



## Calling Balls and Strikes

At some point in our umpiring careers, we have all been taught the proper mechanics of calling “Balls-n-Strikes”. We call Balls staying down in our stance with verbal only and no physical mechanic. We call Strikes after standing up with a verbal and physical mechanic. When I have the opportunity to work with different umpires or to observe various umpires; I am often amazed at how they make these, the simplest and most frequently used calls in the game.

The calling of “Ball” for the most part is fairly uniform in that most umpires make this verbal only call staying down. Yes, some umpires need to improve their timing on this call. When they get too quick with this call they tend to be starting to stand and making the call at the same time. This makes everyone think you wanted to call a strike. It is also important to understand that you should not increase the verbal accentuation of the call just because it may have been a closer call. The voice level and tone inflection for this call should remain constant. Otherwise you are telling everyone; “Yes, that one was close”. Keep this call the same if it is two feet off the plate or two inches off the plate. Work to develop consistency.

Now let’s think about the “Strike” call. This one is off the charts with all of the variations as to how these calls are made. As we progress as umpires, everyone tends to develop their own style as to how they make their strike call (hammer, point, etc...). A little individuality with this; is alright, but, there is no need to go “Over the Top” with a strike call. After all, when the pitch was delivered it had a 50/50 chance of being a strike. So it isn’t like this is some rare occurrence.

Does it make the pitch any more of a “Strike” if we yell at the top of our lungs, if people three fields away hear us make the call, if we become a pirate (aaarg!), if we want to be a quarterback (hikeeeee!), or if we are friendly to everyone (Hiiiiiiiiiii!)? Does it make the pitch any less of a “Strike” if we simply say “Strike”? The answer to both of these questions is, NO!!

Let’s stop for a moment and think about the differences in calling balls and strikes. Our mechanics, particularly good mechanics, of calling balls down and strikes up; informs our partner(s), the players, the coaches, and anyone watching that understands the game if the pitch was a ball or a strike. So why do we verbalize the calls? For the benefit of those on the field who because of positioning (catcher and batter) cannot see the umpire’s mechanics. So, how loud do we have to be? Only loud enough for these individuals to know what the pitch was called. Maybe a little louder than a normal conversational voice.

Now that we have turned the volume down, let’s talk about voice tone and inflection. When you change your voice mechanic on the close ones; what are you telling everyone? Wow, that one was really close. Or, if I get louder, I can convince you that I am right? In reality, our voice level and voice accentuation should remain constant whether calling a ball or a strike regardless of whether the pitch was really close or not close at all.

Well if that is the case then what about “K3”? Don’t most umpires change their mechanic for K3? Yes, but this mechanic is really what is known as a “Punch Out”. This is an acceptable part of the game and most umpires will develop a little style for that K3 call. But, again, don’t go overboard!! There is no need to yell (remember most of the games you call will be for kids), you should not make a spectacle of yourself, you should not “show up” the batter in making the call, and you should never use this mechanic for a swinging or uncaught strike.

It has often been said that the best game an umpire ever calls, will be the one where at the end of the game, no one remembers you were there. Think about what that really means. And, while thinking about that; let me also suggest that you think about how you make your calls, what other people see when you make a call, and what other people hear when you make a call. In the end, I ask that you always remember that neither the call nor the game should ever be about the umpire!!