

## The One Umpire System

By Walt Stack

The one-umpire system is the most common around the country, especially for slowpitch. The following observations and suggestions may be of some assistance, especially to young umpires.

### **Hustle**

The key to successfully umpiring a softball game by yourself is HUSTLE. You are responsible for ALL the calls in the game and the only way to do a credible job is to move out from behind the plate EVERY time the ball is hit.

On ground balls that may result in a play at first base, get out into the infield between the pitching rubber and first base. Get an angle on the play and keep an eye on the ball as it is being fielded and thrown to first base. Let the throw carry you into the play. Watch the ball hit the fielder's mitt and the runner step on the bag. On close plays, hesitate for just a second before making your call. It will save you making one of those infamous "out/safe" calls.

A couple of words of caution dealing with hustle: Don't over-hustle and don't make your call while moving. You don't have to race the batter-runner to first base, just get out into the middle of the infield, get a good angle on the play, stop and make the call.

### **Anticipate**

NO ... DO NOT ANTICIPATE WHAT CALL YOU WILL MAKE! You do, however, need to anticipate where the next play may take you and get ready to move in that direction. For example, with a runner on third base and another runner at first base, obviously the runner on third is the more important of the two. HOWEVER, if the batter hits the ball safely to the outfield, your priority shifts to the runner on first and the batter/runner.

You know the runner from third should score easily so all you need to do is glance to see that he/she touches home plate, then concentrate on the runner from first and the batter/runner. If you have a runner on second and the ball is hit to the shortstop, you may anticipate that the ball will be thrown to first base but you need to be aware also that the runner from second may attempt to advance to third on the throw and be alert to move toward third base. Again, get the angle, stop and make your call.

### **Prioritize**

On hit balls, your priorities, in order, are calling the ball Fair or Foul ... if it's a fair ball and goes into foul territory, does it remain In Play, or does it go Out of Play ... and finally, is the runner Safe or Out. Don't forget Fair/Foul, In Play/Out of Play while trying to get in position to call Safe/Out.

You will need to determine priorities on certain plays to keep all players aware of what's going on. Remember, the "fair" call does not require a verbal call but only a signal indicating the ball is "fair". Obviously, this becomes important with runners on base since without a quick, vigorous call, the runners will not know whether to advance or not.

Also, on balls that may be trapped, make your call quickly and with confidence so the batter/runner and all runners know what the call was. You also need to prioritize when dealing with multiple runners on base.

Since you are working alone, you need to concentrate on the ball, then the runners, especially the lead runners. You may not be able to see a following runner cut a corner and miss a bag, but that's one problem with working alone.

### **Difficult calls**

While working a ball game by yourself, there are several plays that will be difficult for you to call. Sinking line drives hit to the outfield that may be caught or may be trapped are difficult calls. Sometimes the players will give you a hint as to whether the ball is caught or trapped. A runner may quit running if he sees the ball caught by a fielder so you can assume the ball was caught and not trapped. It's not so easy trusting the fielder on this type of call since they will almost always come up with the ball and insist they caught it in the air.

Balls hit over an outfielder's head are also difficult because the fielder may catch the ball over his/her shoulder with his/her back to the plate. Do not run right at the outfielder, but move to a spot on the infield where you can get an angle to make that call. Also, the players may also help you make this call. If the runner gives up, for example, he must have seen the fielder catch the ball or if another fielder gives some indication to his teammate that he has made a good catch.

Another difficult call is the attempted tag on a base runner going by a fielder. It's pretty tough to see whether the shortstop has actually tagged a runner going from second to third unless you see a definite tag or if the runner appears to run outside the base line to avoid the tag.

### **Final word**

Hustle, hustle, hustle! If you hustle on each play and make an effort to do a good job, the players will generally give you some leeway if you make a call with which they do not agree. If you're making all your calls from behind or just in front of home plate, then you deserve any criticism you receive.