



Phil Cuzzi, of Nutley, N.J., making a safe call in a 2012 NLDS game, knows the importance of good timing, and he has a few tricks to help get himself back on track if he's feeling too quick behind the plate.

## THERE'S NO RUSH

Here's How You Get Timing 'On Your Side'

By Bill Madden

Veteran MLB umpire Phil Cuzzi remembers the exact moment when he recognized the importance of timing in the craft of baseball umpiring.

"I had just finished umpire school in 1983 and I drove up to Pawtucket from my home in New Jersey to watch John Hirschbeck work a Triple-A

plate game," Cuzzi said. "I clearly remember the first pitch coming in, hitting the catcher's glove and after a full second John calling a strike. At that moment, a light bulb went off for me about timing."

The NFHS baseball rulebook makes no mention of timing, yet it is often the determining factor in assessing the ability of an umpire. Mastering it is key to advancement. In

the fraternity of college, minor league and major league umpires, timing is valued as a precious skill.

"I don't know if there is anything more important than timing in either working the plate or the bases," said Cuzzi, who finished his 18th year in the majors in October 2016 with his fifth straight postseason assignment. "Good timing leads to good judgment. It is one of the most important skills

BILL NICHOLS



to learn. After major league games, we always talk about calls that we miss and timing is often the reason for them on both pitches and plays."

Cuzzi shared three tactics that he uses to give him an "extra second" when his timing is "too quick" behind the plate during a game:

- "I will squeeze my thigh very tightly with my hand and not release it until I am ready to make my call."
- "I'll hold my breath when the pitch is released and then exhale when the catcher receives the ball."
- "I will call the pitch in my head first before signaling my call."

Former major league umpire Jim Evans, now a special umpire advisor in minor league baseball and regarded as one of the game's finest teachers, includes timing as one of his well-documented "Seven Laws of Umpiring."

In his "Sixth Law," Evans distinguishes between "the call" and "the signal." The law specifically states, "The call is a mental process and the signal is physical. Without a doubt, the greatest cause of missed calls is quick timing, making a decision before the play is completely over. Ask any umpire and he will tell you that he is often the first to realize it when he has missed a call. To develop good timing, it is critical you understand that an umpire's job on each pitch or play is a two-part process — the call and the signal."

"The call is the decision-making process. You observe the play and gather all the information you need to render a correct decision. Then after all the facts are in and you have interpreted them, you make your decision ... ball or strike, safe or out, fair or foul, catch or no-catch. At this point, no participant on the field nor any fan in the stands has any idea what your final decision is but the call has already been made. The verdict is in, but it has not been announced to the court. Once this first process has been completed, it is time to inform the world of your decision. Now, and not a nanosecond sooner, is the time for the signal. A signal should never be given while the brain is still processing the play."

Timing on the bases is just as

important as in plate work. Ed Incle, who has 37 years of minor league, college and high school umpiring experience, remembers a time in the Florida State League when he learned a valuable lesson about timing.

"I was missing close plays at first base for about five or six games and it unfortunately led to a few ejections," said Incle, who worked six years in affiliated and unaffiliated minor league ball. "I realized that I had a bad habit of anticipating and not seeing the whole play."

Incle breaks down the process of making a call on a pitch or play into these simple steps: 1) Get set; 2) See the pitch (or play); 3) Listen; 4) Make a decision; 5) Make a call. Incle now mentors many young umpires in Rockland County, N.Y., and believes it takes several years to develop advanced timing.

"In my opinion, it takes a good, solid five years to develop your own rhythm and timing behind the plate," Incle said. "I've noticed that young umpires who have super quick timing usually make many mistakes. To me, it is a difference of only one or two seconds."

There are many drills used at camps and clinics to help umpires improve their timing. According to Cuzzi, a common drill is for instructors to tell student umpires not to call a pitch until the instructor tells him to do so. The instructor waits 2-3 seconds after the catcher receives the ball before permitting the umpire to make a call. "Instructors exaggerate the timing in this drill but it helps the umpire to slow down." Incle remembers instructors at the Bill Kinnamon Umpire School "always trying to slow us down by urging us to stay down for a count before coming up with a call." Camp instructors even resort to unorthodox drills like asking plate umpires in the cage to close their eyes and make a strike call only after they hear the sound of the pitch hitting the catcher's mitt.

"One of my regular high school partners now likes to slow himself by forcing himself to look at the trademark on the catcher's mitt, like Wilson or Mizuno, before making his

## DID YOU KNOW?

One would think expressing sentiments of physical harm toward an umpire would always result in an ejection. But umpire Bill Byron said he once was so impressed with a player's retort that he didn't eject him from the game. The Feb. 3, 1917, issue of *The Chicago Eagle* said the incident occurred after Byron called a batter out at the plate in Newark. "The player arose, dusted off his uniform, and then pointing to the chimney which towers high over the field, he said to Byron: 'Bill, I ain't sayin' nothin' to you. I ain't makin' no kick or nothin', but I hope that that chimney falls on you and hits you one brick at a time.' Bill says the hope was so soothing and so original that he did not put the player out of the game."

