

It was written to assist in the instruction of **new umpires** : as an **initial introduction** to diamond coverage. It is developed on the premise that these umpires will become trained on shared coverage principles but initially their instruction should focus on getting into position and the techniques of making a call rather than the advanced coverage concepts needed to attain a position working from the first base line.

# The Absolute Basics of Small Diamond Coverage For Two Umpires at the Introductory Level by Brent McLaren

This document is intended only for umpires:

- working at the **Introductory** level, usually in their first or second season
- on the **small diamond** (60 foot) only
- working where the **plate umpire has all outfield responsibilities**

Once an umpire has learned to properly take coverage patterns at first base from the foul line position they may abandon many of the principles developed here in favor of the shared diamond coverage that system involves.

## Definitions

**Call:** the **mental process** and checklist an umpire will use to make a decision on whether a runner is safe or out.

**Catch:** is a process by which a batted ball is held long enough **and / or** is released in a controlled manner. A catch also refers to a pitched ball caught by the catcher.

**Firm and Secure:** the two possession requirements a fielder must demonstrate in order for an umpire to determine whether a ball was held at the time of the tag of a base or runner.

**First-to-Third:** in situations where there is a runner on first base and the plate umpire elects to cover any play that develops at 3<sup>d</sup> base or at home. The plate umpire will have all responsibility for every call at home. The plate umpire will not have responsibility (in this system) for a trouble ball hit into right field.

**To Glove:** the process of a fielder attaining possession (what you might be tempted to call catching but that would not be correct) of a thrown ball. This leads to a tag or no-tag attempt.

**"In-You're Out":** refers to a general understanding that if the batted ball is on the infield the umpire is generally going to take the call from the outfield.

**Interference:** is an intentional act by a member of the offense that impedes or hinders any member of the defence from fielding a batted or thrown ball. It is possible to have a deflection, incidental contact or all-out collision without their being interference.

**Lean-and-a-Look:** when a poor throw is accessed the umpire must compensate usually by leaning in the opposite direction the fielder is drawn towards.

**Obstruction:** is the intentional or unintentional act of the defence which impedes, hinders or blocks a runner, including the batter-runner, from advancing or returning to a base.

**"Out-You're In":** refers to a general understanding that if the batted ball goes to the outfield the umpire is going to come inside and take the call from the infield.

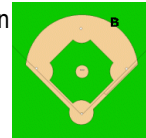
**Overthrow:** In baseball an overthrow is by definition a ball which is thrown into dead-ball-territory by a fielder.

**Pivot:** a term used to describe the umpire school turn mechanic which allows the umpire to keep focussed on the ball while glancing quickly to see if the runner has touched a base legally. This is a four-step pivot commenced with the right foot stepping forward.

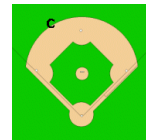
**Position 'A':** working from this position the umpire would be situated in foul territory, 10-12 feet behind the first baseman. This position is not used in this simplified diamond coverage. It is an important position for use when the umpire develops the shared diamond coverage that will occur as they advance.



**Position 'B':** on the rim of the outfield grass positioned between first and second base, approximately on an imaginary line drawn from home plate through the edge of the dirt of the mound. Normally in this position the second baseman would be in front of, and slightly to the left hand side of the base umpire. This is the normal starting position for the umpire in this coverage system.



**Position 'C':** on the rim of the outfield grass, positioned between second and third base approximately on an imaginary line drawn from home plate through the edge of the dirt of the mound. Normally in this position the shortstop would be in front of, and slightly to the right hand side of the base umpire. This is the normal starting position for the umpire in this coverage system with a runner on second base.



**Retouch:** the act of a runner who returns to touch a base after a catch

**Signal :** the physical process of indicating to the players, coaches and spectators the results of the umpire's call. Usually safe / out, fair/ foul, catch / no-catch, or "that's nothing."

**"See the Ball, Glance at the Runner":** means exactly as it sounds.

**Tag:** the result of an attempt to "glove" is to tag a base or a runner.

**Tag-up:** a common phrase. The proper word is "retouch"

**Touch:** the act of a runner touching a base to which he is legally entitled. Umpires frequently use this word to mean "retouch" referring to an umpire as having "all touches and tags" at a specific base.

