Umpire Signs and Signals

by Brent McLaren

Introduction

The base umpire touches the brim of his hat with one finger pointed up then gives the plate umpire a thumbs up signal. The plate umpire responds with a similar, unobtrusive thumb motion. You look at the field and realize it is an infield fly situation. The initial hat touch also relayed the fact that one one is out, the thumb signaled the infield fly situation. This signal may not the one your crew uses but it is an effective form of communication around the diamond.

Umpires have developed a unique set of signs and signals to convey the game situation, the count, even anticipated onfield rotations to each other. Their discreet, and sometimes not so discreet, motions do not distract the fan, who rarely sees them take place. Instead they insure that every umpire on the field is focused on the task at hand, that the count is consistent and everyone knows what might occur on the next play.

PAUSE - READ - REACT. Remember in each of these calls timing is everything. Selling the call is a matter of the game situation and each umpire will respond differently. There is nothing wrong with putting a little extra on the gesture and voice, if fact it is an important part of the game. In time each umpire develops their own personal sense of rhythm and timing, style and flair.

On Instructional Technique: A quick word on a method for starting of the "safe" and "out" signal by initially starting from a hands-on-knees set. It is particularly important when teaching novice umpires. The real-world sequence becomes: "pause, bust to the angle, pause to access the throw, hands-on-knees-set, read, now "CALL IT", return to set." This forces that extra second so quickly glossed over by the new umpire. As an umpire progresses slow and proper timing is ingrained into the signal. Personally, whenever I find myself rushing I resort back hearing my instructor's drilling us through this basic series of motions.

Different instructors and regional systems will dictate how you approach your calls. Regardless of the system you are taught or elect to use the umpire must practice to make all calls consistent, clear and appropriate. Consistency is the aim. Concentration the objective. Communication is the key.

Finally, a reminder: as the field umpire all calls start from a "set" position, usually hands-on-knees or standing with your hands at your side. Most important: Never be caught moving on a call. For the field umpire all calls should return to a set position, either standing or hands-on-knees.. This brings the body into balance, allowing you to pivot smoothly to follow the developing play or to stand and move smartly to your proper field position.
In no way is this a perfect or complete list. Every crew has added at least one sign or signal to its personal list. Any tool which increases communication around the diamond is welcomed.

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Essential Signs for the Players and Fans

My first instructor made it clear: the plate umpire's right hand signals play, strike, out, fair ball - "the ball's alive", and on the rarest of occasions "infield fly" and hopefully even rarer, an ejection. The left hand does everything else including awarding bases, controlling the pitcher and holding the indicator and the mask. Remembers that simple instruction and almost everyone, coach, player and fan, will be crystal clear about your intentions.

**Play**

Along with strike and ball, this is the one call the plate umpire will make most often during a game. Pointing at the pitcher (or the plate) with the right hand and calling "play." The call is essential for the batter and catcher. The gesture is essential for the pitcher, defense and offense. In every case in the rule book (Section 5.00) it is clear that the play signal is a verbal signal: "....the umpire shall call "Play"."

Erick Barkhuis, an umpire from the Netherlands, points out that "this signal/call is very important for your partner(s) too! They must know the exact moment the ball becomes alive. If they don't, they will not be able to respond correctly in situations where the pitcher makes a pickoff attempt or drops the ball while standing on the rubber. These are just a few examples." Perhaps more important than the ballplayer knowing is your partner(s) knowing the ball is alive.

Even though umpires know it is important, it is not absolutely required however. Professional umpires may, or may not give the point and play indicator. As soon as the pitcher is "in contact" with the rubber, meaning they intend to start the pitch cycle, the ball is assumed to be alive.

**Strike**

Always signalled with the right hand, each umpire develops a personalized system for signalling the strike. Some do the traditional bang-the-door clenched fist, some indicate the strike out to the side with a pointed finger. Some umpires face forward, some turn. Some call strike then signal, others do both simultaneously. One essential element is not to turn away from the action particularly in a two man system. In a two or three man system, by not facing forward, an umpire might even miss a play at the plate while going through their actions. Umpire school teaches you to keep your eyes on the ball as you make this signal.

