

Plan for Success Behind the Plate

Other than a few gifted umpires, most of us must learn and reinforce a solid plan to have success behind the plate. Consistent umpiring is based on following good habits and behavioral patterns.

Here is a solid formula that will lay the foundation for position, stance, and mechanics:

First, start off relaxed. Either stand up or crouch with hands on knees. Either way you should use the time between pitches to breath and pace yourself.

Next, you must develop a sense of positioning. You must know in advance of dropping into your stance where your head will go for the best vantage point. This spot, relative to the slot, must essentially remain the same for your entire career. With practice and experience you will find the location and angle for your head so your eyes can track the ball and finish on the catcher's mitt.

When the pitcher is on the rubber, you should arrange your feet and body so all you have left to do is drop into your stance and final position. Your stance should keep you safe, comfortable, balanced and mobile. If you are struggling with a stance, work with a high-level veteran umpire to help you get there.

Next, as the pitcher reaches back to deliver, you must drop down into position while locking in with your head in the pre-determined position. Drop down using a "quick snap" motion. This "snap" is the defining lock-in that will keep you from moving; a slow movement into place will never give you a defined lock-in and may lead to occasional moving or drifting – a recipe for inconsistency.

Now the pitch is on its way. There are 4 steps to follow here that will maximize your ability to get it right: tracking, processing, deciding, and rendering. For the steps to work, each must be completed separately before moving on to the next one.

First is tracking. The natural tendency will be to judge the pitch when it is in flight. This will get you in trouble so slow it all down and let it come to you. Your only job when the ball is in flight is to move your eyes (or "track") the ball to the mitt. With experience and confidence, you will be able to avoid prejudging.

The next step is processing what you saw. Now that the ball is in the mitt, run it back in your mind. Often referred to as "timing", it is actually the use of that time that counts. Proper processing will automatically give you proper timing.

The next step is the actual decision. After processing the information, make your decision and then render that decision. One of the biggest mistakes an umpire can make is to begin coming up from the stance to render before consciously making a decision. This act can "box" you into a decision that you would not have otherwise made. This is a product of overlapping the steps. If your strike mechanic itself involves multiple steps (such as vocalize first), you are more likely to rush "processing" and "deciding" while jumping to "rendering", so a compact strike mechanic is helpful. Although there may be a mere second between the ball leaving the mound and the call, the key is to keep the steps separated.

Consistently following this pattern will lead to consistent judgment and plate performance. There's no magic – just hard work.