

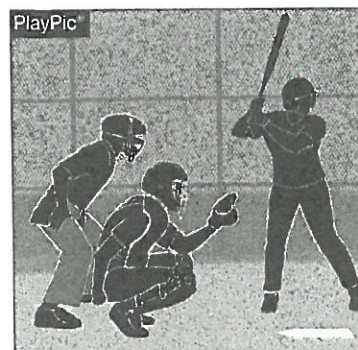
# WORKING THE PLATE

There may not be a position in officiating with more focus or attention than the plate umpire in baseball. He or she is involved in every pitch and when properly rotating, a good share of plays in the field, too.

What that means is you have to be "on it" every pitch and every play, because if you are not, your credibility will suffer.

The important parts of the job that we'll tackle here are your stance, tracking the pitch, calling it a ball or strike, using the indicator and finally plays at the plate itself.

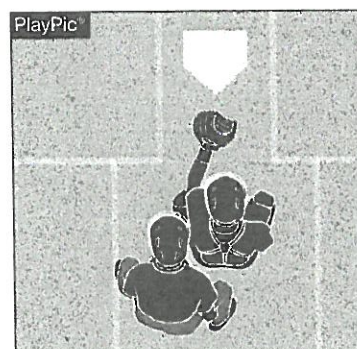
## THE BASIC SLOT STANCE: RIGHT-HANDED BATTER



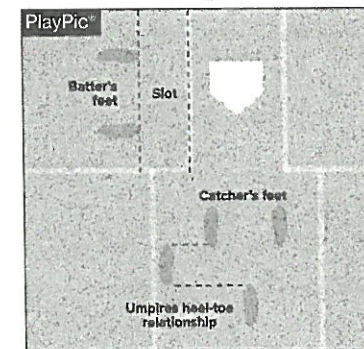
Basic slot stance profile view



Basic slot stance front view



Basic slot stance top view



Basic slot stance footwork

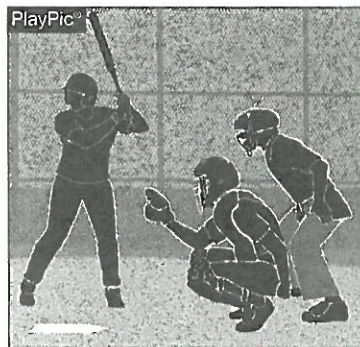
Your feet are spread slightly more than shoulder width apart and are placed in a heel-toe configuration, with your slot foot (left foot for a right-handed batter) slightly ahead of your back foot and your weight evenly distributed on the balls of your feet. As the pitcher delivers, bend at the knees, keeping your shoulders square to the pitcher, and lean slightly forward, into the pitch, to establish your head height and stability. The basic slot stance is the easiest for beginning umpires because it provides good balance and it

distributes stress evenly between the legs.

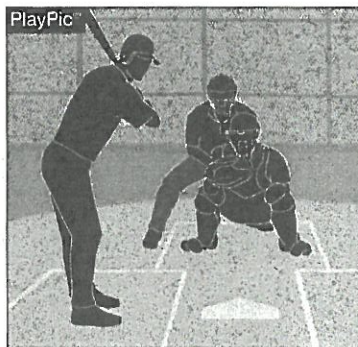
For a right-handed batter, your right hand is tucked behind your right thigh, helping you feel locked in. That can be there because you are protected by the catcher and the risk of getting hit by a foul ball or wild pitch is minimal. Your left hand should be relaxed and on your belt buckle so that your left elbow is tucked against your left waist. That hand is less protected so having it relaxed along the belt allows for it to get hit with a less chance of being badly injured.