**Trouble Ball:** is normally a ball that could require a judgement decision from the umpire. This definition is expanded to include:

- a batted ball that could be caught from the waist down
- a batted ball that requires a fielder to turn and chase it
- a batted ball that will require a fair/foul decision
- a batted ball that causes three or more fielders to converge
- a batted ball that could result in a home run
- a batted ball or thrown ball that could go out-of-play and potentially require a decision on spectator's interference

## In Theory

**This system is based on the following coverage standard:**

- the Plate Umpire will take **all** fair/foul and catch/no-catch.
- the Plate Umpire will take **first-to-third** responsibilities.
- the Plate Umpire will normally have **all** touches and retouches at third base.
- the Base Umpire will start **all** plays in position 'B' or 'C'
- the Base Umpire will take tags on **all** base runners except those which are part of the first-to-third responsibilities of the Plate Umpire.
- the Base Umpire will take **all** touches and retouches at first and second base.

**What are "first-to-third responsibilities?"**

With a runner on first base the plate umpire can elect to take a play that develops at third base. Within this system there are two caveats to this:

- Since the plate umpire has all catch and fair/foul rulings, a ball hit down the right field line, or hit deep into the right field will require him to rule on that ball first. It takes experience and speed to make it across the field in time.
- When the plate umpire communicates "**I'm on the line**" it means the base umpire now has all tags at third base. Note: the plate umpire still has touches and retouches.
- The plate umpire may not always have the luxury of moving down the third base line in foul territory (as afforded in a shared coverage system.) The plate umpire must always be moving into the diamond.

**Are there times when a plate umpire could have "second-to-third" responsibilities?**

The answer is "Yes." But this will be very rare due to the catch responsibilities. Situation: a towering fly ball to left centerfield is misplayed by the fielder. The plate umpire comes out to the left of the mound and rules on the no-catch. The plate umpire would then be in a position to take the runner to third base or home as required.

**What does the umpire do about leading off violations in Youth Baseball?**

The leading-off violation is the sole responsibility of the base umpire. They should not however become the sole preoccupation of the base umpire. If the runner pulls your focus before the ball has arrived at the catcher they have left early. If the runner did not attract your attention then you did not see a violation. Give the required signal and enforce the penalties are required in the rule books.

This is the same protocol taught to professional softball umpires. There are so many elements the umpire must focus on (ie: the illegal pitch, the checked swing) that have priority over a leading-off violation that the umpire must prioritize. The umpire cannot simply see everything.

### What must the Base Umpire Do On Every Play?

On every play the base umpire will only need to concern themselves with three items:

- Determine their **placement** during the plays made on the diamond.
- Was a **tag** of the base or a tag of the runner accomplished?
- **Signalling** the play safe or out.

**Placement** during play is a matter of moving to create an angle so that you can see the ball, the glove and the runner. To the umpire angle is far more important than distance. The umpire can be assisted by the two phrases:

"In-You're Out" If the batted ball is on the infield the umpire is generally going to take the plays from outside. The umpire will be able to see home plate.

"Out-You're In" If the batted ball goes to the outfield the umpire is going to come inside and take the plays that develop from the infield. The umpire will generally have his back to home plate.

Determining a **tag** or **no-tag** is a matter of doing three things:

- Moving into position to take the play (called "**Bust-to-your-Angle**") and standing square to the bag. You will follow the throw with your head, not body.
- Accessing the throw from the fielder
- Adjusting to the throw in case it is offline, called "lean-and-a-look"
- Going to hands-on-knees set (unless doing a lean-and-a-look) to observe the tag.
- Seeing the tag by using the eyes properly
- Assuring the requirement of "firm and secure possession" has been met.

Finally, **signal** the play as quickly as possible using a proper signalling mechanic.

## How to Make the Call

The "**call**" is a 100% mental process, the "**signal**" is a 100% physical process. The umpire's eyes must be focussed on the critical aspects of the tag as it develops.

**If the tag is on a base** the umpire's eyes will **focus on the bag** and the feet of the fielder and runner as he arrives. The arrival of the ball will be clearly seen in the peripheral vision.

**If the tag is on the runner's body** then the umpire's eyes will **focus on the glove** of the fielder. The glove will direct your eyes to the runner.

