



New York State
Softball Officials
Organization, Inc.

Working the Plate

Since the beginning of baseball and softball there have always been conversations on where plate umpires should set-up to call balls and strikes. While it is accepted that no one position is perfect 100% of the time, the set-up that is recognized as being highly recommended by all umpire codes is working the slot.

The Slot is the area between the catcher and the batter. (Just inside of the inside edge of the plate.) Umpires step into the slot by stepping into the position using a heel-toe stance. This gives the umpire a solid base when they drop into the set position. From this position the umpire will have a good point of view (POV) of the strike zone. Umpires need to make sure that they are not too far back from the catcher or they will not be able to see the outside corner of the plate.

The height of the umpire depends on the height of the batter. The umpire's eyes should be at the top of the zone and no lower than the catcher's helmet.

The most important thing is for the plate umpire to see the pitch. Positioning in the slot is only one step in the process to see the pitch.

From this position you can see the release of the ball, the outside corner of the plate and everything in between. It opens you up to see the outside pitch and allows you to track the pitch to the glove. In the slot umpires have a better view of checked swings, bunt attempts, hit by pitch and stepping out of the batter's box.

Umpires from MLB, NCAA Baseball, NPF, ISF, ASA-USA, Federation Softball and Baseball are all taught to use the slot and to set their feet in a heel-toe position.

Here are quotes from each organization.

"We feel being set up in the slot as a plate umpire accomplishes two things. One it gives the umpire an unobstructed view of the whole plate especially the outside corner. Being in the slot also gives the umpire a better look at all the other items that transpire in front

of the catcher, hit batter, bunt or swing attempt, and dropped third strike to name a few.”
Kevin Ryan Director of Umpires ASA/USA Softball

“When working the plate, to improve we need to work on head height, timing and getting in the slot. Work on being able to see the ball from the time of the pitch to the plate all the way into the catchers glove.” NCAA Baseball: Jeff Henrichs NCAA Umpire and Clinician

“Working the plate requires that you see the entire zone – For the most part, umpires I observed are too far behind the catcher. I feel this is one of the reasons why our strike zone has gotten too wide. Umpires need to be more out and up into the slot to see the entire plate and better judge the strike zone. Use the heel to toe stance, with the foot behind the catcher located behind the catcher’s foot that is closest to the batter. You can best align your body by having the center of your body (use your belt buckle if worn properly to determine this) with the middle of the side of home plate closest to the pitcher. Set your eyes at the top of the strike zone and you are set to establish a good strike zone. Use the same set-up on both sides of the plate. To be consistent in doing this, step behind the catcher first then step up into the slot using the heel and toe stance.” Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires

“Umpires working well in the slot have to be flexible, they have to be willing to move, adjust, change, and correct their position in order to be most effective.” Mike Raynor, National Pro-Fast Pitch; NCAA Softball Coordinator

Tracking: Once the umpire is initially set-up in the slot the next area that needs their attention is tracking the ball and seeing it through the zone. Umpires in baseball are taught to track only with their eyes, to keep their heads still. In softball, umpires are taught to track the pitch from the time of its release and follow it into the catcher’s glove with a slight head movement.

Finally: Timing: This is the one area that can have a positive effect on an umpires performance. The first step in developing good timing is to see the pitch all the way into the catcher’s glove. The second is to pause and decide if the ball met all the requirements to be called a strike. Keep the same timing with every pitch.

In conclusion, all codes believe that these tools allow umpires to be in the best position to use good judgment, work on accuracy, consistency and gain the confidence needed to be successful in today’s game.