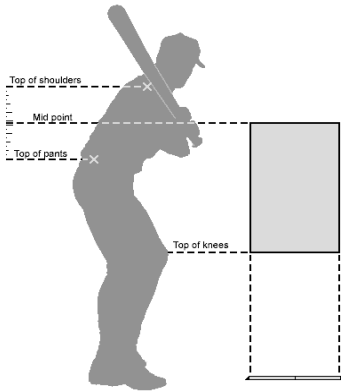


The Strike Zone

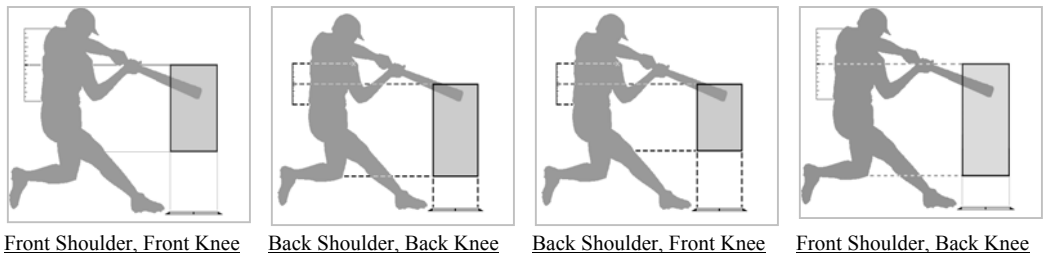


The *Official Baseball Rules* provide a fine definition of the strike zone. It ends by saying “the strike zone shall be determined from the batter’s stance as the batter is prepared to swing at a pitched ball.” That is to say, not when the batter first stands at the plate (folded in like an accordion attempting to convince the umpire how short he is), and not when the batter is in the act of swinging at a pitch.

I interpret *prepared to swing* as that instant after the batter strides into the pitch but before any movement of the hands. The last instant that his body is still evenly distributed. That is when I find it easiest to *set* the strike zone. I feel that it provides consistency and minimizes the dug-out groans. (Once the batter starts his swing and his weight shifts, you have to ask yourself, *top of which shoulder and top of which knee?* You can see the answers to those questions can make a big difference in the size of the strike zone. See the four examples below.)

If the batter does not stride, your strike zone is pretty much as shown in the top left picture. If the batter remains folded like an accordion or attempts to *duck* the pitch (attempting to buy a “ball”), lock in on where you judge his normal mid-point.

If he does stride, it will cause the zone to drop lower. If you lock in on your zone too soon, before the stride, and the batter either checks or does not swing, you would be prone to call a strike on a pitch high out of the zone.



Front Shoulder, Front Knee

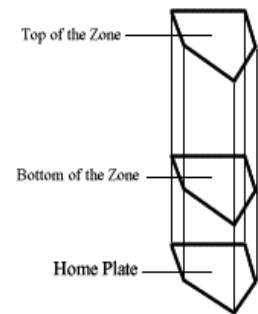
Back Shoulder, Back Knee

Back Shoulder, Front Knee

Front Shoulder, Back Knee

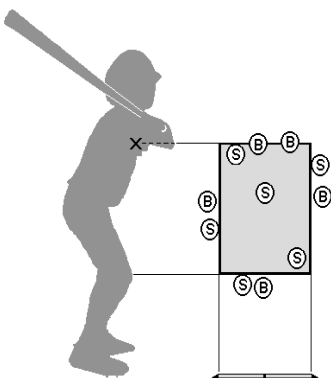
The strike zone is not just a two-dimensional rectangular frame (as depicted in the drawings above). It is a living and breathing, three-dimensional zone. The *top* and *bottom* of the strike zone float to conform to the batter’s height and knee level, and will follow the batter’s stride until the batter is *prepared to swing*. The strike zone follows the upward projection of home plate, all five sides. Using the “*pain-of-glass*” metaphor, if the sides of the strike zone were glass, any pitch, direct from the pitcher’s hand, (no bouncing) making any contact with the glass is a strike.

Strike zones have only one shape and one width but an assortment of heights. How well you adjust to different heights will determine your success or level of difficulty behind the plate.



The Strike Zone

You will develop your own comfort level with balls and strikes over time. If you are looking for a place to start, I offer some of my own personal views of working the plate (below):



- Any portion of the ball crossing any portion of the strike zone is a strike *except when umpiring younger players*. Here the top of the strike zone is usually the armpit. I suggest a *strike* must be completely below the armpit.
- Do not rush your calls. Establish consistent timing; ideally, just under a *second* after the ball hits the catcher’s mitt. Practice your timing with a stopwatch.
- Judge **low** pitches at the **front** of the plate, **high** pitches at the **back**.
- *Strikes are your friends. Every pitch is a strike until it proves otherwise.* If not, batters will look for walks, the game will not be fun and will last an eternity.
- *Never manufacture a strike or an out. Integrity before all else.*

Ⓢ - Strike; Ⓟ - Ball

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