

## **The One Umpire System**

By: Walt Stack

Umpires who work slow pitch games in North Dakota are used to working games alone. As far as I know, every league in the state uses the one umpire system for slow pitch softball. There may be several reasons for this but primarily it is due to a shortage of people who want to umpire and the reluctance of leagues to pay game fees for more than one umpire.

Certainly using one umpire is not the preferred system for umpiring softball but since that is the system used in the state 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 which 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. Just a couple of words of caution about hustle you should know. 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**

One of the first things I learned about playing baseball or softball was to always anticipate the play. In other words, what am I going to do if the ball is hit to me? The same applies to umpiring, especially working alone. You 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 to first and as an umpire you need to be aware that could happen and be alert to move toward third base. Again, get the angle, stop and make your call.

### **Prioritize**

While working a game alone, you are responsible for ALL the calls in the game. You will need to determine priorities on certain plays to keep all players aware of what's going on. For example, a ball hit near the foul line requires the umpire to first call the ball either "fair" or "foul". 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 which 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 the bag but that's one of the problems with working alone.

### **Difficult calls**

While working a ball game by yourself, there are several plays which will be difficult for you to call. Sinking line drives hit to the outfield which 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 that 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. Again, see if you can 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 the 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.