

CHAPTER 3

WORKING THE PLATE

THOUGH ALL PHASES OF UMPIRING ARE IMPORTANT, A PROSPECTIVE UMPIRE MUST PROVE HIS ABILITY TO CALL BALLS AND STRIKES IF HE IS TO EXCEL AND BUILD A SOLID REPUTATION AS THE *COMPLETE UMPIRE*. GOOD JUDGMENT IS NATURALLY A PREREQUISITE FOR ACCOMPLISHING THIS TASK. JUDGMENT ALONE, HOWEVER WILL NOT SUFFICE. ONE MUST UNDERSTAND THE MANY FACETS OF *WORKING THE PLATE*. THESE INCLUDE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF THE STRIKE ZONE, THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPER POSITIONING, AND THE CRITICAL NEED FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE MECHANICAL TECHNIQUES.

INSIDE PROTECTOR

Assume a position behind the catcher looking between the catcher and the batter; you must be able to clearly see the pitcher, the entire plate and the batter's knees. To see all of those elements, it is important to move into "the slot" --that area between the catcher and the batter. The farther you are into the slot, the better you will see the strike zone. Two additional factors have tremendous impact on your view of the strike zone: head height and stability. Your head should be positioned so the bottom of your chin is even with the top of the catcher's helmet. If you work with your head lower, your view of the knee-high pitch at or near the outside corner of the plate will be restricted. The head is straight ahead looking at the pitcher. Your ear closest to the catcher should be just to the outside of the catcher's shoulder. These are good starting positions. From the moment the pitcher releases a pitch until the ball arrives in the catcher's glove, your head should remain absolutely still. If your head moves at all, your view of the strike zone will be blurred and your judgment will be inconsistent.

Assume your crouch when the pitcher is about to release the ball. You'll view the pitch from between the batter and catcher. Don't go down too early, for you will put unnecessary strain on your muscles. Relaxation between pitches is very important. Many umpires wear themselves out for the late innings by staying in a set position for long a period of time. The upper body should remain in an almost upright position.

One important note, don't kneel down to view the pitch. You must remember that in a two or three-man crew, the plate

umpire often covers third base. Going to third from a standing position is far easier and quicker than trying to get there from your knees. (It's true that some great umpires kneel; there are usually exceptions to every rule. But, unless you're an exceptionally fast umpire, stay in a crouch, not on a knee.) When kneeling, you give the impression that you are physically tired.

Which ever position you use, it is important that you do not put a hand on the catcher or position himself against the catcher. Your hands should be kept in front of you. You may hang them at the side of your legs, hold them together in front of you or hold on to your thighs. Don't put your hands over your shin guards at the knees or put them on the catcher. This practice always looks bad to the spectators.

THE PLATE UMPIRE AT WORK

When working behind the plate or on the bases, use the indicator in your left hand. A little bit of experimentation will show that it was not made for the right. Use of the indicator in the left hand frees the right for use in calling strikes. It is very difficult to change the indicator with the right hand and there is danger of throwing it away while calling pitches.

The mask is removed as often as possible when the plate umpire is not actually engaged in calling balls and strikes. The left hand is used in removing the mask, shift the indicator so the thumb is free. Grasp the mask so that the thumb is at the side of or under the jaw. Remove the mask by lifting out first, then up. By using this method, you can be sure that your cap will remain on your head. By keeping the mask in your left hand you will avoid the danger of hitting a player with it or throwing it while calling a runner out. Most people feel that the out signal looks better if made with an empty right hand.

In calling a batted ball hit down the baseline, the plate umpire should remove his mask as soon as the ball is hit. Hustle up the baseline as far as possible(30/45 foot line is recommended). Be sure to stop before it is time to make your decision. On a hard hit ball the umpire may not have time to remove his mask or get to the baseline. Do the best you can.

The plate umpire should make the decision on the batter running inside/outside the three foot line and interfering with the first baseman taking the throw. This play occurs only on a bunt or slow roller down the first baseline, therefore,

he should be in good position while the base umpire probably will not.