pitcher is actually replanting the pivot foot in front of the rubber in a new pitching motion or simply stabbing the dirt with the pivot foot as she is completing a legal delivery. If the pitcher keeps her body weight back and/or the hands together as she comes forward, there is a good chance she is crow hopping if the pivot foot lands in front of the rubber.

## Replant

In another version of the crow hop, some pitchers will replant their pivot foot by sliding it slightly forward while maintaining contact with the ground and replanting the pivot foot on the ground in front of the pitching plate for a new push-off point. Pitchers who use that move sometimes avoid detection because they quickly slide the pivot foot forward and, in virtually the same motion, begin their pitch, but a second push-off from in front of the plate is accomplished. That is more difficult to call than the leap, but it is illegal and the umpire must be watching for it.

If you're not quite sure of the replant, as soon as the third out is recorded, hustle in to sweep the pitcher's plate and look for a large indentation in the ground in front of the plate where the replant might be occurring. That may be the final piece of evidence that you need to determine what is actually happening. That is an important call because if a pitcher is replanting, she is gaining a definite advantage by illegally reducing the distance of the pitch to the batter, putting the batter in an unfair situation.

## No Wipe

If the pitcher goes to her mouth with the pitching fingers, she must wipe them off before touching the ball. Same goes if she brushes her fingers in the dirt. She has to wipe them off before touching the ball with that hand.

## Taking the Signal in the Set Position

The pitcher's set position varies among the different organizations. How does an illegal pitch occur during that phase? It is an illegal pitch if the hands are not separated when the pitcher steps onto the plate. That occurs most often in lower levels in which the pitcher and coaches are not aware of the rule and allow bad habits to develop.

Another violation occurs when the pitcher does not pause after stepping onto the plate to take or simulate taking a signal from the catcher. That is known as "stepping into the pitch" and is not only illegal but can be dangerous to an unsuspecting batter. That rule protects the batter. The pause indicates that the pitcher is ready to throw the ball.

There are specific requirements for the placement of the pitcher's feet in each code, so call an illegal pitch if those rules are violated. In ASA, NCAA and USSSA, the non-pivot foot must remain in contact with the plate. On occasion that foot might move slightly backward as the pitcher tries to gain more torque. If the foot barely moves back off the plate or merely settles into the slight hole created behind the plate, the reality is that a base umpire will probably not be able to tell with certainty that the foot has lost contact with the pitching plate. Call that only if the foot is definitely off the plate with perceptible dirt showing between the plate and the foot or the pitcher is clearly taking a step backward.

# GOING BEYOND THE BOOKS

Not everything can be found in the rulebook or casebook and some instructors and seasoned umpires just don't offer solid guidelines unless it is supported somewhere in print. Sometimes umpires can effectively resolve situations using a common-sense approach peppered with traditional reasoning, accepted past practices, a good feel for situational umpiring and thoughtful judgment.

That way, the umpire can avoid a dreaded "scratch list" while adding to his or her credibility and being welcomed back to another game on another day.

### **Runner struck by throw running away from fielder.**

Other than three-foot-lane violations and intentional interference, a runner running away from a fielder cannot be charged with interference for being struck by a thrown ball.

### **Runner struck by thrown ball running toward a fielder.**

#### **Leaping**

Obviously, a runner is out if she intentionally interferes with a thrown ball. In other situations the umpire must make some critical judgments. When a thrown ball strikes a runner while the runner is facing a fielder, the runner can be charged with interference when the runner is in the vicinity of the base from which the fielder is throwing. That often occurs when a fielder is throwing from a base to which a runner is forced when the runner had time to slide or avoid the throw and didn't do so.

Conversely, if a runner, running toward the next base, is struck by a thrown ball some distance from the fielder she is facing, it is rarely an interference call as it is not reasonable to expect the runner to slide or disappear into the ground when the runner is not in the vicinity of the base.

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### **Base umpire covers rundown.**

A base umpire who covers a rundown, especially when there is no assistance from the plate umpire, must resist the strong temptation to run back and forth with the runner and join all the moving elements of the play that includes the fielders and the ball. The base umpire should pick a midpoint in the rundown and use that midpoint as a working area, taking only quick steps to improve his or her angle on the play. The umpire must keep a perspective of the runner in correlation to the runner's basepath. Taking a midpoint also ensures the umpire will be stopped with eyes level when calling the play.