Now the umpire can complete the first part of the call process ... **YES** a tag took place, or **NO** a tag did not take place.

If the call is **NO** then the umpire will immediately signal "**SAFE**" without delay.

If the call is **YES** the umpire must then bring his eyes to the glove and determine if the possession of the ball is "firm and secure." Only when he sees this will he signal "**OUT**"

### What must the Plate Umpire Do On Every Play?

On every play the plate umpire must determine:

- Whether the ball is **fair or foul**, or in dead-ball-territory.
- Whether the ball was **caught or not caught**.
- Determine whether a **home run, ground rule double or other fielding situation**, such as an overthrow, has occurred.
- Whether a **tag or interference occurred in the running lane**.
- Whether the plate umpire has responsibility for "**first-to-third**" coverage.
- Whether **assistance** with any anomalies, such as a rundown, is required.
- Whether a potential **play at home plate** is imminent.

### When the Ball is Hit what does the Plate Umpire Do?

Assuming the umpire has no responsibilities for fair/foul or catch/no-catch the plate umpire will:

#### On a ball hit into the infield:

- If there is a possible play at the plate the umpire will go to the first or third base line extended in order to see watch the play develop. It has long been considered best to take these plays on the first baseline extended.
- If there is no possible play at the plate the umpire will clear the catcher and trail the runner up the first baseline as far as the baseline mid-point. He will straddle the line watching for interference, overthrows, or any situation that he might be asked to assist the base umpire on.

#### On a ball hit to the outfield:

- The plate umpire will move into the infield in the direction of the ball.
- The plate umpire will glance at any runner who is scoring to ensure they touch third base and/or home plate.
- The plate umpire will assume any first-to-third responsibilities accorded to him.
- The plate umpire has all responsibilities at home plate.

#### On a ball popped up at the plate:

- Observe the catcher's shoulders and move in the opposite direction the catcher goes in.
- If a fair / foul ruling is imminent then position yourself to straddle the line.
- If a ruling on whether the ball is dead (or caught in dead ball territory) will be required then move back to the screen or out as required.
- Let the catcher, or other fielder, draw you towards the ball.
- As soon as you can track the ball do so, and then follow the ball into the glove of the fielder.
- Make the call as required.

## In Practice

### With no runners on base the Base Umpire will start in Position 'B'

Once the ball has been batted the base umpire will make a determination to come into the diamond or to remain outside the diamond.

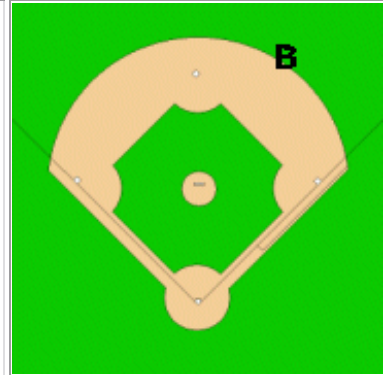
### With no runners on the base umpire has complete responsibility for all calls that will be made on the batter-runner

#### Starting Position

Position B is inside the rim of the outfield grass positioned between first and second base approximately on an imaginary line drawn from home plate through the edge of the dirt of the mound.

You should avoid positioning yourself too deep.

It is important however that the second baseman be in front of you, even if just a step or too. If the baseman is playing in, take advantage of it an move in slightly as well.

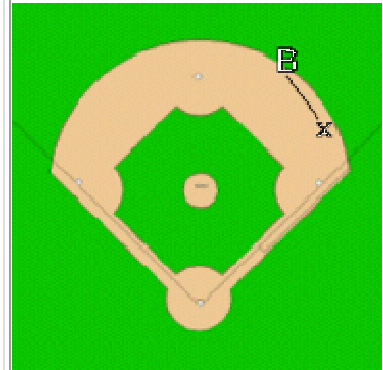


#### An Infielder makes a play at first

If the ball will be played by an infielder then the umpire will work **outside** of the base paths.

The umpire moves to his right in order to attain a good angle to observe the play from. The angle varies: from 90 for a throw from the shortstop, to much more acute angles for throws from second base.

