

An **UmpireBible** Publication

Working the Plate, Part 3:

Myths That Get in the Way of Calling Pitches

By Peter Osborne

This article is Part 3 of a three-part series, "Working the Plate," by Peter Osborne:

Part 1: The Basics

Part 2: Advanced Ball & Strike Calling

Part 3: Myths That Get in the Way of Calling Pitches

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Before we get into specific ideas for improving pitch calling, I need to question some popular myths that umpires hold dear. The following observations turn conventional wisdom among umpires on its head:

Coaches want to like the umpires

I am not sure that this is true, but I have become convinced that the following is true: "Coaches definitely do not want to hate or dislike the umpire!" Now, immediately your thoughts go to some crazy moron who actively hates umpires. This individual, however, is not in the majority or even a significant minority of coaches. Hate is a destructive, time consuming emotion and a smart coach is directing his thoughts to winning games.

Do not schmooze with the coaches but do not give the coaches any reason to dislike you. Just because they yell and scream at you does not mean that they dislike you. (Your wife or kids probably do this all the time but that does not mean they hate you.) This knowledge can make your job a lot more pleasant and your on field performance will improve. A happy worker is a better worker. The methods taught in pro school run counter to this wisdom. It would probably lead to less confrontation if minor league umpires recognized and dealt with the above observation.

Coaches are smarter than umpires

Say What? Osborne, you have flipped out at this point. Hang with me for a minute. The most common adjective used in umpire circles for the word "coach" is "stupid" as in "stupid coach". We umpires have confused knowledge of the rules and power with intelligence. We are more knowledgeable of the rules and we control the game but we are not smarter than the coaches.

Coaches, on the other hand, must constantly be developing new strategies and assessing the game in order to win. On your own, do a little investigating on what it takes to become an NCAA coach versus what it takes to become an NCAA umpire. They have a much more difficult climb up. In my area of the country, the same is true of high school coaches versus high school umpires or American Legion coaches versus American Legion umpires. What does this have to do with calling balls and strikes you might ask?

Successful coaches do not give competent umpires very much grief. Smart people do not antagonize powerful morons who they actually want to get along with. (The coaches know that they are smarter than we are.) This means two things. One, the stupid mind games that we think up to fool coaches are not necessary and will not work. Two, the coaches, in general, do not plot to make us look bad. This knowledge means that we can develop a plan to focus our attention on important things, like calling pitches.

Umpires should ignore heckling and other distractions

The last big myth that must be dealt with is that we can ignore the fans, derogatory comments from the dugouts, or other distractions. This may be the biggest umpire self-deception of them all

Umpires proudly say that they tune out the fans, ignore the chipping from the bench, etc., and then experience a meltdown of their normal performance when these events occur. I will relate three stories here to drive home the point that it is easier to put your hand in a candle and leave it there without moving it, than it is to "ignore the derogatory comments."

Several years ago I was in a group of umpires who went to a minor league ball game. We were sitting behind home plate and the meanest umpire I have ever known was part of our group. The plate man was having a good game and in about the fourth inning, the mean umpire said "I bet I can rattle this umpire." The rest of us said "No way. This is pro ball. These are pro umpires. Nothing that you can say will rattle them."

So the mean SOB started shouting insults at the plate umpire. He must have planned this in advance because he knew some personal information about the plate umpire, such as that he had a girl friend in town named Kathy whom he was staying with while he umpired this series for the Carolina League. When the plate man called a strike wide he shouted. "Are you trying to get home early.... You're being paid to umpire this game. Get your head back in it."

This went on for two innings with more and more suggestive comments before management came over and put an end to it. It was not the harassment that they minded, just the obscene nature of the comments. By this time, we all agreed that the mean umpire had won; the plate man's performance had completely deteriorated. The plate man had three more innings but he did not get his consistency back. After the game, an umpire from our group playing the good cop went to the umpire's dressing room to "apologize" for the mean umpire's comments. The game umpires let him in and assured him that it did not influence the game. They were engaged in the massive self deception that I so often see in umpires. The good cop umpire got two free tickets from the game umpires for their next game.

The next story also concerns a minor league game at the same ballpark. I knew the umpire on the plate but had never seen him work. I was sitting in ideal umpire evaluation seats, that is, in the front row, halfway between home plate and the first base dugout. This gives a great view of high/low and an okay view if in/out for right hand batters. As the plate man worked, I commented to John Porter sitting next to me, that this was an awful erratic strike zone for someone at this level. It was not noticeable to someone who did not know what to look for; I had just come to expect better in this league. Later I found out that the coach of one team had told each of his batters to go to the plate and give the plate man a little crap, not show him up for everyone to see, just little snide comments. (This obviously was not one of the smart coaches that we were just talking about.) It had its effect although this plate man would deny it to this day.

The last story concerns one of the best NCAA umpires in the state of Virginia. We were doing an NCAA level game and my partner had the plate. After the plate conference, but before the home team took the field, one of his contacts fell out in the dirt around home plate. No one saw this happen, and he panicked at the thought of doing the

game without the contact, but I bent down and found the contact in the dirt. He had his contact solution with him, so he washed it off and put it back in, and all should have been well. But I could see that he was losing his game face. I almost suggested that we delay the game and let me do the plate but then I thought to myself, "This is an umpire god. He will shake it off and refocus."

The resulting plate game was the most catastrophic collapse of a great umpire that I have ever seen. He had three or four gross misses in the first two innings. The fans were on him unmercifully. Finally, one of the assistant coaches of the losing team came out and went nose to nose with the plate umpire shouting insults at him. Of course he was ejected but this fired up the losing fans even more.

I then did something that I only do when I umpire with a weak partner. I look to start trouble to take the attention away from my partner and put it on me. The second baseman gave me the chance when he said to the shortstop, "This guy sucks." I turned around from the "B" position and ejected him. Since no one heard what the second baseman said, they all went ballistic at me. This continued for another half inning before it died down but at least my partner was no longer the center of attention and could get back to calling balls and strikes.

This last incident drove home to me that none of us are immune to distractions and insults. Rather than deny it, we need to realize that it affects us and that we need to learn tricks to minimize it. If top level umpires cannot "tune out," then the rest of us amateurs do not have a chance. G. Gordon Liddy could supposedly put his hand over a candle flame and leave it there. Can you? We umpires need to understand how negative events affect our game instead of saying that it does not happen.