SOURCE: THE CHICAGO EAGLE

## QUICKTIP

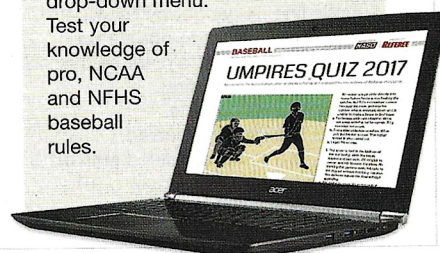
Umpire training tends to hammer home the phrase, "Angle, then distance," noting that getting a good angle to see the play is primary and getting closer is secondary. If you're fortunate enough to have a good angle and can close the distance, remember closer is better, up to a point. Get too close and it's tough to see all the elements of the play. **The optimal distance on a tag play is between 8-10 feet; 15-18 feet on a force play.** As you gain experience, those distances can be adjusted to fit your own ability.

## TOOLS

### Umpires Quiz

The annual baseball umpires quiz, prepared by the editors of *Referee*, is available free on the Internet. To download the 20-question quiz and answers, go to [referee.com](http://referee.com). Find sport-specific quizzes under the "Resources" drop-down menu.

Test your knowledge of pro, NCAA and NFHS baseball rules.





# 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. With R2 on second, F1 momentarily stops during his delivery and then immediately continues. B1 lines a single scoring R2. A balk is called.
  - a. The ball is immediately dead.
  - b. The ball is delayed dead.
  - c. R2 is allowed to score and B1 remains on first.
  - d. R2 is awarded third and B1 must return to bat.
  - e. The offensive team may choose between c and d.
2. With no runners on base, B1 hits a high fly to short center. The wind-blown ball eludes F8 as B1 pulls into second. B1 rounds second, feints to third and is on his way back to second, when F8 fires the ball over F5's head into the dugout. B1 is awarded:
  - a. Second (the base he was approaching).
  - b. Third.
  - c. Home.
3. With R1 on first and R2 on second and none out, B1 hits a towering fly ball which F4, standing in the baseline, settles under. Neither umpire declares the infield fly. F4 allows the ball to drop as both runners attempt to advance. F4 fields the ball, tags R1 and fires to third for the tag on R2. B1 holds safely at first. After the play, the umpires confer and recognize it was an obvious infield fly.
  - a. B1 is out.
  - b. The play stands.
  - c. Triple play.
  - d. R1 and R2 return to first and second, respectively.
4. With R1 on first and R3 on third and one out, the suicide squeeze is called and both runners break with the pitch. B1's bunt, a pop up down the first-base line, is caught by F2, who then fires to first to double up R1. R3 crosses the plate as the ball is enroute to first.
  - a. The run counts.
  - b. The run is canceled.
  - c. The run is canceled only on appeal.

call," Incle said. "Umpires need to develop their own triggers."

Timing is not easy to grasp and some umpires never achieve the necessary pacing to move up to higher levels of baseball.

"I've seen guys at umpire schools who just don't get it and never make

the adjustments needed to have good timing," Cuzzi said. "There is an old saying in umpiring, 'It's nothing until I call it.' That says it all. There is no reason to rush."

*Bill Madden, Stony Point, N.Y., is a high school baseball umpire and a former sports editor of a daily newspaper. □*

# Check-up on Checked-Swing Assistance

By Brent Killackey

The lead photo in the 2/17 softball section (shown below) caused quite a stir among baseball umpires. Several wrote to express their displeasure with *Referee* magazine for displaying a plate umpire asking for help on a half swing by pointing with his right hand.



Hold onto your hats, baseball umpires. That's the correct mechanic in softball, where some manuals prescribe stepping out, removing the mask with the left hand and pointing to the appropriate base umpire with the right hand. (See page 25 for further details.)

On the baseball side, pointing with the right hand on a request for help on a half swing remains a no-no, largely because some umpires signal a strike with a right-handed point. There's a risk for confusion between a point for help on a half swing and a point for calling a strike. Pointing with the left — as the umpire is doing in this month's cover photo — makes it completely clear the umpire is going

for help. (Also note that baseball umpires will request help without removing their mask.)

A plate umpire will go for help only after calling a ball on a half swing. If a strike is called, there is no appeal.

There is a rules wrinkle among the different codes about what an umpire must do when a coach or player requests that a plate umpire get help on a half swing.

Under pro and NCAA rules, if an umpire calls a ball on a half swing and a player or coach requests an appeal, the plate umpire must get a judgment by a base umpire (NCAA 3-6f; pro 8.02c Cmt.). The ball remains live on an appeal of a half swing; baserunners and fielders have the responsibility to remain alert, such as if the half swing occurred on a dropped third strike, and the call is changed from ball to strike on appeal.

In NFHS, an umpire is not required to go for help on a checked swing when it's requested (10-1-4a). But it's a good practice to do so. Unless you're looking to unnecessarily ratchet up the tension between yourself and the coach or player, nothing good comes from denying that request.

What about the two-umpire system when the base umpire is in B or C? There are some plate umpires who outline in the pregame that they simply want their call confirmed if the base umpire is in B or C. If we're working to get the calls right, if a partner really has information that changes a call, why not use it?