

## Working with the Catcher

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Working the plate is the single-most difficult activity in all of sports officiating. The focus and concentration needed for three hours or more can be mentally and physically exhausting. The catcher is one person that can greatly influence the quality of our game behind the plate, and it is important to build a positive relationship with each catcher during the course of the game.

The relationship between the plate umpire and catcher needs to be one defined as a working relationship. Using some humor, I've often said at clinics that umpires in general should have no need or desire for more friends in the 18-to-23 age demographic at our particular current stage of life. In other words, we are not on a college baseball field to make friends with the players with small talk or buddy-buddy conversation. Know that every single word we utter to player, as innocent and innocuous as it may seem at the time, will get back to the dugout and to the coaching staff.

It is important to get off on the right foot with each receiver. When the line-up cards are being exchanged, I find the first names of both of the catchers so when they come out to catch in the first inning, I greet them by first name as I introduce myself. This is a little detail that shows both catchers I have done some prep work ahead of time and now they at least think they have an umpire who is not working his first game today. As he's catching the warm-up pitches, I will share with him that I'm not much of a conversationalist during the game but I will provide him answers to any questions that he has during the game. 99.9% of the time the catcher will say "great, no problem" and I'll wish him a safe game.

The most common question you will get from a catcher during the game will be some form of "where was that pitch?" As promised during our quick introduction, answers to appropriate and respectful questions is something we as umpires need to provide the catcher. Be honest when asked about a pitch and tell the catcher where you had it (low, outside, etc).

This brings about a great philosophical question- do you admit it when we flat-out miss a pitch? Remember that every word you say to the catcher will get back to the dugout, and admitting a miss could come back to haunt us with that dugout. A good technique a veteran umpire shared with me years ago was to say that you had the pitch where you did (low, high, wherever) but that you will keep working to get the best look at that location again, and tell the catcher not to be afraid to throw back there again. The good catcher can read between the lines and figure out what you are saying without

going back to the dugout and throwing you under the preverbal bus. Finally, you will need to set boundaries as you go with each catcher as you can't be answering questions about the location of every single pitch.

From there, you will build credibility and hopefully some benefit of the doubt with the catcher by your performance and how hard you are working. Keeping our conversations with catchers brief, to-the-point and business-related will provide success in most of our games. I hope you can find a few of these tips useful in your plate games this coming season.