**Should you say "Strike One," signal "Strike" or both?**
Philip Gawthrop from Anne Arundel County, Maryland wrote to add this comment: "Generally, on a swinging strike, as the plate umpire, I NEVER VERBALIZE my call but rather indicate to the players and fans with a raised right arm (in my case, with a clenched fist). The exception to the NOT VERBALIZING is on a third strike; the plate umpire again raises his right arm and says "Strike Three" firmly but does not "sell the call." If the catcher has dropped or trapped the pitch, you still go through with a firm "Strike Three" keeping eye-contact with the batter/catcher."

Umpire school teaches you to say "Strike One," "Strike Two," and "Strike Three!" with a growing emphasis on each one.

**Ball**

Never signalled. Alright, maybe a touch of body english but no hand gestures. The general preference is that the verbal signal "ball" loud enough that both dugouts can hear it. Calling "Ball One," "Ball Two," etc. allows you to maintain the rhythm of your calls. **Never indicate why a pitch was a ball, for example: "High, Ball One"**

**Ball Four**

"Ball Four" is announced clearly. You should NEVER point to first base even with the left hand. Just say "BALL FOUR". If the umpire points to first after the pitch and the defense thinks it's strike 3 and starts to leave the field chaos abounds. Even if you use the left hand, the players may not take note of which hand it was and be confused. Professional umpires never point to first.

**TIME!**

Raising both hands into the air and calling in a loud voice "TIME!" All umpires on the field will immediately signal the time call. Sometimes the call must be made several times in order to shut things down. Once time is called every effort must be made by all umpires to stop the action taking place.

**Safe**

Both left and right arms are raised together, to shoulder level, in front of the umpire and then a sweeping motion is performed out, parallel to the ground, palms down. The verbal call of "safe" may be made. To complete the call you normally return to the set position. To sell a safe call you might consider doing it two or three times in rapid succession. It is not always necessary to even make the sign or call. If the play is obvious do nothing.
"Out!"
The clenched right fist and a short hammered motion seem to be favored by most umpires. Again, personal style is acceptable as long as it does not distract you from seeing any further plays taking place. Check that the fielder is really in possession of the ball. The signal can be made with only a gesture or can be sold with a loud call of "He's Out!" or "She's Out!" Signal every out.

Why "He's Out!" ???? Players are running by, not focussed on the umpire, on a noisy diamond. If the player hears one sound he is "safe" ... if he hears two "he's out!" If the players hear nothing, the call is usually so obvious that everyone knows the result.

Never say "Strike Three - You're Out!"
Umpires are encouraged not to make this call a part of their repertoire. Why? In some leagues the third strike does not have to be caught while in others it must be caught. Often the plate umpire is in the worst situation to call the trapped ball, for example: a breaking ball in the dirt for the swinging third strike. An umpire should only call "Strike Three." If you have a situation where you know the batter now erroneously becomes a runner you can follow this by the call "The Batter Is Out!"

Uncaught Third Strike
Where this call is made the base umpire is often in a better position to relay the possession or trapping of the ball to the plate umpire. Signalling, not calling, a small discreet "out" means the ball was caught. Pointing to the ground with your right hand can mean the ball was trapped or not caught.

Some crews are more insistent, and the base umpire will point to the ground announcing "On the ground, on the ground" several times. This is crew dependent and should be discussed before the game.

On the tag!
Point at the runner with the left hand, signal the out with the right hand. Complete the sign by saying "On the tag, he's out!" if you want to sell it a touch. (Remember you are the umpire, not the color commentator.)

Missed the tag!
A "selling it" call that occurs when a runner slides under the tag or the tag is high. You can save some grief by indicating a loud "Safe, he missed the tag!" and following it with a tapping motion where the tag was. Everyone will know you saw the tag and most will assume the runner had the bag before it.

Fair Ball
The right hand points into the field in fair territory. There is no call "Fair" anything ever made.