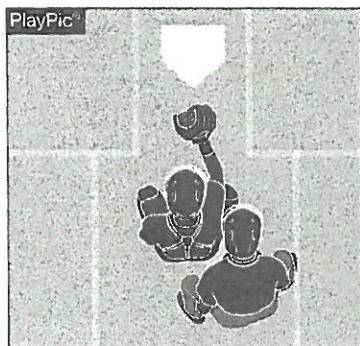
## THE BASIC SLOT STANCE: LEFT-HANDED BATTER



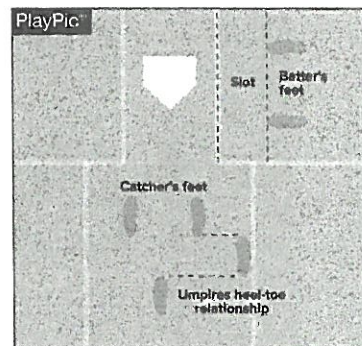
Basic slot stance profile view



Basic slot stance front view



Basic slot stance top view

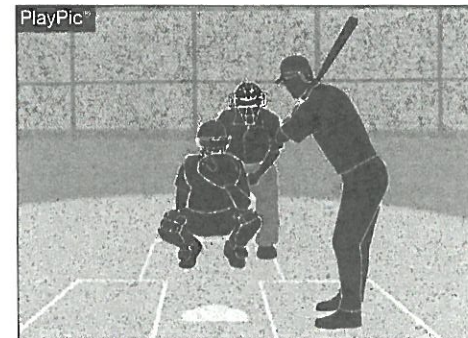


Basic slot stance footwork

## THE SCISSORS



Scissors profile view



Scissors front view

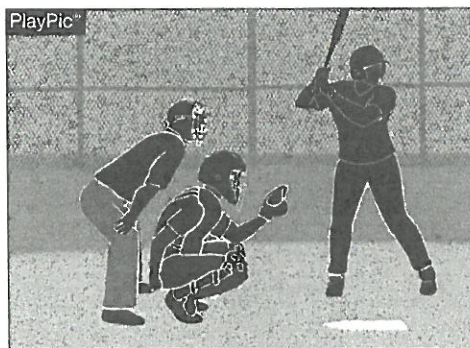
Your legs will be fully open, similar to an open pair of scissors, with your feet directly behind each other one full stride apart. Your slot foot (left foot for a right-handed batter) is positioned approximately six inches behind the catcher's inside foot; your back leg is fully extended, knee straight, with the ball of the foot on the ground and the heel elevated. When the pitcher delivers, your slot-leg knee is bent at the best possible angle; the vast majority of your weight is on your bent leg;

keeping your shoulders square to the pitcher, lean forward into the pitch and establish your head height and stability.

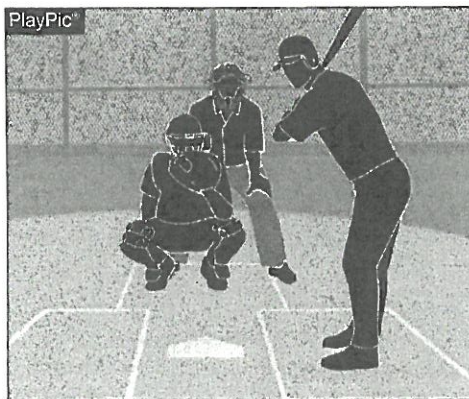
The scissors stance is difficult for beginning umpires because it provides poor balance and (due to the high number of right-handed batters) it places extreme stress on the left leg. By forcing you to lean forward, it also exposes your shoulder and collar-bone areas to potential injury.



## HANDS-ON-KNEES



Hands-on-knees profile view



Hands-on-knees front view

The hands-on-knees stance is very similar to the basic slot stance, but instead of having your feet in a heel-toe configuration, they are square, about six inches behind the catcher. As the pitcher delivers, bend at the knees, keeping your shoulders square to the pitcher, and lean slightly forward, into the pitch, to establish your head height and stability. The hands-on-knees stance

is widely praised because it is easier to establish a consistent head height. However, umpires tend to get hit more and with the exposed hand being locked on the knee, there is no "give" in the hand and a direct shot is more likely to cause a severe injury. For that reason, MSHSL does not recommend using the hands-on-knees stance.

## Head Height and Position

Regardless of which stance you use, your head height and position should be consistent and identical.

Your position should be behind the catcher, looking between him and the batter. You must be able to clearly see the pitcher, the entire plate and the batter's knees. To see all of those elements, it is important to move into "the slot" — that area between the catcher and the batter.

