

A background image of a baseball field, showing a dirt infield and a green outfield. A large white number '9' is overlaid on the left side of the image. The text 'Free Tips to Help You Become a Better Umpire' is written in a white serif font to the right of the number.

# 9 Free Tips to Help You Become a Better Umpire

# Editor's Note



**U**mpiring is hard. Anyone who tells you different is either lying or doesn't know what he's talking about. One of the reasons it's hard is that there are so many things to learn - a complicated rule book, a thick positioning manual, a detailed interpretation manual. Then there are all the other facets - plate work, base work, game management, timing, angles, confidence, communication . . . the list is almost endless.

**There's a lot to it. And you can't do it all at once. It takes time.**

**But here are some things you can implement fairly quickly. Like everything worth doing, it takes work. But if you focus and you're patient, you can see results soon.**

**Here's to being a better umpire.**

**KENT**



# 1. Debrief

Getting feedback from your partner(s) is crucial. No, not every partner is going to have a tip for you that you can use. And you're not going to agree with every piece of advice you get.

But there will be some advice that will be helpful to you, things you didn't realize. For example, maybe you thought your timing was great, but your partner, who you trust, thinks you're too quick. You can have a look at that and see if your timing needs some attention.

Here's how to get good feedback:

1. Let your partner(s) know before the game that you'll be asking for feedback after the game. That way they may pay attention to issues they see with your game and be able to offer helpful tips. And you can also ask them to keep an eye on something specific you think you need to work on, like your voice, timing, or signals.
2. If a specific issue crops up during the game that you'd like to get feedback on, talk to your partner right after the next half-inning (or as soon as possible) and let them know you'd like to talk about that issue after the game, so it stays fresh in their mind.
3. Be specific. Don't ask them in your post-game "What did you think?" or "How was my game?" You'll probably get a "Good," and that will be it.

Instead, ask "Was I in proper position for that play at the plate in the third?" or "Should I have gone out on that fly ball in the fifth?"

4. Don't argue. You asked your partner for help so don't argue with him when he gives it. You don't have to agree with what he says, but you want him to continue to offer advice in the future, so don't tick him off by arguing with him when he does offer help.

5. Take notes. Sure, you think you're going to remember what your partner said. But you'll probably forget. Eliminate that problem and write down what he says.



# 2. Hustle

**Hustle doesn't mean you have to sprint everywhere. And it also doesn't mean it's just about running.**

**Hustle also means to pay attention to the flow and pace of the game and to get things done quickly, without causing needless delays, or having the teams have to wait for you.**

**So yes, jog when you have to go somewhere. If you, as plate umpire, run up the base line on a ground ball to the infield, jog back to your position at the end of the play. As base umpire, if you go out on a fly ball, jog back into position when it's over.**

**But hustle also means don't take an unnecessary amount of time between innings. Pay attention. And when the teams are ready and the pitcher has had his warmup pitches, get the game going again.**



**This is also the time - between innings - that you make sure you have enough baseballs. Don't stop the game in the middle of an at-bat, if you can help it, because you have one baseball left at the start of an inning, and the batter just fouled it into the trees.**

**Also avoid unneeded breaks. For example, did you really need to call time in the middle of an at-bat because the plate was slightly dirty? You can probably wait until the at-bat is over, and this keep the game flowing.**

**Hustle by jogging where you have to be, and players, coaches, and fans sometimes will notice that you're working hard, trying your best.**

**And keeping the game flow going smoothly, without unneeded interruptions, will keep everyone focused on the game, and not on the umpires.**



# 3. Be there

What does that mean? Of course, you're going to be there. But what this step really means is that you are fully there. You're giving your full attention to this game, like it's important to you. You're not leaning on the fence between innings, looking distracted and lazy. You're not on your phone from time to time. You're not trying to get the game over as quickly as possible, like you have somewhere else to be that's more important.

But again, it's more than that. Being there also means be dependable and reliable. You're going to be where you said you'd be, whether that means covering for your partner on a rotation, or showing up at the diamond in plenty of time because you don't want the teams to have to worry about whether they'll have an umpire today.

It also means you look as good as possible when you're there. You don't have to be in the greatest physical shape, but you do need to look like an umpire - and that means your uniform fits properly - from cap to shoes and everything in between - and it's all clean and cared for.

Having clean, shiny shoes and a clean, properly fitting uniform tells the teams you care about umpiring, that this is important to you. Like it or not, people judge you on their first observation of you. If they see an umpire with clean shoes and a neat uniform, it sends a completely different message than if you show up in old sneakers, dirty pants, an untucked shirt and a hat that should've been thrown out five years ago.

