

Umpire Communication by Steve Orinick

Most people observing a baseball game are oblivious to the intra-umpire communication that takes place on the field. If you notice it, you are most likely watching the umpires, and the chances are you are an umpire yourself. If you are, then surely you recall a time when you looked up at your partner and saw him touching the bill of his cap with the first finger pointed up when you then realized that it was an infield fly situation. This may not be the signal used in your area of the world, but all umpires know that there is a unique set of communications devices to stay aware of game situations and to avoid the dreaded element of surprise whenever possible. There are also the signals and calls we give for the game participants and those observing the contest, from balls and strikes to outs and safes. I am presenting a few thoughts here for the amateur umpire based on what I have learned over the years. Certain elements are essential and absolutely required. Others are a matter of opinion or style.

General Information

The information provided here are general guidelines based on my training and experience. Check with your local association for regional systems.

PAUSE - READ - REACT. These are the most fundamental elements of successful umpiring. Good timing is essential. From the set position, observe the ball, pause to read the situation, see the developing action and react in the appropriate manner. The few extra moments can be the difference between proper reaction and running off in the wrong direction. Take advantage of that extra second before calling a strike. Wait and see if that throw pops out of the glove. You'll be a better umpire, have fewer problems and will avoid some of those embarrassing situations, such as making an out call and then seeing the ball rolling away on the ground.

Selling the call is a matter of the game situation and each umpire develops a feeling based on experience and reputation. Selling the call is a required aspect of your game, when appropriate on close calls. Knowing when to sell it and then doing so can be a great help in avoiding unpleasant situations.

The call sequence is hands-on-knees-set, pause, read, react, CALL, return to the set position. This forces that extra second so allowing more time for proper judgment or for that inevitable unexpected occurrence, such as a dropped ball. Slow and proper timing should be an integral part of your mechanics. You also look better, make fewer errors in judgment and will have fewer problems on the field.

Concentration at all times during the contest is essential. A mind wandering for a few seconds can quickly turn your game into a disaster.

Never make a call or a decision while moving. Always get to the best location possible (remember that angle is much more important than distance) and pull up to see the play and make the proper call. After making the call, one should return to the set position, either standing or hands-on-knees, or gravitate to a better location on the field to be ready for any possible subsequent action.

For Spectators and Participants

Here are some of the general signals and signs used by the umpire. Keep in mind that except where indicated, all calls are made with the right hand. It is absolutely required that the plate umpire removes and holds his mask and indicator with the left hand. Practice it until you can do it with no thought involved and without pulling off your cap.

Play: I can't stress this enough. Besides officially beginning the contest, the plate umpire must always point the ball back in play with runners on base when the pitcher is on the rubber with the ball and the batter is in the batter's box. This is essential. It allows the players and your partner to know exactly when a ball is back in play. I've often seen a pitcher throw over to first as soon as I point the ball back in play. If this is not done, is the ball back in play or not? May or may not be accompanied by a verbal signal of "Play!"

Ball: No physical signal. Plate umpire gives a verbal signal of "Ball" loud enough to be heard by at least the batter and catcher. Do not indicate location of the pitch. "Ball" will suffice. The Pro umpiring schools teach calling the balls and strikes by the numbers for training purposes and for lower minor league use. This is usually not done in the real world.

Swinging Strike: No verbal signal given the Plate umpire gives his strike mechanic only with the right hand and arm.

Called Strike: A verbal and physical signal is given, add your best banger for called strike 3.

Dropped Third Strike: Signal the strike mechanic. Use the safe mechanic to indicate that the ball has not been caught cleanly by the catcher and the play is not over. If there is a question as to whether or not the batter swung, state "Yes, he did" to indicate that the batter did indeed swing. If there is a potential checked swing, go immediately to your partner for a ruling before being asked.

Checked / Half Swing: Point to the batter, come up with your strike mechanic and state "Yes he did" or simply state "Ball, no he didn't go."

Checked / Half Swing Appeal: Only on a pitch that is called a ball. Step out from behind the plate, point to the appropriate partner with your left hand and ask loudly "Did he go" or "Joe, did he go?" If your partner indicates yes, then say, "Then that's a strike" and give the revised count. The base umpire should never respond unless asked by the plate umpire for a ruling.

Foul Tip: I slide my right hand down my left arm and then come up with my strike mechanic. Some umpires slide their hand down 2 or 3 times then come up with the strike mechanic. This is a swinging strike and always a live ball, so no verbal signal is needed.

Time: Both arms are raised to shoulder level, palms facing out. Verbal mechanic is "Time" not "Dead Ball". This should also be utilized when a batter has been hit by the pitch.

Foul Ball: Same physical mechanic as "Time". Verbalization is "Foul" not "Foul Ball."

Safe: Lift your arms from your side or knees, fingers together and extended and lift them chest-high. Then come straight across to the sides of your body while stating "Safe." No fly-away bird mechanics needed.

Safe, off the base: Same physical and verbal mechanic as Safe, followed by both arms coming together in front of the body and then sweeping to one side while saying; "Safe. He's off the bag!"

