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Working the Plate

As we've said already, working the plate is, in many respects, the cornerstone of the umpiring avocation. It's the image that comes to peoples' minds when they think of the baseball umpire. Of course, we know that umpiring is a team sport, and that everyone on the crew plays an indispensable role (and that a mistake from one is a mistake for all); but, that said, the plate umpire is, by rule, the umpire-in-chief and manager of the game.

Important: You should read this article together with its companion article, [Calling Balls & Strikes](#). The two should be read together.

We have a problem, though. More than any other subject covered by [UmpireBible](#), you can't teach anyone how to work the plate from the written word. It's like teaching golf out of a book. A book can help with the rules, and it can describe correct technique, but never in a thousand years will anyone learn to hit the ball by reading about it. A person has to go out and do it, and practice and practice, and they'll also need an observer and teacher. And over time, with repetition, they learn.

Which isn't to say this is a waste of time – talking about working the plate here in this article. The fact is, you can pick up some important information. And that's what we're going to focus on. The information. But to **really** learn how to work the plate, you're going to have to go out and just do it.

A great deal has been written over the years about working the plate, so I won't try to reinvent the wheel. Instead, let's start with two distinguished umpire-writers, Peter Osborne and Carl Childress. For over two decades a series of articles by these writers have played a role in the teaching umpires their craft. On many points, however, Osborne and Childress disagree. And that's the beauty of pairing them.

I encourage you to read for yourself Peter Osborne's three-part series, as well as Carl Childress's thoughtful two-part response. I draw largely on their insights and expertise in what follows.

By Peter Osborne:

[Part 1: Working the Plate: The Basics](#)

[Part 2: Advanced Ball and Strike Calling](#)

[Part 3: Myths that Get in the Way of Calling Pitches](#)

By Carl Childress:

[Working the Plate: Another View, Part 1](#)

[Working the Plate: Another View, Part 2](#)

Two important points about the Osborne and Childress articles: First off, they disagree on many points. Second, some of their guidance does not agree with current accepted practice. I see both points as advantages, not weaknesses.

We're going to cover three topics:

- [The Setup](#)
- [Tracking the Ball & Seeing the Pitch](#)
- [Timing Timing Timing](#)

The Setup

One of the biggest disagreements between Osborne and Childress is about the initial setup – the **box** vs. the **slot**. (The other setups that are mentioned, the scissors and the kneeling position, are outdated and seldom used; they are not recommended and I won't waste any time on them. For the record, current teaching focuses almost entirely on the slot.)

The Box

In the box position, the umpire lines up directly behind the catcher, about 12 inches behind, and positions his head so that his chin is no lower than the top of the catcher's head. Your feet are parallel, about shoulder width.

At one point, Osborne says about the slot position, "All good umpires in the U.S. work what is called the slot. If you do not work the slot, you will be perceived as inferior, regardless of what your actual results are."

This opinion is generally accepted as true, including by me. The box position is rarely used and is fading away. The slot is what you should focus on and learn. It's what almost all (in fact, probably all) umpire training schools and teacher instruct. If you decide to adopt the box, you'll be largely on your own.

Childress fleshes out the main deficiencies of the box: "The practical objection is that since few umpires use that stance, it's difficult to find good trainers. The philosophical objection is that the umpire is farther removed from the low pitch." This latter point frames the central problem with the box. While you have a good view of the edges of the plate, inside and outside, you have a terrible view of the low pitch. Given the extent to which modern pitching "lives low," this is a considerable problem. The modern strike zone is lower (by rule) than in bygone days, and with it the box setup has become obsolete.

The Slot

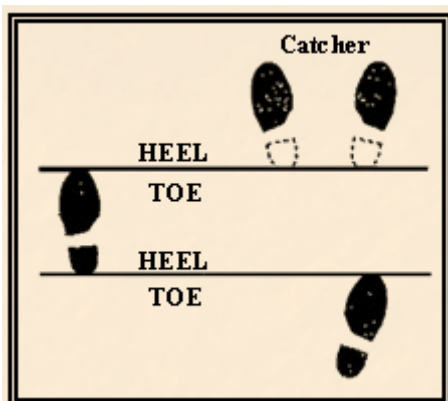
There is no perfect position for the plate umpire. Every position has certain deficiencies. We'll talk about the deficiencies of the slot position in a minute, but first let's learn it.