Foul Ball
The same signal as "Time" but the call becomes "Foul." Umpires often add a point into foul territory with one hand after giving the time signal. Once verbalized, this call sticks. Only in the rarest of moments can it be reversed.
The base umpire needs to pay specific attention to a ball hitting the batter in the batter's box. If the batter has not moved the base umpire will immediately call "Foul." If the batter is in motion the base umpire must delay to see if the plate umpire is going to make a call. Only if the plate umpire is silent, and the base umpire is certain the batter contacted the ball outside of the batter's box would the base umpire signal "Time, that's interference, the batter is out!" otherwise the call is "Foul!"

No Pitch
The same signal as "Time" but the call becomes "No Pitch." If you are the plate umpire, step away from the plate. You will use this call most often in a softball game. It is used to indicate a leading off violation in some leagues. The call is a clear "No Pitch" and the "Runner is Out!" with a point and Out signal.

The Run Counts
Here there are two schools of thought. Often you will see an umpires point at the plate each time a run crosses the plate legally. Scorers often key on this gesture (as well as catchers!) This is important on the "time-play" or a "third-out" situation. It can also be important on a force play.

Bob Bainter, a professional umpire noted, "As far as the point on the run scoring, I think it is a matter of personal preference. Umpire Development wants no signal from us whether it is obvious or not. It is not our job to let anyone know, because what if the defense wants to appeal and throws the ball away, allowing another runner to advance or even score? That is a situation could put the offensive team in a tizzy. It has happened before."

The Run Does Not Count!
Signal and announce when the runner does not score so that the scorer and coaches maintain accurate records. The signal, done by the plate umpire, begins by forming an 'X' with the arms in front of the body then sweeping the arms out to the "time" position. The gesture is repeated and the call "The runner does not score!" is made.

Advanced Signs for the Players and Fans

Called Strike
First point at the batter with the hand closest to the batter then signal the strike with your right. It is good practice to verbalize something like "He went - strike."

The "Check-Swing" or Appealed Strike
The plate umpire does not have to be asked for help, he can simply request it himself. Experienced catchers will immediately ask you to get help from the base umpire after a check swing which you called a ball. In professional baseball the catcher and the manager can request the appeal on the swing.
Check with your league to see where the request can come from. In some leagues the request to appeal can come from anywhere on the field. **A request should never be refused.** The argument on the refusal will take longer then the appeal.

Step away from the plate, optionally removing your mask. With your left arm gesture clearly to the base umpire and ask "Did he swing?" or "Did he go?" If the answer is yes the base umpire signals - strike while saying "Yes, he went!" If the answer is no - a safe sign with "No, he did not go!"

The plate umpire will now announce the results by giving the count .. "Then that's a strike, the count is ..." or if denied, "The count is ...."

**The Foul Tip**
A two part signal. Extend you left arm up, in front of your body, palm down, to at least shoulder level. Brush the fingers of the right hand over the back of the left hand two or three times. The signal is completed by signalling the strike with the right hand. Because the ball is alive and runners can advance never say "Foul Tip." Announcing "foul" anything could stop the action.

**Infield Fly Called**
All umpires point into the air with their right hand. On some crews every umpire on the field echoes the infield fly call, on others only the gesture is echoed. This should be dealt with in the pregame conference.

The plate umpire will usually announce the verbal portions of the signal, echoed by the other umpires.

**Home Run or Ground Rule Double**
First, the ball is dead. Make sure any unnecessary action is killed, particularly if the ball has rebounded back into the field. The signal for a home run is circling the right arm and index finger overhead. The ground rule double is awarded by signalling "two bases" with two fingers held up usually on the left hand.

**Awarding Bases**
Using the left hand point clearly at the runner and state "You, second base" or "You, third base", "You, score!" whatever the case may be. The runner is protected all the way to the base but not one inch beyond it. Always move the runner closest to home first.

**That's a Balk!**
Balks must be called with reference to the action. Remember, if the pitcher completes the delivery of the ball, or throws to a base, you are in a delayed balk situation. The sequence of arriving at that signal is: point at the pitcher, arm at shoulder height, and say "That's a balk" .... now if the pitcher hesitates in his delivery call "Time ... that's a balk" and award the bases "You, second base." etc. Pointing at the pitcher will allow sufficient time to determine a delayed balk call situation.