Your appearance and reliability are also things you have complete control of. You might not be able to control someone coming out to argue with you after a close call goes against his team, but you can absolutely look good, which goes a long way toward building credibility.

# 4. Work Hard

I've seen it a hundred times. An umpire starts off the game great. His strike zone is spot on, he's hustling everywhere, and there are few, if any, complaints.

But then, halfway through the game, or maybe a little later, things change. Players start griping about the strike zone, maybe the umpire is a step or two away from their perfect angle on a play, and the game starts slowing down. What happened?

The umpire stopped working hard. Perhaps he relaxed his stance a little bit, which meant he stayed back too far or set up too high, and started missing a few pitches because of his new stance.

He ran to get into proper position, but he didn't run as hard as he should have, and that put him a

step or two behind when the play happened.

And maybe because the umpire was tired or was trying to relax a little more, teams took longer between innings, because the umpire wasn't paying attention and didn't tell them when to start play when he should have.

Umpiring is like many things - the degree of your success is a direct result of how hard you work.

Work hard the entire game and your strike zone will stay consistent, the game will continue at a steady pace, and you'll be in position for your plays.

You can relax when the game is over. Now, while the game is on, you need to be working hard, from the plate meeting until you leave the field.





# 5. Have goals

Imagine this: You hop in the car and start driving. When are you going to get where you're going? Well, how will you know when you've arrived at your destination if you've never set a destination?

Goals are like that. How are you going to succeed at something if you don't make it a goal? How are you going to be a good umpire if you don't set specific goals on how to improve?

Note the word "specific" there. It does little good if you set a goal of "trying to be a better umpire."

You need specifics, such as "By my 10th game this year, I will stop flinching on pitches headed at my face." Or "By my 10th base game, I will have proper footwork for a steal of second base."

Be specific about what you need to set as a goal, and have a deadline. In addition, your goal needs to be important, it needs to be realistic, and it needs to be measurable. And it needs to have a realistic deadline. With no deadline, what's the point of having a goal?



**REALISTIC:** If you set a goal of working a high-level tournament gold medal plate game, how can you make that happen? You can't, unless you're the guy in charge of assigning the umpires for the tournament. Otherwise, you might be the best umpire there, but who actually gets the gold medal plate is out of your control. So keep your goals realistic, within your control.



**IMPORTANT:** Sure you can set a goal of having 10 ejections this month, but will that really make you a better umpire? Maybe instead, set a goal of improving your game management skills so you don't have to eject as many people. It might also be a good idea to get some feedback from umpires you respect, because you might think you need to improve your voice, but a mentor might say your voice is fine, and what you really need to work on is timing.



**MEASURABLE:** So your goal is to be the best umpire in your association. How do you quantify that? Or maybe your goal is to just be a better umpire. Again, how do you measure that? What does "better" actually mean? And better by when? Instead, maybe a goal of improving your stance, so you get better on balls and strikes. You can measure when your stance is getting better, by getting feedback from mentors, and by knowing that you're having a good look at the strike zone.





## 6. Fail

**What's that? Fail? How can that help you improve? Believe me, it will. The only people who don't fail are people who don't try anything.**

**I've often told young umpires that I've made it as far as I have in my umpiring career because I've literally messed up almost every rule there is in the book. In other words, I've failed many, many times.**

**But the thing is, I've learned from them, and I don't make that same mistake again.**

**Since there is no such thing as a perfect umpire, the chances are good that you are not a perfect umpire. So you need to work on things to get better. And that means working outside your comfort zone, experimenting to see what works. And not everything will work.**

**Trying to slow down your timing? So maybe you wait and wait and wait to make sure you're definitely slower. Only now you're too slow, so people start complaining, and because you're**

**super slow you start to think too much instead of just reacting to the pitch. It's a fail. For now. But you did learn that you could slow down your timing. It was tough. You paid the price and got criticism, but you learned. And now you can adjust your timing so it's not so super slow, because you made the brave choice to fail in the first place, and learn from it.**

**The same thing could happen no matter what you try, because umpires don't usually have practices to go to, to work on things. We almost only have live games to work on.**

**So maybe you feel you need to be louder on your calls. Don't be afraid to fail. Make those calls super loud, so it distracts players, they're so loud. They might make fun of you for being so loud, but you'll learn, by experimenting with different pitch tones and different volumes, what works best for you.**

**Have the courage to fail in order to succeed, because you want to be a better umpire.**



# 7. Work on the Right Things

## WHAT DO I WORK ON?

Here you are, ready to work on being a better umpire. So, what do you need to do to get better? You had someone tell you a week ago you were calling pitches too quickly. So now you think you need to work on your timing.