If the ball is **bunted**, or tapped slowly into the infield the umpire will come almost to the baseline to attain the best angle on any play that will develop

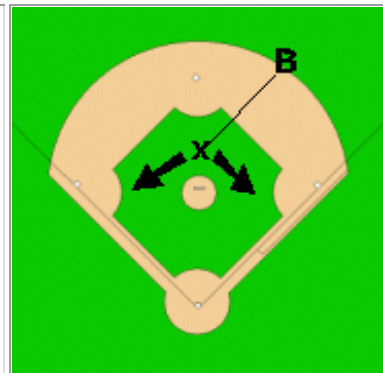


#### On a ball hit to the outfield

If the ball is hit through to an outfielder the umpire will come inside, pivot and ensure the runner touches of the each base. **With no runners on the base umpire has all touches and tags at all the bases.**

The umpire can follow the play in any direction, taking the runner to first, second or third base easily. If a play develops at any base the umpire can easily attain an angle to see the play.

If play breaks down at any time the umpire should work into the infield to follow any plays that develop.



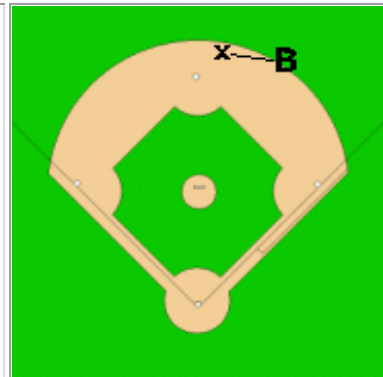
### With only one runner on first base the Base Umpire will start in Position 'B'

With the ball on the infield, and **when there will only be a play at second base** the base umpire moves to his right several steps and sets for the tag.

Experience will assist you in judging your best distance from the base. Generally it is 10 feet.

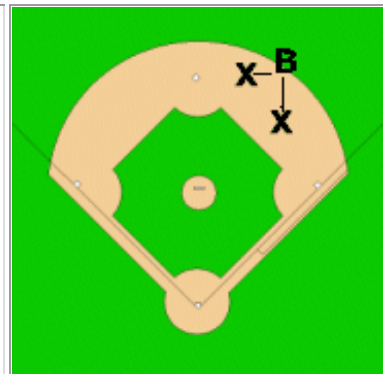
Assess the throw and the tag then check on the possession of the ball by the fielder before making the signal.

On a ball to the hit outfield the base umpire comes inside as he would with no runners on base.



On a play that could go to either base, or **when a double play is possible** the umpire must be aware that force plays can take place at two bases and he could be required to "**split-the-difference**" in order to make these calls.

Again experience and reading the fielders will permit you to take one, maybe two steps to gain an angle, that must be to both ends of the play! The two 'X's on the diagram represent possible positions. Sometimes holding your ground at the original position 'B' is best.



### Signalling the Double Play

To signal a double play you will actually make the signal for the first play while moving and pivoting to take the tag at the other end of the play. This is the only time an umpire should signal on the move. You must be stationary to make the call but the first signal is made while moving.

### What is the Plate Umpire doing?

After determining the status of the ball the plate umpire will move to take any play that could develop on R1 at third base. The plate umpire will communicate "**I've got third if he comes**" and will communicate "**I've got third, I've got third!**" when he is in position to take the developing play.

The plate umpire usually moves in foul territory, three to six feet from the base path, holds and waits in foul territory until assured a play is possible.

If the base umpire does not hear "I've got third" then the base umpire has all plays that develop on all runners on base.

The plate umpire assumes all responsibility for coverage of plays that develop at home plate. If the plate umpire rotates home he will communicate "**I'm going home!**" telling the base umpire that coverage of subsequent plays at third are his.

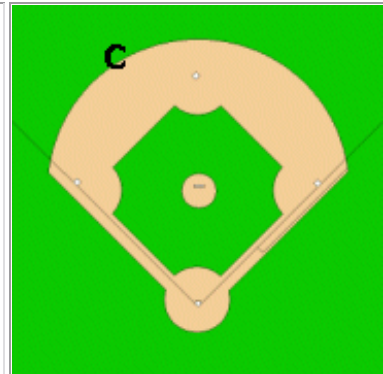
**With a runner on second base, third base, second and third base, or with the bases loaded the base umpire will start in Position 'C'**

**Starting Position**

Position 'C' is on the rim of the outfield grass, positioned between second and third base approximately on an imaginary line drawn from home plate through the edge of the dirt of the mound.

