



UMPIRES MECHANICS MANUAL – HARTFORD CHAPTER

TIMING

What is timing?

Timing in essence is the amount of time from:

1. When an umpire sees a play or pitch.
2. Analyzes in his/her mind what he/she has just seen.
3. Determines what the call will be, and finally
4. Communicates his decision both vocally and visually to players, coaches, and spectators.

Experience

What separates a novice official from a veteran? Usually it is experience. Experience is having seen many plays and having made many calls. Judgment will get better over time, and we as umpires learn from past plays/situations. This learning process will allow us as umpires to improve and more effectively handle similar plays in the future.

Newer umpires often have plays “blow up on them”. It’s as if someone put what the umpire just saw into fast-forward. The result to this umpire is a muddled view of the play. Also, many newer umpires will be excited and “jump on the call” and make it much too early.

On the other hand, more experienced umpires will often see the play in slow motion. A veteran will be more relaxed and make his call only after the entire play has taken place.

Good Timing

Good timing allows the entire play to happen and gives the umpire a moment to “instant replay” in his mind what has just occurred. Doing this will greatly increase the odds of calling plays and pitches correctly. So this slight delay is not delay for delay’s sake, but rather gives the umpire an opportunity to verify that his initial view of the play was accurate.

Examples of good and poor timing

Plays at first base on a ground ball:

Good- once the umpire is sure that the ball has beaten the batter-runner and the fielder's foot is on the base, he delays a moment and waits for voluntary release by the fielder. This is usually the pulling of the ball from the glove with the throwing hand. At that point the umpire communicates his decision with an out call.

Poor- this would be announcing the out decision as soon as the ball hits the mitt. Since there hasn't yet been voluntary release, there is still the potential for the fielder to drop or juggle the ball. If the umpire has at this point given up on the play and averted his eyes, he will miss this call. If his attention does remain with the play, he will then have to quickly reverse his call. Either way it is an embarrassing situation and he's sure to catch grief from the game's participants. Even if he doesn't get flack, he has undermined his own credibility with all involved. Now when a close and possibly controversial play occurs later in the game, players and coaches are much more likely to voice their displeasure.

An umpire who has gained the confidence of participants with smooth, accurate calls on routine plays is much less likely to receive severe disagreement from players and coaches. He may still be questioned, but it is likely to be less intense.

Solution

An excellent time to practice and develop good timing is during the teams' infield practice and when they warm up between innings. Between innings we can read the throw from the fielders to the first baseman and make an adjustment for a swipe tag angle if the throw is inaccurate. On accurate throws, once the ball is caught look for the voluntary release and in your mind say, "okay, now I've got an out." Practicing this will help us when we encounter it in a game situation.

Calling pitches

Good timing-

1. Keep the head and body still, letting the pitch completely pass by the plate area.
2. Allow the ball to hit the catcher's mitt.
3. Replay the pitch quickly in one's mind.
4. Then call ball or strike.

Poor timing- this would involve giving up on a pitch and making one's decision before the ball crosses the plate area and hits the catcher's mitt.

Often a pitch will have late movement (especially breaking pitches). A pitch's location can change drastically from the time when it's just in front of the plate until when the catcher catches it. A curve ball that's at knee height just prior to the plate can dip down below the knees. The catcher might actually have to dig this pitch out of the dirt or block it with his body. Calling a strike on this pitch will certainly cause a negative reaction by the offensive team.

Watching how and where a catcher catches a borderline pitch can definitely assist the plate umpire in making his call (and also the participants' acceptance of that call).

In reality, on a majority of plays and pitches, an umpire is not necessary. The plays could call themselves and both teams could agree on the outcome. But then there are the pitches and plays that are very close and require the umpires' expertise in making the call.

Establishing Timing

It is on the routine/obvious calls that we as umpires should establish our timing. On the pitch that is obviously high or low, the plate umpire should establish his rhythm in making the call. It is critical that he uses this momentary delay even though he practically immediately knows the result of this obvious pitch. Then when a borderline pitch comes in that the umpire needs an extra moment to decide upon, that extra time has already been built in with his previous calling of the obvious pitches. It doesn't look like he's taking extra time to ensure that his call is the correct one (even though he is).

The same would apply on the bases. When a runner at first is out by ten steps, the umpire should still slow things down and not rush his call. He is looking for voluntary release. Now when the base umpire has a "banger" at first he has already established his timing. The delay to review the play in his mind will not be noticeable because he's previously established the tempo for verbalizing and signaling his call.

Of course too long a delay shows uncertainty. It is a fine line between good timing and taking so long that it appears that we are unsure of our call. It is essential that on close plays we sell the call with louder voice and more demonstrative signals.

It is very important to stick with the play until completion, and then and only then, announce the decision. Nothing is more embarrassing for an umpire than to make an emphatic out call, only to see the ball rolling loose on the ground. This is something that has probably happened to every umpire at least once during his career.

One play, one call

One of the best examples of good timing witnessed by this author involved a fifteen year-old Little League umpire. The play was a steal of second base. There was a swipe tag applied, but then the ball was dropped. The base runner then overran second base and came diving back into the base. A tag was applied before the runner reached the bag, but again the defender dropped the ball. Without good timing there was the potential for four separate calls to be made on this play!! Yet this excellent youth umpire had the patience to watch the entire play unfold and finally make **one** safe call.

Ways to improve timing

1. Watch fellow officials. Seeing other umpires (including one's partner) can greatly assist one in developing good timing. Seeing someone who calls the play "instantly" will reinforce what not to do. Watching someone with good timing will allow one to incorporate that into one's own umpiring mechanics.

2. Watch games on TV. Major league umpires are amongst the best in the world. Generally their timing is outstanding. Watching a play develop or a pitch come in and calling it when the major league umpire calls it can help one develop a sense of timing.
3. Mental imagery- using this technique can be of huge benefit. It involves watching an imaginary play or film clip to develop in one's mind, and making the call using the principles of good timing. If an umpire can establish the habit of waiting on this imaginary call, it will greatly increase his chances of doing the same when it actually occurs in a live, game situation.
4. Relax. Taking a deep breath between pitches helps promote relaxation and a feeling of calmness.
5. Work lots of games to gain valuable experience.
6. On tag plays where there is a cloud of dust or the fielder goes sprawling after making the tag, many umpires will instruct that player to "show me the ball". This ensures that the defensive player indeed has possession and control of the ball. This principle can carry over to more routine plays. The umpire can say in his own mind "show me the ball" on tag and force plays that are more routine. This will slow the umpire down and promote looking for voluntary release.
7. On diving catches near the foul line, the umpire should always visually signal fair/foul before catch/no catch. Fair or foul is the top immediate priority and signaling one or the other will force the umpire to slow down in terms of announcing catch or no catch.

Summary

Good timing is essential in calling plays and pitches correctly. Establishing this habit will give a newer umpire a more polished and veteran appearance. This will help him gain the confidence of the games participants and result in much smoother games for the umpires.