

Foul Ground Umpiring...Are You Ready to Shine

Statistics say a three-hour baseball game on average has 292 pitches and the actual playing action is less than 18 total minutes. I realize umpires work the entire game, but if you do the math and break it down, the average play is a little more than seven seconds in length. That is a small amount of time to prepare when having to make decisions on each individual play. Many times umpires are looking for a way to stand out and separate themselves from the pack as “elite” and based on the stats above, they have a short amount of time to do it.

Great umpiring mechanics and proper positioning while the baseball is between the lines can be attributed to the extensive amount of quality repetition for balls hit in fair territory, taking plays at first base, etc. However, often there are missed opportunities to shine when the baseball is on the foul side of the line. This can happen for a variety of reasons, but the most frequent reasons are not getting a good read on the baseball and/or fielder, assuming the baseball is going to into dead ball territory when it ends up in the field of play, or just overall lack of concentration. Establishing and sticking to a formalized progression on plays where the baseball comes off the bat and ends up in foul territory can help you be in the best position to get the play right. An example of this progression is:

- 1 – Get a good read of the baseball off the bat
- 2 – Read the catcher/fielder on their initial movement
- 3 – Read how far/fast the catcher/fielder is going and in what direction
- 4 – Determine what is being threatened (foul line/fence/backstop/dugout/etc.)
- 5 – Move in the similar direction as the fielder but building in an angle
- 6 – Go as far as the play allows

To elaborate, getting a good read on the baseball means determining which direction did it go (right, left, back, or straight up, “up or down angle”) and at what velocity? That will give you the first indication on how much you might have to move. You should be able to tell this after the ball hits the bat. Secondly, reading the catcher or fielder means reading with your eyes, stand your ground until the catcher/fielder commits to a direction (a path) to try and catch the baseball. Removing your mask or moving too early during this time could cause you to interfere with the fielder, cause the umpire to backpedal (unsafe), and even worse, cause the umpire to be out of position for the play. Once the catcher/fielder starts their path and the umpire has identified what direction they are headed, the umpire can pivot on either foot, open up, and allow them to pass; in umpire training this is called “opening up the gate.” What happens if the baseball is a dribbler down the line? Is there wind that will blow the baseball a different direction thus changing the fielder’s path? With their actions, the catcher/fielder will provide more information if the umpire doesn’t get a good read of the baseball off the bat in step #1. Thirdly, reading the catcher/fielder’s pace of movement, are they full sprint toward the dugout, are they lingering around the plate area? That movement can

transition into #4 and can help an umpire determine where the potential play is going to happen. If the catcher/fielder sprints away in the direction of the dugout, envision a rope tied between the waist of the player and the umpire, pulling the umpire at the pace of the player in the direction of where the play will be made on the baseball. If the catcher stays near the plate, the rope isn't pulling the umpire away from that area, thus he can simply move back choosing one foul line extended to position himself (the actions of the fielder will determine which foul line extended to choose) so the umpire can judge fair/foul. Next, the umpire should try to build in an angle when moving in the same general direction as the fielder. Lastly, the umpire should move as far as the play will allow, and attempt to get set for the play. The goal is getting to the position that allows the umpire to see first touch of the baseball and/or the open side of the player's glove. I know it's easier said than done in some cases and sometimes the umpire may need that extra second to get a better angle, but could the umpire make a quicker decision (process sooner) in one of the previous five areas to give you that extra second in step 6?? A delay in any one of the steps throughout directly impacts your positioning at the end of the play.

Honestly, each play in foul territory is unique and sometimes an umpire's natural instinct and play recognition gets him through the progression with ease. Occasionally, umpires follow the progression and just get lucky in the way the baseball comes down or how the fielder positions himself. Either way, I was once taught the definition of luck is preparation that meets opportunity. That being said, prior to each pitch think situationally where you are going based on where the baseball is hit. Imagine reading everything perfectly and getting in the proper position to see that pop-up in foul territory near the padded wall next to the fans. The player begins to slide as he reaches toward the wall, potentially trapping the baseball against the wall, but makes a catch, and you the umpire are in perfect position to see it and to make a confident call. That would make you, as well as the entire crew look good, because you didn't take the play off. You went through the appropriate progression, and were in the best position to get it right.

Here are a series of plays that are examples of umpiring when the baseball ends up in foul territory. Using the progression steps, what was done well? What could be improved on? Don't focus on the umpire's judgment or who is in the clip, rather on the positioning and mechanics utilized during each play.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_iK_p67NAHmMGJ6UXRweV9Ca0E/view?usp=sharing

Hopefully, these progressional steps will help you and your crew shine this season...seven seconds at a time.