Important: As with many aspect of working the plate (and as we've said before) you're not going to learn proper setup in the slot position from a book (or web page). You need hands-on instruction. You need to be observed by a knowledgeable teacher who can correct your posture and positioning. You need to attend training sessions or clinics.

The literal "slot" is that open space between the batter and the catcher. You want your head in the slot so you can see the pitch all the way from the pitcher's release point to the catcher's glove, and you want to be able to see all of the plate.

In the slot position, then, the plate umpire places himself squarely in that opening. The head is positioned on the inside portion of the plate and the umpire's head is above the catcher's. The view of the plate is from the inside-top.

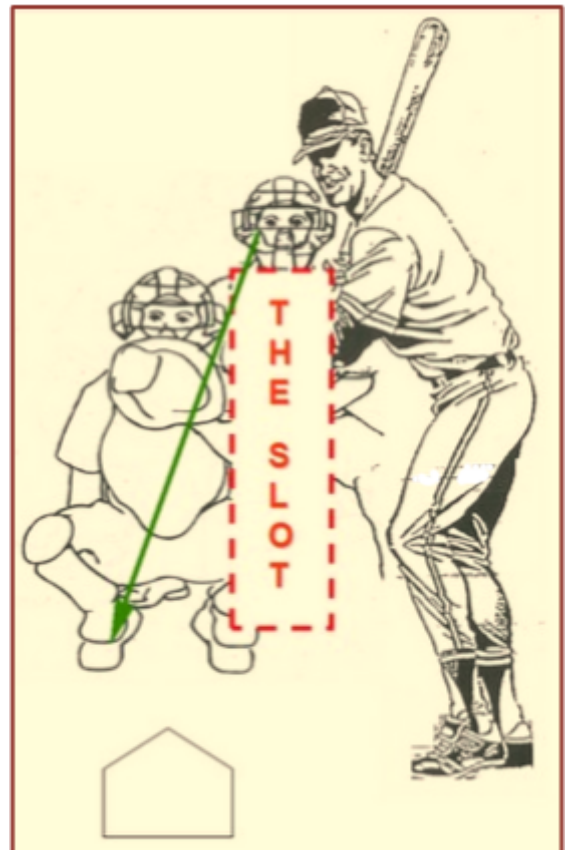
Let's look more closely, though, starting with the feet. You set up in the slot by stepping into position with your feet configured in the heel-toe.



Look at the image on the left, which depicts the heel-toe setup for a right-handed batter (left-handed batter is mirror image).

The left foot sets up in a position with its toe on a line created by the back of the catcher's feet. The right foot, then, lines its toe up on a line created by the back of the left foot. (Expressing it in words makes it sound confusing. Just look at the image.)

Note: This depiction of foot positions is for general guidance only. The umpire's height and other factors will affect how wide your feet are placed. The important part of the setup is positioning yourself so that your head is in the slot, and that you have full view of the plate.



This positioning gives you a nice stable base and allows you to drop into your stance quite easily by simply "sitting" into it. It also allows you to lower or raise your head height by simply spreading or narrowing your stance. The image on the right shows you the setup in a top-down view.

Osborne finishes off the setup this way: "Your nose ends up being lined up with the inside corner of the plate or slightly to its left [depending, in part, on how the catcher sets up], but never over the plate. Your body, because of the heel-toe alignment, is facing the second baseman, and pro school teaches that the head should be square to the pitcher. You are now in a position to accept the pitch. As the pitcher winds up you snap down so that the bottom of your chin is no lower than the top of the catcher's helmet."

Tracking the Ball & Seeing the Pitch

Can we all agree on one thing? That it's important for the plate umpire to see the pitch?

