

I was one of the fortunate umpires who had some really great instruction early in my umpiring career. My true fortune was that I learned the, "Fundamentals," of umpiring early.

First, let us define Fundamental. Webster's Dictionary defines Fundamental as, "serving as an original or generating source... or of central importance." This is not to be confused with "Basics." Basics defined means... "Easiest part of something." In umpiring we can often get the two confused. Fundamentals are foundations, the things that must occur on every play for us to be great. Whereas the basics are what you learned when you first started out, things you needed to know but also had to progress upon. Each play we judge will involve the fundamentals, it is my goal to bring them alive.

This will be the first in a three part series on the three essential fundamentals of on field umpire performance. The first fundamental is being set.

Being set on plays is not an option, but rather a must. Below is a simple example as to why:

First, pretend that you are filming an accident while running toward it. Now, imagine what that video looks like when you watch it? Will it be clear and sharp? Will you be able to determine ALL of the details of the accident? The odds are, the video will be choppy and out of focus. The same applies to umpiring. Being set gives you the best chance of getting the call right. While it may seem simple and easy to say, "Just get set!" However, being set on a play requires game awareness of three things:

- 1. What are my responsibilities?*
- 2. What is my next possible play?*
- 3. Where is the best place to view this play from, while splitting my difference?*

What are my responsibilities? This is a question you must ask yourself before every pitch. This is called, "Priming." It means that you have already started thinking ahead of the next play and that you have begun to zone in on what you will be looking for as the play occurs. By knowing your responsibilities before the pitch, you will be able to make quicker decisions as the play develops. We all hear umpires talk about "instinct." Knowing your responsibilities before each play occurs allows you to move into a better position and stay ahead of the play. In turn, this will allow you to be set. It is being mentally and physically ahead of the play that shows off your instinct.

What is my next possible play? We need to ask ourselves this question numerous times throughout the development of a play. In a 2, 3 or even 4 man system, umpires have multiple responsibilities such as an overthrow, watching runners touch bases, and interference/obstruction, etc. Knowing your next possible play, allows you to stay ahead of any contingencies that may need to arise.

Where is the best place to view this play from, while splitting my difference? After knowing what I'm supposed to watch, and what my next possible play is, the next question is... "Where is the best place to view this play from, while splitting my difference?" Not every play at every base needs to be taken in the same place. It is no longer acceptable to be a "spot umpire." The craft of umpiring has evolved beyond this type of instruction. The term, "splitting the difference," refers to being set to see one play while still in a position to react should a subsequent play develop. The challenge is too many umpires get sucked too close to plays, while having other responsibilities. Hence, "split the difference" and allow yourself to get a head start on your next possible play.

By clearly understanding your responsibilities before every pitch, knowing your next possible play, and then splitting the difference, you will have the advantage of being set for plays. Remember, being set on plays is not an option, but rather a must. The great umpires are set ahead of their plays, they not only get more plays right, they show instinct in the craft of umpiring.