Ideally, your eyes should be on the inside corner of the plate, although there are times when the location of the batter and/or catcher may force you to adjust. If you must adjust — because for example, the catcher works inside — never move to a spot over the catcher's opposite shoulder; instead, work higher over his head.

Two additional factors have tremendous impact on your view of the strike zone: head height and stability. Your head should be positioned so the bottom of your chin is even with the top of the catcher's helmet. If you work with your head lower, your view of the knee-high pitch at or near the outside corner of the plate will be restricted.

To determine proper head height, use a dining room or folding chair to simulate a squatting catcher. Pretend the top of the chair back is the top of the catcher's head. Practice dropping into your stance until it is a crisp, one-motion movement. Working in front of a mirror is a great technique; so is the use of videotape, if you can find someone who will tape you setting into your slot position. If you have a partner, work on it together.

## Practicing Your Stance

You can practice your stance without being on a baseball diamond. In fact, it is a good idea to try those practice techniques and to become

comfortable with the movement before you take the field.

For example, here is a simple practice method for the basic slot stance (you can adapt the equipment to the scissors stance on your own):

Get two pairs of shoes and two yard sticks (or any straight sticks, or even rope, about three to four feet long). Place one pair of shoes where a batter would stand in the batter's box. Place the second pair where a catcher's feet would normally be when set to receive a pitch. Place one of the sticks in a straight line, parallel to the pitcher's rubber, behind the heels of the "catcher," toward the batter. Place the toes of your slot foot on that stick. Place the second stick parallel to the first stick behind the heel of your slot foot. Place the toes of your back foot on the second stick, slightly more than shoulder width from your slot foot. Now turn the back foot out, about 30- to 45-degrees away from your slot foot. That will keep you from "kneeing" the catcher when you squat. Make sure the toes of your slot foot are pointed directly at the pitcher, so foul balls and wild pitches will carom off the steel toe of your shoe instead of the side of your foot.

Place your slot arm across your waist with your elbow tucked close to your side. Your other hand should be placed behind your thigh, elbow tucked tightly against your side. These arm positions will help protect the bones in your arms from pitched and foul balls, which can cause serious injury.

## Tracking the Pitch

From the moment the pitcher releases a pitch until the ball arrives in the catcher's mitt, your head should remain absolutely stable. If your head moves at all, your view of the strike zone will be blurred and your judgment will be inconsistent.



Here is an easy-to-understand parallel: If you suddenly jerk a camera the instant you press the shutter, the picture will be blurred and out of focus. That principle is the same when you view a pitch approaching the plate. If you keep your head still and follow the ball with only your eyes, you will see the pitch and location much better.

Follow the ball from the pitcher's hand to the catcher's mitt by only moving your eyes. By following the pitch into the catcher's mitt, you have the advantage of seeing how and where he caught the pitch. That will aid your ability to call it correctly. If the catcher catches the ball and then yanks the mitt back toward the strike zone, he is telling you that he didn't think the pitch was a strike. Conversely, if he holds the mitt still or slightly moves it (commonly called framing), he believes it was a good pitch. Not all pitches that he yanks are balls and not all frame jobs are strikes, but that is an additional tool you can use to aid your judgment.

Practice getting into your set position until you can drop into your stance smoothly and crisply. Have someone "soft toss" a rolled-up pair of white socks, underhand into the strike zone. Follow the ball with just your eyes all the way in and through the zone. Have your partner, who is tossing the ball, watch closely to see if your head moves or if you are drifting into or away from the pitch. Make sure the soft toss drill includes pitches that are up, down and near each of the corners. Have your partner note which pitches cause you to move and when you stay stable. Work on the pitches where movement is a problem.

Do not be concerned with calling balls and strikes until you can remain stable and follow the ball with only your eyes. Again, that practice exercise is well suited for a video camera. You will see yourself drift or move, even though you probably will not feel the movement.