## A MENTOR CAN HELP

Yes, find a mentor. And work on the things you need to work on that will make you a better umpire.



## FIND THE RIGHT THING


But wait. What if your timing is just fine, but your head height is too low? You'll spend all this time trying to get slower, but you'll still be missing pitches because you're working on the wrong thing, and your head is still too low.

## FIND THE RIGHT PERSON

Perhaps, instead, you should get some feedback by an umpire - or two - that you respect, that you know has the experience to determine what you really need to work on.




# 8. Pick the right people



**TIP:** Don't be afraid to ask for help. Most veteran umpires are only too happy to help out if you're really interested in getting better.

You've made it known in your umpire group that you want to improve, you want to be a better umpire. You'll get lots of advice, lots of feedback on what it takes to be a good umpire.

No disrespect to those well-meaning umpires, but most of the information you'll be given will be wrong, or at best, unhelpful.



**ACTION PLAN:** When asking an umpire for help, be specific. Let them know what you're looking for, and when. You're the one who has to do the work, not them.

1  
It's important, when you look for a mentor, that you find one (or more) that not only knows what he's doing, but that he can find the holes in your game that you need to work on.

2  
Also, he has to have the time needed to be able to help you and - this is crucial - he has to be able to effectively communicate those things to you.

3  
I've heard lots of veterans tell younger umpires "This is what I do" when a certain situation arises. Not everything a 20-year veteran does will work for a 16-year-old kid just starting out.

## Key Takeaway...

Your new mentor has to be able to find a way to communicate to you not only what you need to work on, but how you go about it so it works for you.





# 9. Be honest

If you're planning on being an umpire for a long period of time, nothing will hurt you more than a lack of credibility. You have to be trustworthy. So be honest as much as you can, whenever you can.

That means be honest to your partner(s), the players and the coaches. If your partner asks if you think he missed a close call, tell him the truth. That doesn't mean you have to be hurtful. Did he miss that banger at first? "Well, it was close, but from my angle, I think he was out," you can tell him.

But that's the easy one. Harder is being truthful to players and coaches, because it might be information they don't want to hear. But as hard as it is, think about the long term, not just trying to get out of this jam. "In my judgment, coach, the tag missed the runner."

Starting your explanation with "In my judgment" is hard to argue with. It might not be what actually happened, but it's your judgment. How can he argue with that?

You can also tell a coach or player you might like to get another look at a play. That's code for telling him you missed it. There's nothing you can do about it now, so hopefully, the coach will be smart enough to move on.

Another person who it's crucial to be honest with is yourself. You can't improve as an umpire if you refuse to think you make any mistakes.

I used to work with an umpire who was mediocre at best, but he thought he was great. After each game he'd say "Wow, I was awesome today." It's hard to get better if you're already perfect.

Don't be like that. Be open for feedback. Be aware there's always room for improvement. And be completely honest with yourself.

If you made a mistake, admit it to yourself. That way you can work on fixing it. It's hard to improve when you're not honest with yourself, and think you're already perfect.



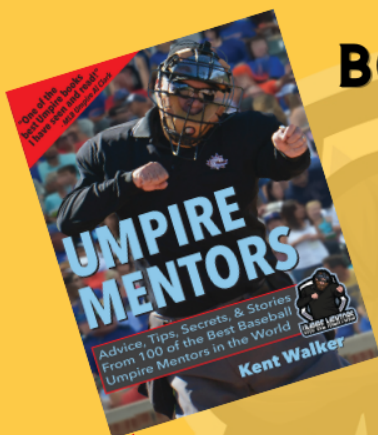
# THANK YOU!

If you think this booklet was helpful, you might want to consider checking out the **UMPIRE MENTORS** book and its companion, the **UMPIRE MENTORS WORKBOOK**.

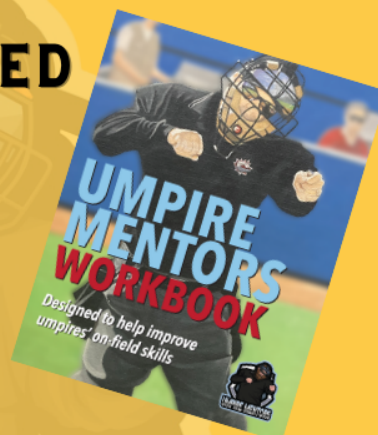
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