The number one requirement

The number one requirement for seeing the pitch is

keeping your head still and tracking the ball with your eyes. I put all of that in boldface because it is so important. In fact, this is so important that I'm going to say it again: ***The number one requirement for seeing the pitch is keeping your head still and tracking the ball with your eyes.***

This does not come naturally. You must train yourself to keep your head still and track the ball with your eyes, not your head. Our natural tendency is to turn our head as the ball approaches the catcher's glove. In fact, one of the biggest tip-offs that an umpire is not well trained is his tendency to move his head and sometimes even his body. On outside pitches, this movement is particularly noticeable.

Which brings us to the outside pitch

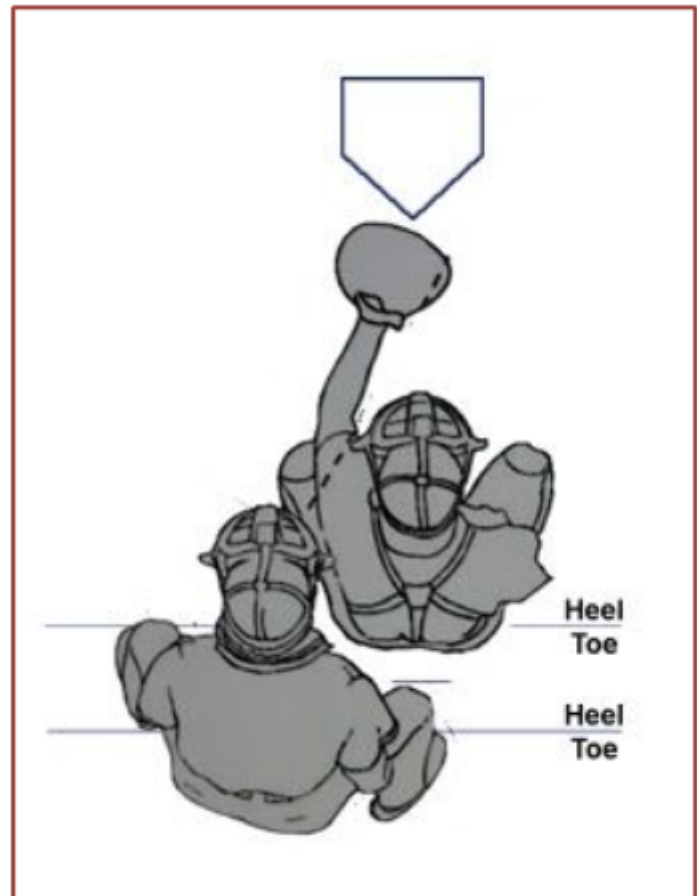
Both Osborne and Childress note that the weak spot (the main deficiency) of the slot position is difficulty calling the low-and-away pitch. In the slot position, your eye is at or near the top-inside corner of the strike zone. This makes low and away the farthest point from the eye.

I would even go a bit further and say that both of the outside corner pitches (high and low) are the most challenging pitches to call. Pitches up-and-away are the farthest from your primary reference points (plate, batter, catcher). More than any other pitch, up-and-away requires that you **know** it every bit as much as you **see** it. And that just takes practice.

Pitches inside, and the high stuff

Calling the inside pitch is relatively easy. Inside pitches are right in your face so they're pretty easy to call – so long as your timing is good (that is, you're not rushing it). Also, you're positioned such that a pitch off the plate inside is pretty easy to see as a ball. Your main concern on the inside pitch is high/low. But again, if your eye is at the top of the zone, the high strike inside is pretty much right in your face. The low one is just inches from the batter's knees, so your reference point is adjacent to the pitch.

The common mistake on the high pitch is calling a bad strike on a pitch just above the zone. Of course, when adjusting for age and level, it's the top of the zone that varies the most, so it's sometimes difficult to dial in the top of the zone if you move frequently from one age group to another. Most of us do. We talk more about this in [Calling Balls & Strikes](#).



Breaking balls

Calling breaking pitches are most challenging of all, particularly if your timing is too quick. On breaking pitches you have to be very attentive. A high breaking ball could "stick" the catcher's glove right at his chest, but still have come over the top of the zone. Same with cutters and sliders that move in and out. A ball can break sideways into or out of the zone at the last moment. You must be diligent on these. Most important is seeing the pitch all the way to the catcher's glove, resisting the temptation to call the pitch too quickly.

