

Three Umpire Update
"DP1 Mechanics"
By Jay Miner

Modern players are faster, quicker and dramatically improved in all facets of the game. To keep pace with the players, umpires must also strive to improve their skills.

Three umpires are now often assigned to tournament and championship games for better field coverage. However, are more umpires better?

While observing three-umpire games I've seen some well officiated games. Unfortunately, I've also witnessed games where "fire drill," "circus" or "zoo" mechanics prevailed. For the record, "fire drill, mechanics" are akin to umpiring chaos on the field; "circus mechanics" are more jumbled than fire drill mechanics but not as bad as zoo mechanics; "zoo mechanics" a.k.a. "no clue mechanics," are completely out of control and the lowest rated mechanics.

Four factors that usually cause poor three-umpire performances are: (1) Lack of training; (2) Lack of practical experience; (3) Lack of or a poor umpire pre-game discussion; (4) Lack of confidence in fellow crew members.

Some three umpire history. Many years ago when the need for three umpires arose, some softball associations emulated early baseball three-umpire mechanics developed in the 1920's. The principal theory for those mechanics was to keep an umpire even with or ahead of the lead base runner.

That system was an improvement over the two-umpire system. However, the main shortcomings were that too much responsibility was placed on the first base umpire while the third base umpire was often in "the rocking chair at the beach" behind third base.

More than 30-years ago, at the urging of the late Nick Bremigan (then a minor league umpire and later a major league umpire and *By the Rules* Columnist for *Referee Magazine*), baseball improved their three-umpire system. The hypothesis of the new system was to never burden the first base umpire with having to call both ends of a ground ball double play attempt. Curiously, most softball associations are still using the old time mechanics.

Three umpire overload. With "Ti" traditional mechanics, the third base umpire (U3) is (among other times) positioned on the left field foul line behind third base whenever there are runners on first and second, first and third or the bases loaded. This means the first base umpire (U1), on a ground ball double play possibility and positioned behind the second baseman, has overload responsibilities. The first base umpire must call the play at second, look for interference and then call the play at first where there could be a pulled foot or swipe tag.

Three umpire update. With modern mechanics, the "DP 1" method is used when there is a ground ball double play possibility with runners on first and second, first and third or the bases full. The third base umpire sets up behind the shortstop and between the short stop and second base in "Position C." From this position, the third base umpire calls the play at second and stays with the play looking for possible runner interference.

The first base umpire, working from "Position A," on the right field foul line behind first, moves into fair territory and takes the back end of the play at first. The "DP 1" method is a big improvement over conventional mechanics in most situations.

Exceptions. However, as good as "DP1" mechanics are, there are exceptions to its use. With runners on first and second and no outs, in an obvious bunting situation, traditional mechanics should be used. The base umpires should communicate with each other with an inconspicuous bunting signal so the crew can set up with the third base umpire behind third and the first base umpire behind second.

On a sacrifice bunt, the throw will be to third or first about 95% of the time. With "Ti" traditional mechanics, the third base umpire has the best possible view of third and the first base umpire has a good look at first. If a batter, attempting to bunt acquires two strikes, the base umpires should alertly switch back to modern "DP1" mechanics so each ump has only one call on a ground ball double play possibility.

A crew, after communication, may elect to use traditional mechanics with runners on first and second when there is *overwhelming* evidence that the runner on second may attempt to steal third. This way U3 has the call at third after moving fair from behind third and U1 has the call at second from behind second.

Also, late in a close game, the umpiring crew may elect to use traditional mechanics, rather than modern mechanics when there's the possibility of a time play with two outs. The umpiring crew may decide that the importance of the time play takes precedence over the advantages of modern positioning.

With the first base umpire set up behind second with a runner in scoring position, three-umpire "rotation" is canceled. That means the plate umpire stays home and has a much better view (rather than the first base umpire rotating from first to home) of whether a run does or does not score when the third out of the inning is recorded on the bases.

The overall philosophy of the modern three-umpire system is that the crew should try to use "DP1" mechanics when possible. However, the crew should not be so structured that they compromise their ability to best cover the most likely play even if that means moving from a "book" position.