With the marking sticks still in place, step back from the slot position, as you would when the ball is being returned to the pitcher. Get back into your slot position and proper foot position for several pitches. Practice getting into and out of the slot until you can place your feet into position without having to look down at them. Practice the "soft toss" with the chair, until you can sit down in your set position crisply, without having to check if your head is positioned at the proper height.

This would be the timing sequence to get ready for the pitch:

- As the pitcher gets on the rubber — Place your feet properly.
- Set — Drop from standing to your calling position with proper head height).
- Call it — Say "ball" while remaining in the set position or say "strike" and stand up as you say it and signal it with a hammer signal or a point signal.

Practicing those techniques, either in front of a mirror or with the aid of a video camera, will enhance your ability to get into the slot and will help your confidence — in your calls and in yourself.

### Calling the Pitch

Timing is critical on the pitched ball. Watch the ball with your eyes all the way to the mitt, and watch the catcher catch the ball. Then make up your mind on the ball's location and call the pitch: ball or strike.

If the pitch did not cross through any part of the strike zone and the batter did not swing, it is a ball. To call a ball, remain in your stance and call, "Ball." The call should be loud enough for the pitcher, catcher and batter to hear. Only after you've made the call, should you come out of your stance. The best phrase I have heard is the dugouts should hear the "Ball" call and the stands should hear the "Strike" call.

If the pitch did cross through any part of the strike zone and the batter did not swing, it is a called strike. To call

a strike, come out of your stance and call, "Strike." Again, the call should be loud enough for the participants to hear. In conjunction with your call, you should make an arm motion.

The two common ones are the hammer (like you are calling an out) or pointing out to the side. If you point to the side, it is imperative that you do not take your eyes off the action in front of you. Uncaught third strikes and trapped foul tips are easily missed when plate umpires fly out of the plate area to emphasize a called strike. For that reason, MSHSL recommends calling strikes using the hammer-fist call until you have enough experience to develop your own strike call without taking your eyes off the action in front of you.

If the batter swung at the pitch, you do not need to judge whether the pitch itself was a ball or strike. You also do not need to verbalize, "Strike," since everyone saw the batter swing. Come out of your stance and use the same signal as when calling a strike, only with no voice.

If the pitch is an uncaught third strike, the plate umpire must call the pitch outcome first and also denote that the pitch was not caught. For an uncaught third strike, only a point out to the side is proper to call the strike, using a fist could make it appear that an out is being called. The point should be followed by a safe signal and a verbal call, "No catch."

### Making Adjustments

If every catcher and every batter positioned themselves exactly the same on every pitch, your job as plate umpire would be easy. You could establish a "groove" in the slot, sit down in the same spot every time, and call all the pitches. In reality, it doesn't happen.

Catchers will "squeeze" the inside corner for their pitchers and take away your slot space. Batters will crowd the plate and take more of that space from

you. Some catchers, especially those with little experience, work high and block your view of the plate.

As you gain experience, you'll read those situations and adjust your slot position to accommodate calling balls and strikes. Remember, the most important thing is to keep your head stable so you can see the plate area. If a catcher's position takes that view away, adjust. Your (1) first adjustment is up: Work higher above the catcher's head when he crowds the inside corner. That will allow you to look down onto the plate area and improve your view of the plate, compared to the view you would have if you made no adjustment.

The (2) second adjustment you can make on a catcher who sets up inside is to move farther into the slot, toward the batter. That will increase your viewing angle to the plate and reopen the plate area (and strike zone). That move pushes the outside-corner pitch farther outside, but again, your goal is to see as much of the strike zone as possible.

Never move to the catcher's outside shoulder. There are 4 other adjustments possible: (3) Move further behind the catcher; (4) More knee bend to lower yourself; (5) More torso lean and the (6) 6th one is to widen your stance.

### Keeping and Signaling the Count

The plate umpire is responsible for keeping and signaling the count during a batter's plate appearance.

To keep the count, use an indicator. The plastic or metal device is about the size of a pack of chewing gum and is designed to be used in your left hand with knobs to keep track of balls, strikes, outs and sometimes innings.

Here are some guidelines for indicator usage:

**Use it.** Even with the best of memories, it's possible to lose the count. That is especially true after