Safe, dropped ball: Same physical and verbal mechanic as Safe, followed by pointing at the ball and stating "Safe. He dropped the ball."

Safe, missed tag: Same physical and verbal mechanic as Safe. Followed by saying; "Safe. He missed the tag!"

Out: Right fist together covered by the thumb, lift your arm crisply up at your head level and state "He's out." Use your best banger for a close one. Work on it in front of a mirror.

Out on the Tag: Same as Out, followed by a point to the tag and the statement "Out, on the tag!"

Fair Ball: There is never a verbalization for a fair ball. The appropriate umpire simply points into fair territory with either his left or right arm to indicate that the ball is fair. The plate umpire should come out from behind the dish and up the foul line as far as possible. He should then straddle the line and stop as the ball approaches the bag or the line and make the call.

Foul Ball: Same physical mechanic as "Time," with the hands up a bit higher. The verbalization is "Foul", not "Foul Ball." Not needed for an obviously foul ball that everyone already knows is foul.

No Pitch: Call "Time" or "Time - No pitch" if there is a question as to pitch validity if the pitch was delivered.

Count: Hands up around eye level with the appropriate number of fingers extended. Proper mechanic is to state "3 and 2" or "3 balls, 2 strikes", not a fist and not "Full count."

Run Scores: Used for a time play when there is a question as to whether or not the run counts. Point to the plate and then the press box or scorer and state "The run scores, score that run" as you do so.

Run Does Not Score: Also used for a time play when there is a question as to whether or not the run counts. Point to the press box or scorer and state "No run scores, no run scores" while raising your arms above your head in a sweeping "X" motion.

Base Awards: The appropriate umpire points at the runner to be awarded and states "You - 2nd base", or "You - score" while continuing his gesture toward the base being awarded. When multiple runners are to be given awards, the umpire should begin with the runner closest to home plate, and work back from there.

Ground Rule Double: The signal is the right arm with first two fingers extended overhead. Keep in mind that the ball has left the field and is dead, even if it should bound back onto the playing area.

Fan Interference: Grabbing of the left arm at wrist level with the right hand. Place runners.

Home Run: The signal is the right arm with index finger extended overhead in a circular motion. Once again, the ball has left the field and is dead, even if it should bound back onto the playing area.

Balk: Point to the pitcher and state "That's a balk." Allow the play to continue (pro rules) or call "Time" immediately (HS rules). Place runners.

Obstruction: Point to the obstruction when it occurs and state "That's obstruction." Call time when the play has run its course and place the runners if needed when appropriate.

Interference: Point to the interference when it occurs and state "That's interference." Call time immediately or after the play and place the runners if needed when appropriate.

Catch / No Catch: Out mechanic with verbal "That's a catch" or Safe mechanic with verbal "No catch - No catch."

Infield Fly: Point into the air with your right arm fully extended. State either "Infield fly - batter's out" or "Infield fly if fair - batter's out" if there is a fair-foul possibility.

Crew Field Communications

The umpiring crew has a set of signals used for communication between partners. These may vary by region. The important fact here is that you are indeed communicating with each other and are on the same page at all times during the ballgame. Remember to always have a pre-game with your partner, even if you've worked together before.

Infield Fly: Most crews use the touching of the cap while pointing upward with the first finger for a one out situation or a closed fist in a no out situation. Other crews touch their right hand to their chest. Makes certain that the crew is aware of a possible infield fly situation.

Time Play: Touching of the left wrist with the first two fingers of the right hand. Point to the plate to let your partner know you are staying home for a possible time play when you are the plate umpire.

Covering First to Third (Rotation Play): Mechanics vary. Point to third or make a side to side motion with your right hand with your thumb and pinky extended. As the potential situation is developing, move from the plate toward third to the left of the foul line stating, "I've got third if he comes." If the runner then proceeds to third and the ball is coming to the base, move to the cutout and state, "I've got third." Keep in mind that you need a ball and a runner for a potential play.

Lost Count: Get your partner's attention and twirl your hands around each other in small circles with your index fingers extended.
It Lets your partner know you need a count reload.

Outs: Right arm pointed downward or at chest level and facing outward with the appropriate number of fingers extended. Do this on a regular basis when runners are on base.

On the Ball / Line: In situations such as runner on first with a possible first to third, the base umpire is inside the diamond. If a possible fair-foul ball is hit down the right field line, for example, the plate umpire must make the call and cannot hustle down to third. "I've got the Ball" for the left field line, "I'm on the Line" for the right field line.

Help on a Rundown: When coming to assist your partner on a rundown play, you should communicate "I've got this half", but not until you are there and actually have half of the play. The original umpire must handle the entire rundown until you are there. Move in only when the play is moving away from you. If you are unsure who should make the call, make eye contact with your partner to determine who will take it, and / or state, "I've got it" to your partner.

Base Umpire Leaving the Infield: After pausing, reading and reacting the field umpire will communicate "I'm going" or "I'm going out" to his partner. This informs the plate umpire of his additional responsibilities emanating from the situation. As the field umpire, never leave the infield with runners on base when using the two-umpire system. With no runners on, only go out on a possible fair-foul call or a possible trouble ball from center field to the right field line.