**Cleaning up our game** 

Below you will find a list of old habits and bad habits that are frequently observed when watching and evaluating umpires. As we all know, nothing gets corrected until it is identified. Read through the following list and see if it identifies with any of your habits. If so, work hard and focus to eliminate these habits and help “clean up your game”.

1. **Pointing at outs** – Where did this mechanic come from? For some umpires’ every time they prepare to call an “Out” they point at something and then call/signal “Out”. What are they pointing at? The runner? The base? We would think that it is pretty obvious as to the location of both the runner and the base, so there is no need to point.

There is only one mechanic where we point before the “Out” call. A “Swipe Tag” on the first base line is when it is used. It is pointed and stated “On the tag, He / She is out”. This mechanic is used in this situation to distinguish the difference between the tag for the out, as opposed to the typical force out at first.

1. **Ball watching/Back pedaling** – These are sometimes referred to as the “Killer B’s”. Ball watching will almost always make you late to getting into the proper position for your responsibilities on a play. You should read the ball coming off from the bat, pause only long enough to gauge direction and depth and then react. You don’t have time to watch and see if the ball is caught/fielded before reacting. Backpedaling will eventually get you on your back. Your movements on the field should be athletic. This includes cross-steps and drop-steps, which will prevent the need for backpedaling and allows you to be more balanced.
2. **Trailing the batter-runner without stopping** – We all know that with no runners on base on a ground ball to the infield; the plate umpire should trail the batter-runner down the first base line. The umpire is watching for a possible swipe-tag, a runner’s lane violation, a pulled foot or an overthrow. Except for the overthrow, these are all part of the play. In order to get the best look at the play, the umpire needs to be stopped, allowing the eyes to focus prior to the play. So remember to stop and read – see the play clearly.
3. **Making fair/foul decisions while not on the** **line –** We have all been taught that every time we make a fair/foul call we must be on the line. Being able to look down the line and seeing where the ball touches or is touched in relation to the foul line is the only way to get the close ones right. So why do we see umpires 2-3 feet off from the line, or even running away from the line and signaling fair/foul? Bad habits! On a batted ball that requires a fair/foul decision, your first move should be to straddle the line, come set, watch the ball and make the call. “IF” you feel that the ball is coming directly at you; your first thoughts must be to hold your ground and make the call. In those cases where you must abandon the line, always move into fair territory, give your partner the call, and pick up your next responsibility. Once you abandon the line; don’t come back to make the call. Doing so could result in the dreaded “Double call”.
4. **Calling obvious fouls** – All fair/foul decisions where the ball is between the coach’s box and the inside edge of the cut-out should be called. If the ball is down the outfield lines and touches or is first touched within approximately 20 feet of the line it should be called. But the ones that are really obvious to everyone, do not need to be called. Some examples include the ones up and over the fence, bounding off the bleachers or off from the backstop. So, if it is close to the lines or the limits listed above, then call it; otherwise let it go.
5. **Taking call in foul territory** – It seems that more and more umpires want to make the call from foul territory. If you are working a 2-man system, then you will be out of place for another responsibility. Aside from that, you will almost always be looking through a fielder trying to see the play at a base. Let’s look at a play at third base; The throw is coming from the outfield, the runner is advancing from second base and a tag is imminent. The umpire moves into foul territory behind the third baseman. Oh, let’s not forget the base coach is there too. This position results in a bad look at the play. Get into fair territory and get a good look at the front of the bag, that is where the action is.
6. **Safe signal with NO play** – Ever watched a game where the umpire is in position for a play at a base, but there is never a play, and the runner reaches the base; the umpire signals “safe”? Really? Glad you got that one right. If there is no play; there is no reason to make a call. This also applies to the runner crossing the plate, and the plate umpire signals “safe” or points at the plate, even though the ball is not even in the infield. If there is a pick-off attempt at first base, and the first baseman doesn’t even make a tag, what is there to call? Make the calls when there is a play, and don’t call the no plays.
7. **Getting hands on knees set, with no play** – Much too often, we see umpires move into position for what they anticipate to be a play and immediately come to hands-on-knees set. Moments later they discover that there will not be a play because the ball was not thrown or at least to that base. In order to make good calls, umpires need to be set before the play happens, but we must always know the location of the ball. Relax, let the play unfold, let the ball take you to the play, come set – make your call.
8. **Locking in on a base and not seeing a throw** – This happens most often with the umpire in the “A position”. The umpire reads that it is a ground ball on the infield, moves into position, and then turns and locks in on the base w/out ever seeing if the ball is fielded or w/out seeing the throw. This is a scary situation, umpires have been hit by that thrown ball, on bad throws that they never saw coming. For plays on the infield; move into position, see the throw, read the throw, adjust if necessary and then come set before the plays happens.
9. **Safe call on an overthrow** – Many times we see plays at a base where the ball is overthrown or is not caught by the fielder and the ball ends up rolling 15-20 feet away from the base. These instances do not require a call. When it is obvious, don’t make the “safe” call, but do move into position for your next possible play. On the other hand if the ball is caught or is dropped and remains on the ground in the vicinity of the base, then we use the mechanic of “safe, ball is on the ground”.
10. **Not being set for the play** – Being “set” for the play means coming to a complete stop and allowing the eyes to focus before the play happens. When you are moving on the play, this means that your eyes are also moving. You might get away with this on the majority of plays, but when you have that really close one, you need to be set and focused. This is often caused by being slow with the pause, read, react technique that is crucial to getting into position before the play. Plays on the infield you should be hands on knee(s) and for plays in the outfield you will be in the standing set. Either way – stop before the play. Always remember angle over distance.
11. **Starts too deep** – When working the bases, too often we see umpires where their starting position is too deep. This just means that when something happens you have much more ground to cover, before you can get into position to make a call. Typical starting position while in the “A Position” should be 1012 feet behind the first baseman when he is playing in his normal position. If the first baseman adjusts forward or back, so do we. We must always keep the fielder in front of you. Remember, the deeper you start, the further you have to run, and the longer it will take. You might be late to get into position for your next call.
12. **Plate work – too deep/not in slot –** When working the plate, the umpire needs to be in the slot. This is to be able to see the entire plate, as well as the catcher’s mitt. Being close and in the slot, also keeps you out of the ‘kill zone’.

*Reprinted with permission from Bryan Horne - Tennessee*