### **When does a batted ball pass an infielder?**

A batted ball is considered to have passed an infielder when the ball is more than an arm's reach away from a fielder. That means if an untouched batted ball goes by an infielder and strikes the runner, the runner is not out if the ball is more than an arm's length away from the infielder unless another fielder has an opportunity to make an out, or uniquely in NCAA, unless another fielder has an opportunity to make a play (NCAA interpretation of play is that an infielder could have stopped the ball from going to the outfield).

## **Let coach give relief pitcher the game situation before play resumes.**

Though it is common practice in many parts of the country for the base umpire to tell the new pitcher the game situation, including what bases are occupied, that is the coach's responsibility and not the umpire's.

What happens if you provide the wrong count or give the incorrect number of outs or erroneous information about what bases are occupied? If there is a count on the current batter, the plate umpire should give the count before the next pitch.

## **Leave the rabbit ears at home.**

Rabbit ears is a malady that causes many umpires to hear things said by managers, coaches, players and even fans that are best unheard. Be aware of the condition and try to control it by not responding.

However, far too many umpires ignore inappropriate comments to the degree that their credibility is compromised, like a seriously hearing-impaired official who turns his hearing aid off when he or she is receiving criticism.

That also creates problems for less-experienced umpires. It's best to train newer umpires to address coaches and players through verbal and non-verbal cues. Non-verbal cues, such as putting up your hand in the form of a stop sign, can often be enough to deal with the situation.

Verbally try to establish clear communication, knowing what was said and the intent, and respond in a way that maintains game decorum.

# **BANG-BANG PLAYS AT FIRST**

Calling close plays or "whackers" at first base will determine how you are perceived as a base umpire. Do you want to be a better base umpire on whackers as soon as your next game? It can be done with proper preparation. Focus on adopting the following strategies for improved umpire success.

When they are mastered, you will also become a more credible and accepted base umpire.

## **Setup along the baseline.**

Take a position 18-21 feet beyond first base in foul territory next to but not touching the foul line. You can use the standing set position by leading with your right foot on the initial step toward home as the pitcher releases the ball and landing on your left foot as the ball nears the plate. With that method, you will be ready to push off your left foot into fair territory to cover any possible play on a fair, batted ball.

## **One step fair (1SF).**

By moving just one step into fair territory, it is easier to compare the arrival of the ball and the runner at first base. The 1SF positioning allows the umpire to see the play in slow motion.

1SF is also a great calling position for any errant throws to first base. For a throw that pulls the first baseman off the bag toward home, the umpire can remain stationary and easily look between the fielder's swipe tag and the batter-runner.

On a bad throw to the outfield side of the bag, there won't be a swipe tag so the umpire has to focus on the fielder's foot before making a call.

## Snap-thud.

A knowledgeable umpire understands that umpires must use their hearing along with their vision to get those eyelash plays right.

From your 1SF position, track the ball two-thirds of the way to first base before focusing on the home plate-side of the bag while keeping the ball in your peripheral vision. That's your focus point because the batter-runner always aims for the home plate-side of first.

Then, listen for the snap of the ball in the fielder's glove and the thud of the runner's foot on the base. Combine your visual information with the snap and the thud. If the snap beats the thud, the runner is out.

Before making your call, flash your eyes to the glove to be sure the fielder has control of the ball.

## Throws from right field to first.

To be a top softball umpire, try to be aware of snap throws to first on sharp hits to right field. That occurs most often with the bases empty, but it can occur in other base configurations. From position A, never cross in front of the throw, so move one step fair. Or, only when absolutely necessary, drop-step into foul ground for the best position on the play.

## Was batter-runner's lead leg straight or bent?

When making calls at first, be aware of the lead leg on the runner's final step. That method is known as the "bent leg theory." On close plays, many runners extend their lead leg in a locked position in their last lunge for the bag. A straight-locked leg means the runner hasn't yet reached the bag so consider her out on a real whacker. Once her knee bends it means the runner has hit the base and could (but not always) have beaten the throw.

## Wide throws to first.

On a wide throw to first on the home side of the diamond, the one-step fair technique allows the umpire to remain stationary with only having to flash their eyes to the fielder's glove and have a perfect view of any possible tag. Umpires who move farther into the diamond toward a 90-degree angle must move immediately and quickly toward the foul line to have any hope of seeing the tag.

