



IN THE 'TRY RIGHT ZONE'

Have a Ball by Calling More Strikes

By Nathan Huang

The plate umpire in fast-pitch softball faces the demanding task of making split-second rulings hundreds of times each game, regardless of the competition level. Those who perform that responsibility best have one thing in common: consistency.

The concept of calling balls and strikes is straightforward. Each rules code defines the strike zone in specific language. In practice, however, things are more complicated. Pitches often

change direction as they approach home plate, darting up or down, left or right.

Batters can be taller or shorter, and the size of the strike zone from top to bottom changes accordingly. Those batters may use an unorthodox stance, which forces the plate umpire to visualize the proper strike zone based on the "natural batting stance" specified in the rules codes of the NCAA, USA Softball, NFHS and the USSSA.

"The rulebook is our standard," said Arthur "Butch" Andrey, the

rules interpreter for the Chester County Chapter of Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association softball umpires. "But it's still your judgment. If you want that perfect strike zone, better turn on that (video) machine."

Achieving consistency while calling balls and strikes starts with the definition of the strike zone. In NFHS, USA and USSSA, it is the space over home plate between the batter's armpit and the top of the knees when the batter assumes a natural batting stance. The NCAA



Good head height, a solid stance and positioning himself in the slot will help James Basinger, Greenfield, Wis., maintain a good strike zone from start to finish.

specifies the bottom of the batter's sternum instead of the armpit.

All rules codes specify that a pitch should be judged as it crosses home plate in flight, and a strike should be called on a pitch in which any part of the ball passes through the strike zone and the batter does not swing.

NCAA rules offer additional guidance to help umpires develop consistency in calling balls and strikes. The rulebook notes the width of the strike zone is fixed regardless of the batter. The plate itself is 17 inches wide and the diameter of a

softball is 3.82 inches, making the actual width of the strike zone 24.64 inches when the inner edge of the ball is over the edge of the plate.

As a result, umpires should pay particular attention to the six-inch area between the edge of the plate and the inner edge of the batter's box, often called "the river." A pitch in that area should be ruled a strike only if any part of the ball passes over at least the edge of the plate.

Umpire Brandon Hibbler, Schnecksville, Pa., said developing a consistent strike zone is a key to ensuring a game proceeds smoothly. His approach is to be aggressive in calling strikes from the start of the game. He also pays close attention to whether a pitcher is focusing on the inside portion of the plate.

"I'm not going to give a pitcher (called strikes in) the river if she's not hitting it consistently. That's what she's taught," said Hibbler, who is in his seventh season as an NCAA umpire and has 10 years of NFHS experience, including a Pennsylvania state championship game. "You want to have a good flow to the game. If a pitcher throws strikes, you're going to have a good flow. Having a consistent strike zone sets the tone. You're really there for 14 innings (the seven innings for each team's pitcher).

"You don't want a coach frustrated about the strike zone early in the game. You always hear a coach complain because the strike zone is too tight, not too wide. You want to make the batter swing instead of making the pitcher work so hard."

For Sonny Pompilii, of Chester, Pa., who began his umpiring career in 1970, consistency in calling balls and strikes starts with positioning. He stresses the importance of lining up in the slot position, which the various mechanics manuals describe as assuming a heel-toe stance behind the catcher, aligned slightly inside the inside corner of home plate and outside the perimeter of the strike zone.

He also suggests umpires be conscious of how far behind the catcher they line up. Pompilii recommends a distance of six to

DID YOU KNOW?

Lewis Rober Sr., then a lieutenant with the Minneapolis Fire Department, invented a version of softball in 1879 in an effort to keep his firemen fit during their idle time. Rober decided to use the vacant lot adjoining the firehouse and laid out bases with a pitching distance of 35 feet. His ball was a small-sized medicine ball and the bat was two inches in diameter.



QUICK TIP

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.

TOOLS

Umpires Quiz

The annual softball umpires quiz, prepared by the editors of *Referee*, is available free on the internet. To download the 20-question quiz — or to take an online version — visit Referee.com. Test your knowledge of USA Softball, NCAA, NFHS and USSSA softball rules.



TEST YOURSELF

Each of the following includes a situation and possible answer(s). Decide which are correct for USA Softball, NFHS, NCAA or USSSA rules and which might vary.