Normally in this position the shortstop would be in front of, and slightly to the right hand side of the base umpire.

Different age levels and game situations may require you to move in, or out. It is important to have a clear angle to a possible pick-off play at first base should one develop.

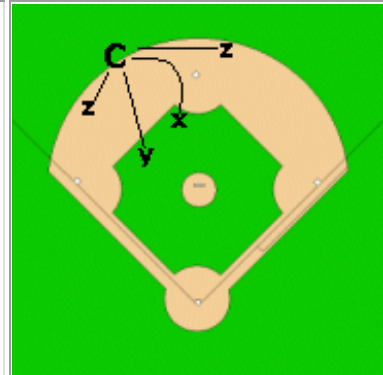


**Respond to the Pressure**

**With the ball in the infield** the base umpire could be required to move in many ways, again determined by the game situation and your experience.

It is important to get the best angle to every play that could develop.

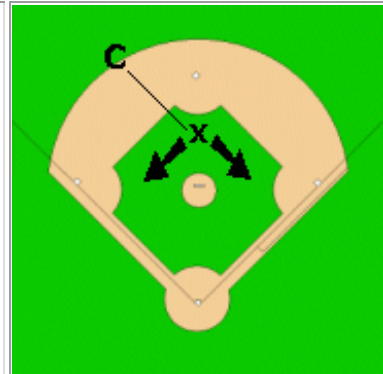
Some umpires like to work themselves inside (x & y) at every opportunity while others work the "rim" (z) of the diamond.



**With the ball in the outfield**

The plate umpire will come into the infield and take responsibility for all touches of first and second, and all tags at all bases. With runners on base the plate umpire has all touches at third.

The only exception would occur when the plate umpire assumes coverage at third base. The situations in which this happens is discussed below,



**When does the Plate Umpire take third base?**

With runners on first and second the base umpire is in position 'C'. A ball is hit deep to the left fielder. The plate umpire moves down the third base line to read the ball and ensuing catch. He communicates this by saying **"I've got the ball!"**

Since the plate umpire is now in position to take plays at third base (sometimes referred to as 'the second play' assuming the ball is caught) the plate umpire would take the runner at second into third base and subsequently into home if required.

The base umpire takes touches and tags on the runner from first and batter-runner at all bases.

## Some Final Notes

- In the two umpire system both umpires must be mobile. A plate umpire who remains behind the plate at all times will sooner or later place his partner in jeopardy.
- Do not use secret signs or signals. Communicate vocally and clearly: "I've got the ball." "That's a catch, Bill." "I'm on third." "I've got the runner, Bob"
- The plate umpire must concentrate on the six baseball basic 'doubles': strike or ball, fair or foul. catch or no-catch.
- The base umpire must concentrate on the touches and tags at first and second base for all runners and be aware of when the touch and tag at third is his call.
- Angle is your priority, distance is secondary. You can get too close to a tag.
- Focus on what is being tagged. You should see all other action in your peripheral vision.
- The plate umpire must communicate every "Catch" and "No-Catch" situation since often the base umpire will not be aligned fully with the ball. Ideally the base umpire will achieve an alignment that allows him to see the runners and the touch of the ball by the fielders. This is the ideal all base umpires should aim at. In the two umpire system it does not always happen that way.
- Use your partner's first name when communicating on the field. "That's a catch, Bill," "Tim, did he go?"

## And One Very Final Thought

Always refer to the manager of a team by their first name. The first name of the manager (and coaches) should be on your batting order. If it isn't then get it at the plate meeting.

At the plate meeting always introduce your umpires by their first name and refer to each other and the managers in conversations at the plate by their first name.

The manager and coaches should refer to you by your first name. (For young umpires the "age" thing can be awkward, but it is a sign of respect on the field.)

Do not respond to "Umpie", "Blue" or "Hey You" if it is coming from a manager, coach or any participant in the game.

Young players usually call you "Mr. Umpire" but at the upper levels of baseball they are expected to know and use your first name as well. Often the umpire knows the player's first name and will use their name in conversations as well. If you don't know the player's name, ask them.