For a throw that pulls the first baseman toward the right field side of first, just slide a couple of quick steps toward home as you won't have a swipe tag. At that point your only concern is whether the fielder keeps her foot on the bag. Moving slightly toward home dramatically improves your angle on the fielder's foot.

# KNOW THE DP/FLEX RULES

In order to understand the DP/Flex rule, umpires must first recall a few other rules:

- **A batter may only bat in one position in the batting order.**
- **All players (both starters and substitutes) are permitted to re-enter the game one time;** they can leave and come back once (Exception: Only a starting player may re-enter the game in NCAA).
- **If a team wishes to use a DP/Flex, the team must have the DP/Flex on the official lineup card at the start of the game.** Once the lineup is official, a team cannot add a DP/Flex. • **When using the DP/Flex, the lineup can go from 10 to nine to 10 players any number of times, provided no other rule is violated, like substitutions.**

• **No one is considered to have left the game until she has been removed from the batting order.** However, the Flex is considered to have left the game any time she is substituted for or the DP plays defense for her. With that basic background, an umpire only needs to remember two rules regarding the DP/Flex:

– The Flex may only enter the game on offense in the original DP's batting position. Therefore, the DP and Flex may never be on offense at the same time.

– The Flex may never play offense only. Why? Because in order for the Flex to play offense, the DP has to leave the game. Thus, the Flex assumes both the offensive and defensive roles.

• **The DP may never play defense only.** Why? Because the DP must remain on the lineup card (in her original batting position); thus, she must always be on offense if she is in the game.

There is no DP/Flex violation if none of these three fundamental rules are violated. However, there still may be some other violation.

Probably the most inappropriately handled DP/Flex change occurs when the coach has the DP play defense.

That is permissible, as it does not violate one of the three fundamental rules. In order to have the DP play defense, the coach has two options:

– The Flex can leave the game, reducing the number of players from 10 to nine.

– The Flex can continue to play defense only and another player in one of the nine batting positions can simply play offense only. For practical purposes, the umpire can consider that player who is now only batting a temporary DP. However, the umpire must keep in mind that the Flex cannot enter into the temporary DP's batting position. In order for the Flex to bat, she must enter the game into the original DP's batting position. The plate umpire must ask the coach which of those two options the coach wishes to exercise.

When making lineup changes, coaches often give a player's first or last name or uniform number. However, when changes involve the DP/Flex, the umpire must translate the names or numbers into DP/Flex terms.

## LOOK THE PART, HAVE PRESENCE

The cliché about first impressions is exponentially true for softball umpires. Appearance is a general term, but applies to fitness, mobility and uniform. Presence also is a general term and often is a factor that combines with appearance for a positive perception from the get-go of any game.

### **Fitness.**

That can be defined as being in good physical condition but does not refer to weight. There are many excellent umpires who are not poster persons for health clubs, but keep themselves in shape, can move quickly and are in good health. There are also many umpires who work hard to achieve the proper weight based on recognized guidelines, such as the government's body mass index charts. Either way, it is important for an umpire to be in good physical condition.

### **Mobility.**

That is the ability to move appropriately around the playing field as required by each play situation. Sometimes that means a slight movement of a few feet and other times it means running at almost full speed to get quickly to an impending close play. Some examples based on a two-umpire system may help. With no runners on base and a ball hit sharply to the shortstop, the base umpire needs to move only three or four steps into fair territory to get the best angle for the force play at first base. But what a difference between umpires who do that crisply and quickly, and those who walk nonchalantly into position.

## **Uniforms.**

Be aware of the requirements of the organization for which you are umpiring and follow them exactly. If your organization requires a patch on the shirt, make sure your shirt has one.

Other necessary requirements for your uniform include shined shoes, black belt without an ornamental clasp, clean hat, unwrinkled heather gray pants and shirt. Do not take any of those requirements for granted. Show up for every game looking as sharp as possible.

## **Making unnecessary calls.**

A foul ball straight to the backstop or into the stands doesn't require the big call. It doesn't require any call. Yet it's surprising how many plate umpires, and even some base umpires, make a production over such an obvious play. The time to make the big call is when there is a doubt as to whether the ball was trapped or a fielder maintained possession after the catch.

## **Use of the indicator.**

How many times have you seen a plate umpire call a pitch then hold the indicator right in front of his face as he advances the count? Umpires sometimes give the impression they've never seen an indicator before. Notch your indicator wheels at "zero" and you'll cut down on the need to constantly check the count. If you have to check your indicator, do it while holding it down to your side (making sure no play is possible, of course). Another way to check is to sneak a look while adjusting your mask with your left hand. In any event, be inconspicuous.