Solutions: p. 105.

1. In a fast-pitch game, R3 is on third base with one out. B1 hits a one-hopper to F1, who holds the ball motionless in the pitcher's circle as R3 holds her ground about five feet off third base.

a. R3 is out for violating the look-back rule if she doesn't immediately move one way or the other.

b. The ball is immediately dead.

c. R3 is not in violation of the look-back rule.

2. Fast pitch. Preliminary to the delivery:

a. Both of the pitcher's feet must be in contact with the pitcher's plate.

b. Both of the pitcher's feet must be in contact with the pitcher's plate and at least one half of the pivot foot must be on the top surface of the rubber.

c. The pitcher's pivot foot must be on or partially on the top of the plate and the non-pivot foot can be on or behind the plate.

d. Only the pivot foot must be in contact with the pitcher's plate.

3. Obstruction occurs when:

a. A fielder impedes a runner as the fielder is about to receive a thrown ball.

b. F6 accidentally impedes R1, who is advancing on B1's extra base hit to the outfield.

c. F1 blocks B1's path, causing B1 to break stride when F3 is fielding a batted ball.

d. All of the above.

4. When a runner passes an unobstructed preceding runner:

a. The preceding runner is out immediately.

b. The following runner is out immediately.

c. The ball is dead.

d. The ball is delayed-dead.

e. The ball is live.

5. B1 is ejected from the game. As a result:

a. B1 may remain in the dugout but shall not remain on the playing field or communicate with opponents or umpires.

b. B1 shall remain in the dugout/bench area.

c. B1 must leave the grounds and have no contact with umpires or participants.

d. B1 may be asked to leave the park at the discretion of the umpire and the tournament director.

10 inches. Too far back can cause umpires to not accurately judge the bottom of the strike zone and the outside corner of the plate.

From the slot, Pompilii advises umpires to focus on reaching the set position, the downward movement in which the umpire will lock the position of his or her head in order to judge the pitch. The key is to correctly time the movement to the set position as the pitcher prepares to throw.

"You've got to see the ball released. If you don't see the release, the ball's going to explode on you when it gets to the plate," said

"If the catcher catches the ball with her glove up, it's usually a strike. If she catches the ball with her glove down, it's usually a ball.

"I look at the batter's elbows," he continued. "Just about all of them, the elbows are right at the sternum (when taking their stance). Have your eyes just below the top of the (strike) zone. That way you aren't going to call a high strike. That's the toughest pitch to hit in fast-pitch softball."

While the ability to call a consistent strike zone involves a variety of factors and how each umpire implements them, most

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Pompilii, who has officiated two International Softball Federation world championship tournaments and is the District 6 umpire-in-chief and a state deputy UIC for USA Softball of Pennsylvania. "A lot of new umpires go down as the pitcher is breaking her hands, getting ready to pitch, and they're still going down as the catcher is catching the ball. I'd rather have them set up early, before the pitch is released, than late. You have to be still. Keep your head stationary, track the ball with your nose into the glove."

When it comes to judging pitches, Pompilii said he focuses on positioning of the batter and the catcher in order to provide visual cues that help him achieve a consistent strike zone.

"Use the catcher as a tool, as far as her two shoulders and two knees, for the perimeter of the strike zone. If she catches it within that perimeter, nine times out of 10 it's going to be a strike," said Pompilii, a 30-year collegiate umpire who has worked five NCAA Division II national championship tournaments.

umpires agree on one concept: A pitch that is called a strike in the first inning must be called a strike in the last inning. Umpires should not change their interpretation of the strike zone as the game goes on.

"Whatever I call for one team, I'm going to call for the other team," said Andrey, an East Fallowfield, Pa., resident who has more than 20 years of NFHS experience and 12 years as a collegiate umpire.

Andrey said his approach to achieving a consistent strike zone involves confidence, concentration and comfort.

"Confidence is No. 1; being prepared is the big thing, so I'm confident. ... Understand situations of the game and the batter," Andrey said. "Be comfortable. Make sure you see the pitch. You don't want to hide behind the catcher. And you have to concentrate on every pitch. You can always make a mistake (if you lose concentration), and that mistake can get you in trouble."

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