

Why You Should Never Argue Balls and Strikes (in Baseball or Life)

At times, watching baseball is tedious. The pitcher steps off the mound. The hitter steps out of the box. The catcher runs out to talk to the pitcher, and the game drags on. [Average game time](#) has stretched to over 3 hours, and there seems to be no rhythm to the game.

Then there are hitters who have trouble accepting calls of balls and strikes. Not liking a call, the camera catches them glaring at the umpire.

A glaring hitter is unaware that his thought storm is subtracting from his own performance. Hitting while thinking about the umpire's calls makes an already difficult task even harder. If confronted, the complainer, sure of both his professionalism and victimization, might retort, "I wouldn't have reacted if the umpire hadn't blown the call."

Of course, many athletes understand that blown calls, bad bounces, and even fluke events that go their way are the backdrop on which baseball is played. [They respect others](#) and recognize that showing up the umpire does not help borderline calls go their way. Devoting mental energy to what they can't control is foolishness.

Red Sox pitcher Chris Sale is one of the premier pitchers in baseball. Besides talent, he has a unique edge: his complete focus.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Jared Diamond [explains the rule Sale follows](#) while pitching: "Don't shake off the catcher. Ever." Without the tedious routine of the catcher giving a sign and the pitcher shaking his head no, Sale sinks

into the rhythm of his pitching.

Red Sox pitching coach Willis reports that Sale even avoids scouting reports on hitters, ““It just clears his mind. His basic thought is, ‘Whatever I throw, you’re not going to hit it.’”

“To Sale, it doesn’t matter what pitch he throws—as long as he throws it well,” adds Diamond. “Thinking about anything else only serves as a distraction.”

Human beings [cannot multitask well](#). As a practical matter, at any instant, our focus is on one thing: what we are doing or something else.

Second guessing your catcher and then wondering if you should have thrown a different pitch is like a hitter second guessing the umpire. You lose your focus and, with that, undermine your abilities.

How often are you arguing balls and strikes and losing your focus? Consider just a few examples:

1. You are working on an important report. Persistent thoughts about your colleague who shows up late and doesn’t do his “fair share” distract you from the work. You’re sure the project manager needs to be stricter with him. The consequence: Each sentence in the report takes forever to write.
2. You often remember your bad breaks: the promotion you didn’t get, the job you didn’t take, the investment you didn’t make, and other opportunities you didn’t pursue. You have a litany of reasons why other people and circumstances have made it impossible for you to have the life you hoped for. The consequence: You are not fully present to fresh opportunities that are presenting themselves today.
3. Daily you find yourself thinking and sharing thoughts that begin with, “Did you see that? Someone needs to do

something about... I'm fed up with..." The consequence: Your mind is clouded by a low buzz of irritation about everything that is wrong.

What can we do differently?

Bruce Springsteen played at halftime during the 2009 Super Bowl and later wrote an essay about his experience. [Springsteen describes the problem](#) when his mind wanders and is not "in" the performance. He explains, "When that happens, I do anything to break it. Tear up the set list, call an audible, make a mistake, anything to get 'IN.' That's what you get paid for, TO BE HERE NOW!"

Notice how Springsteen places the locus of responsibility on himself, not on other people or circumstances.

Focus—being here now—is indeed a key to good performances and to our enjoyment of what we are doing.

Think of your moment-to-moment choice in this stark way: At this moment, ask yourself, am I arguing balls and strikes or am I deploying my abilities to do what is valuable in my life?

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[Image credit: Major League Baseball Youtube]