## **Giving the count.**

It's not necessary to give the count to one dugout, then the pitcher, then the other dugout. Remember that people can't always see the count, but they can often hear it. Therefore when you give the count visually, also give it verbally. It's best to give it, "Two balls, one strike," as opposed to, "Twenty-one" or "Two and one." Also, when you give the count visually, use the middle finger and the index finger to indicate a two ball or two strike count. Don't use the index finger and the little finger. When you give the count, give it in an authoritative manner and face the pitcher.

## **Attitude.**

Work the game as hard as you can and give the impression that you are happy to be umpiring that game.

## **Hustle.**

Hustle plays a major part in the game. Not only does it help you get into position to get plays right, but it also instills respect among players and coaches. If you hustle throughout the game as opposed to walking and meandering around the field, a coach will give you the benefit of the doubt on a close play. Instead of arguing, he might stay in the dugout. Or instead of going ballistic during the argument, he or she might come out and ask for information.

**Please see additional comments below!**

# FHSAA Comments on referee.com's Next Level Softball Training

## **BEFORE THE GAME**

**Arrival time.** FHSAA umpires should be at the school or field at least 30 minutes prior to scheduled game time. If you are unable to meet this because of work schedule or traffic, be sure that you notify your partner(s) and the home coach of the time you expect to arrive.

**Pregame conference.** The plate umpire should have a thorough understanding of the ground rules. Go over them with the home coach before the meeting so you fully understand everything. Then ask the home coach to go “around the field” with ground rules during the plate conference.

**Observing warm-up pitches.** The plate umpire should observe 2-3 pitches from both starting pitchers from behind the plate. Get in your stance behind the catcher for a couple of warm-up pitches before the top and the bottom of the first inning.

## **GET IN THE ZONE**

**Stance.** The Heel-Toe Stance in the Slot Position with a Good Pelvic Alignment to the front outside corner of the plate is the only acceptable stance for FHSAA Softball. However, the hand placement requirement is waived. Hands will be in front of the body, in the best working position for the individual umpire.

**Make it clear to the batter.** FHSAA umpires will verbalize “strike” or “ball” in the down position. If it is a called strike, stand, then give a solid hammer in the up position.

## **TRACKING PITCHES**

FHSAA umpires should track the ball with their eyes and nose all the way to the glove.

### **Head height and positioning.**

When you position yourself in the slot, have your inside ear on the corner of the plate. Never drop your chin below the top of the catcher’s helmet.”

### **Tracking the pitch as the plate umpire.**

Again, FHSAA umpires will track the ball with their eyes and nose.

## **ON THE BASES**

No additional comments or clarifications are needed for Week 4.

## ILLEGAL PITCHES

### No Wipe

Dirt is not a foreign substance. It is part of the softball field. A pitcher who brushes her hand in the dirt or in the chalk is **NOT** required to wipe the hand.

### Taking the Signal in the Set Position

Like USA Softball, NCAA, and USSSA, FHSAA pitching rules require the pitcher to have the non-pivot foot in contact with the pitcher's plate until she takes her forward stride.

## GOING BEYOND THE BOOKS

### Runner struck by thrown ball running toward a fielder. Leaping

The word "Leaping" does not belong in this section title.

## BANG-BANG PLAYS AT FIRST

The one-step fair (1SF) position is not correct for umpires in Florida. It is the Next Level Softball author's personal opinion. Base umpires should follow NFHS and USA softball mechanics. Move to a position 90-degrees to the path of the throw—BUT no farther than a 45-degree angle from the first base line. Maintain a distance of 18-21 feet.

## DP / FLEX

No additional comments or clarifications are needed for Week 8.  
Review the new NFHS Appendix H covering the DP and Flex.

## LOOK THE PART, HAVE PRESENCE

**Giving the Count.** You are giving the count to the pitcher. Make sure she is facing you before you give the count. The batter and catcher can hear your verbal. Use consecutive fingers on the left hand for balls, and the right hand for strikes. Always verbalize the number of balls and the number of strikes. An 0-2 count is, "No balls, two strikes." It is not, "Two strikes" or "Oh and two."  
Review the Field Presence document on the FHSAA Softball OneDrive Training site.