

THE STRIKE ZONES

One thing young catchers have to learn is that the strike zone is a changing entity. The rule book says the strike zone covers the width of the plate and extends from the armpits to the top of the knees. The rules also stipulate that any part of the ball over any part of the strike zone is a strike. In fact it is fair to say that there are actually three strike zones the catcher must contend with.

HITTER'S STRIKE ZONE

First is the *Hitter's Strike Zone*. Every hitter has a favoured area where they prefer the pitch. It's that spot where they consistently make their best contact with the ball. For some it's high and inside, others like outside pitches. The trick is to avoid pitching to these strengths.

UMPIRE'S STRIKE ZONE

The second strike zone is the *Umpire's Strike Zone*. Some umpires like to call the low pitches, others see the high ones better. Likewise inside and outside. Catchers can help their pitchers enormously by establishing and adjusting quickly to the umpire's zone. There is little point in trying to throw strikes in a spot where the umpire consistently calls the pitch a ball.

PITCHER'S STRIKE ZONE

Finally we have the *Pitcher's Strike Zone*. And this can also change from game to game, depending on which pitches are working well in that particular game. Catchers need to focus on that portion of the strike zone where the pitchers are throwing their best pitches.

These three strike zones are alive and working in every game for every batter. The catcher's job is to balance the pitcher's zone against the hitter's zone, while taking advantage of the umpire's zone.

Rayla Allison, former U.S.A. National Team Catcher and Head Softball Coach at the University of Hawaii, describes it this way.

***"THE AREA THAT IS THE HITTER'S STRENGTH
IS CALLED THE HITTER'S STRIKE ZONE;***

***WHERE THE UMPIRE CALLS STRIKES
IS THE UMPIRE'S STRIKE ZONE;***

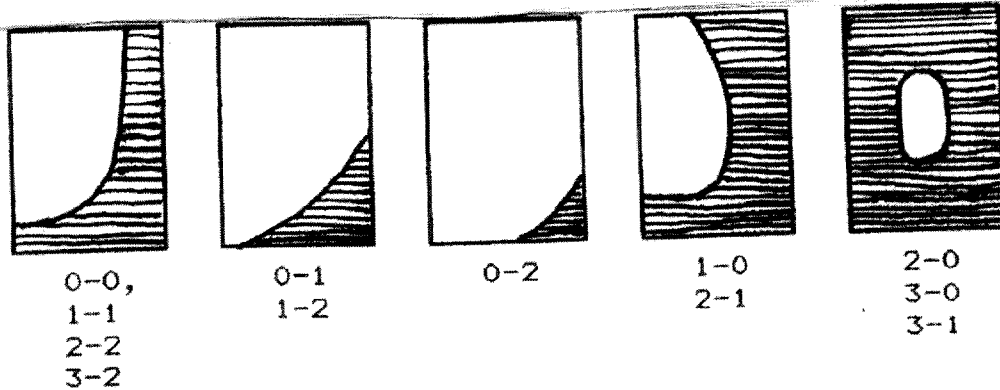
***THE PITCHER'S STRIKE ZONE IS THE AREA
WHERE THEY THROW THEIR MOST EFFECTIVE PITCHES
AGAINST THAT BATTER.***

***EVERY STRIKE CALLED SHOULD TRAVEL INTO
THE PITCHER'S STRIKE ZONE,
OR THE UMPIRE'S STRIKE ZONE,
BUT NEVER INTO THE HITTER'S STRIKE ZONE".***

Of course every batter needs to know and understand these concepts as well, so they can more accurately anticipate what to expect at the plate.

PITCHER'S STRIKE ZONE

The important thing to note here, is how this strike zone changes with the count. When ahead in the count, i.e. 0-1, 0-2, 1-2, the pitcher can afford to be more precise with the next pitch, because the next pitch doesn't have to be a strike. On the other hand, when the count favours the hitter, i.e. 1-0, 2-0, 3-0, 2-1 or 3-1, the pitcher must use more of the strike zone to ensure a strike. These diagrams illustrate this point.



HITTER'S STRIKE ZONE

As the count changes, so does the batter's perception of the area to be protected. Obviously, the larger the area the batter is forced to cover, the greater the advantage to the pitcher.

When the count is even, i.e. 0-0, 1-1 or 2-2, the batter perceives a normal strike zone, which conforms roughly to the official version, as established by the umpire of that game. In other words, the pitcher would prefer to throw a strike, but it will probably be close to the edge of the zone. (Diagram "A")

When the pitcher is ahead in the count at; 0-1, 0-2, or 1-2, the pitcher will try to be very precise and force the batter to swing at a less hitable pitch. The batter can not afford to have another strike called, so must swing at anything close to the edge. This means the batter has to protect a larger zone, expanded by about the width of the ball. (Diagram "B")

On the other hand, when the count favours the batter; 1-0, 2-0, 3-0 - 2-1 or 3-1, the batter knows the pitcher must throw a strike and can afford to ignore anything close to the edge that could be called a ball. The perceived size of the strike zone is reduced, increasing the chances of a safe hit; advantage batter.