**The Interference Call**
An immediate decision is needed: "dead ball" or "delayed dead ball." Point at the offensive player and make the call "That's Interference" followed by your decision on whether or not the ball is dead, announced with a loud gestured "Time" or (...nothing...)
meaning a delayed dead ball. If the ball remains alive avoid any signal that looks or sounds like "Time" until the appropriate moment. If the ball is dead call "Time" immediately and shut down any remaining play on the field.

The Obstruction Call
This call is like interference except the ball may remain alive. In all cases the call "That's Obstruction." is made while pointing at the defensive player making the obstruction. If a play is being made on the obstructed runner the ball is dead so immediately signal "Time." This is followed by an awarding of a base or bases either after play has stopped or even while play remains ongoing. Unless a play was being made on the obstructed runner the ball remains alive.

Any gesture which resembles "Time" being called can cause problems on a diamond. This is one reason why some umpiring organizations teach to initially extend the left hand horizontally with a clenched fist. The professional baseball umpires point at the fielder with one hand only.

Catch or No Catch
When signalled the "catch" resembles the "out" signal. No verbal indication needs to be given. The "no-catch" signal resembles the "safe" signal except the call of "No Catch" is clearly given. Sometimes it will be necessary to repeat this sign several times. An addition to the "No Catch" is the juggling routine which indicates the fielder did not have possession. Juggle when the fielder is on the base for the force out but not in full possession of the ball.

Some crews give the safe signal and then point to the ground several times saying "on the ground, on the ground" when the ball is dropped. The terms "Catch" and "No Catch" could be mixed up over the crowd noise.

The verbal call needs only to be given on a trouble ball, for example: a ball caught diving or below the fielder's knees. Routine flys can be signalled or not signalled depending on crew and local practice. If a ball is on the foul lines first signal whether the ball is fair or foul, then the catch or no-catch status if desired.

Signs for the Umpire Crew

The last thing a crew needs are a whole collection of "secret" or "private" signs. Keep any signs simple. Much beyond these few universal signs and the umpire's sign list is growing too long.

How many are out?
There are two signs for making this request: 1) a cutting motion made across the throat or 2) tapping the right pant leg with a closed right fist. Responses 1) The number of outs are relayed by hold the appropriate number of fingers, pointing down, pressed against the right leg or 2) touching the brim of the hat with the appropriate number of fingers (or a
A plate umpire often signals the number of outs by touching the side of the mask with a closed fist (0 out), one finger (1 out) or two fingers (2 out) extended.

**What's the count?**

A quick tapping on the top of head or on the brim of the hat indicates confirmation of the count being requested. An alternative sign is placing the palms of both hands horizontally on the umpire's chest. **Response** is made by holding the number of balls in the left hand and the number of strikes in the right hand. These are held pressed against the shirt just above the belt. The responding umpire also calls the count aloud.

**Possible Infield Fly Situation**

Some crews signal each other by first relaying the number of outs from the brim of their hats then signalling the infield fly. Another infield fly signal is done simply with the thumb pointing and moving upwards. A standard signal is to tap your left shoulder with your right palm indicating that the infield fly could be called. What is important is that play does not resume until all umpires are aware of the pending situation.

**Watch out for a time play**

Rejolly@aol.com wrote this note: "I just finished 5 weeks at the Jim Evans Academy of Professional Umpiring and they gave this time play instruction: Indicate to partner with right arm extended toward him with two finger indicating two outs and then a sharp point to the plate. This indicates that there is a possible time play and I am staying at home plate for a possible time play. This is echoed back by the other umpire.

Another sign flashed around many diamonds is a warning to be alert for a potential "two-out" time play situation. The plate umpire simply taps the back of his wrist where he would normally wear a watch.

**I need help!**

As soon as a manager leaves the dugout good umpires will move towards the umpire being addressed. If the discussion goes beyond a few pleasant words they will move in very close. If that umpire places two hand on his waist, particularly if he pumps them another umpire will step in between the umpire and manager. This request for intervention allows the umpire to immediately walk away from the area. As the intervening umpire there is only one objective, calmly say to the coach "OK coach, let's get back to playing baseball, the discussion is over, lets get back to the game." Under no circumstances will the intervening umpire discuss the play or become involved in any rules discussion.