Of course, you tend to see pitches like these at higher levels – generally 14 and older – which is a level that, if you're a new umpire, you shouldn't be working yet. Instead, you can cut your teeth on the younger kids who pitch lollipop floaters that aren't really breaking balls, and yet cross the plate in much the same way. Rather than breaking, they're arcing across the plate, and these require the same attention as true breaking balls. These, again, you learn to see. And also demand good timing.

The number one mistake

The number one mistake you see with inexperienced umpires is their not seeing the ball all of the way to the catcher's glove. They see it most of the way, make their decision (ball or strike), and then the ball breaks or drops and you end up with a ball called strike or strike called a ball.

This happens unconsciously, of course. But it's still a perfect segway into the issue of timing, which is cause of this problem – poor timing, that is. A breaking pitch over the middle of the plate, but low (even in the dirt) **looks absolutely perfect when it's fifteen feet from the plate**. And that's where many inexperienced umpires are making their ball/strike decision – probably only a dozen thousandths of a second before the pitch reaches the catcher's glove. But if you're calling a pitch the instant it hits the catcher's glove, you're almost certainly making your decision while the ball is still in flight. And that's why those decisions are so often wrong.

Timing Timing Timing

If there's one area where Osborne and Childress agree wholeheartedly, it's on the matter of timing. Osborne puts it well:

Good timing is rarely seen in amateur umpires and adopting it is as close as you are going to get in finding a silver bullet in this article. There is probably no one thing that you can do which will immediately improve your performance as quickly as adopting good timing.

The first step in developing good timing is to see the pitch all of the way to the catcher's glove. You think you see it all the way, but you probably don't. You must train yourself to not just see the ball all the way to the catcher's mitt, but to then **notice** the position of the mitt. If you permit yourself to notice the position of the mitt after the catch, then you've seen the ball all the way.

The most uniformly prevalent bad habit we see in new umpires is the impulse to call balls and strikes quickly. The instant the ball hits the catcher's glove (and sometimes even before it hits the glove – believe it or not) you hear it: "steeee-Rike!" It's painful to watch because, as an experienced observer, you know that when the call is made simultaneously with the catch that the decision was made while the pitch was still in flight. We all did this when we first started out, but then we learned about proper timing.

The second and equally important step is to pause once the ball hits the mitt. This is a hard habit to develop because it doesn't feel natural. But it's critically important. You have to practice it.

Here's the drill. Once the ball pops the mitt, pause for a full second. During this pause, allow yourself to quickly replay the pitch, make your strike/ball decision, the vocalize your call silently to yourself, and only then do you verbalize "ball" or "strike." Let me reiterate:

- Once you've seen the ball hit the glove, replay the pitch in your mind.
- Make your decision – ball or strike.

- Vocalize your decision *silently* to yourself.
- Finally, verbalize your call – either come up with your strike call, or stay down and verbalize "ball."

This is going to feel awkward at first. It will seem like you're silent for a long time, for too long. But it's **not** a long time. It only feels that way.

What are the advantages of methodical timing? The advantages are several:

- First, and perhaps most importantly, concentrating on your timing prevents you from calling your pitches too quickly. That is your biggest enemy – the impulse to call your pitches rapidly.
- Good timing minimizes the tendency to make mistakes on close pitches, which helps ensure consistency. Consistency lives and dies on the corners. And few things get you in more hot water with coaches and pitchers than inconsistency with your strike zone. Coaches are not stupid. They can see when you're being inconsistent and they will call you out on this. That will unnerve you and make things even worse.
- Difficult corner pitches sometimes makes you stop and think. If you call your pitches quickly, but then come to a tough pitch and hesitate a moment while you think, this infrequent pause is nothing short of you shouting at the top of your lungs, "I'm not really sure about this one!." Believe me, everyone over nine years old will understand this. If, on the other hand, you give yourself time on every pitch, then only you (and maybe your catcher) will know the really tough ones.

Accuracy, consistency, fewer arguments, greater confidence – what's not to like about good timing. But, like everything else in umpiring mechanics, it takes practice. You have to train yourself (with some help from a good instructor) to find your timing, and to then ingrain it so that it becomes perfectly natural and remains consistent.