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1When Did Umpires Start Calling Balls and Strikes?

Richard Hershberger

10When did umpires start calling balls and strikes? This might seem a trivial question. The
11rule allowing the umpire to call strikes was instituted for the 1858 season, while that for
12calling balls was introduced with the season of 1864. That is what the rules said. The
13reality in practice was different.

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15The centerpiece of modern baseball is the duel between the pitcher and the batter. This
16duel didn't exist in early baseball. The game was seen as a contest between the batter
17and base runners on the one side and the fielders on the other. The pitcher's role was to
18put the ball in play for the batter to hit. The batter was not required to swing at any pitch,
19but if he swung at and missed three pitches, the ball was in play as if it had been hit into
20fair territory (with the batter out if the ball was caught by the catcher).

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22This system relied on two assumptions: that the pitcher would pitch balls that could
23reasonably be hit, and that the batter would swing at these pitches. Neither assumption
24survived the competitive cauldron of the first flush of baseball fever in the 1850s.

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26Balls getting past the catcher were a regular feature of the era, long before catchers
27wore mitts or any protective equipment. Some batters took advantage of this when
28runners were on base with the "waiting game" of simply refusing to swing at any pitch,
29knowing that eventually the ball would get past the catcher and the runner could
30advance. The rules makers responded to this in 1858 by adapting the existing concept
31of the swinging strike, and allowing the umpire to call a strike should the batter refuse to
32swing at good pitches:

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34 This [new rule] is a very good one, and will, if strictly enforced by umpires, effect a desirable reform. It
35 will do away with the system very much in vogue the last two seasons, of striker refusing all balls
36 thrown them until the second base was cleared. New York Mercury May 9, 1858

37

38The flip side to this was to force the pitcher to throw hittable balls. The motivation for not
39doing this was a fashion in the early 1860s for throwing as hard as possible, at the
40expense of accuracy. Nor was the wildness necessarily thought a failing, if the batter
41was intimidated or induced to swing at a bad pitch out of frustration:

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43 Swift pitchers have apparently regarded it as the very acme of skill in swift pitching to intimidate the
44 batsman as much as possible, and thereby so cloud his judgment as to induce him to bat at balls he
45 cannot hit. New York Sunday Mercury March 2, 1864

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47Both balls and called strikes were in the rule book by 1864. Many modern writers
48assume that is that: that while the details would change over the ensuing decades, the
49essential features of called strikes and bases on balls were a feature of the game from
501864 onward. This is not the case. In actual practice, umpires initially were very
51reluctant to call balls and strikes.

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53The evidence is thin for called strikes in the six seasons previous to 1864. It is even
54thinner for a called third strike resulting in an out. I know of no explicit example of either.
55Here we have a criticism of an umpire that suggests he was calling strikes:

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57 [Eckford vs. Union of Elizabeth 9/10/1860] The Umpire, Mr. P. Welling, acted his part satisfactorily,
58 except in one important part. He should have called out the strikes and foul balls in a loud voice. An
59 umpire should always give his decisions promptly, and call foul balls and strikes distinctly, so that all
60 may hear. New York Clipper September 22, 1860

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62It was important that the umpire call foul balls loudly because base runners needed this
63information. It is harder to see why it would be important to call swinging strikes loudly,
64as anyone with eyes could see that it was a strike. The implication then is that he was
65calling strikes, but not loudly enough for everyone to hear (and with hand signals far in
66the future). Even such an indirect clue is rare. Much more common is the observation
67that strikes are not being called:

68

69 Section 37 of the rules [allowing for called strikes] is a deal letter... Again, when a strike has stood at
70 the home base long enough to allow a dozen balls, not plainly out of reach, to pass him, he should at
71 once be made to declare where he wants a ball, and the first ball that comes within the distance
72 pointed out, if not struck at, should be declared one strike, the second, two strikes, and the third, three.
73 If this were done, a stop would at once be put to the unmanly and mean "waiting game" frequently
74 played, and the cause of much unpleasantness removed. Out of all the matches we have reported this
75 season we have yet to see the Umpire having moral courage enough to call strikes on a batsman who
76 wilfully breaks the 37th rule of the game. New York Clipper September 29, 1860

77

78 There were high hopes in 1864 for the new rule. The potential for a base on balls
79 would balance the potential for a strikeout. This balance would, it was thought, make
80 umpires more willing to call strikes:

81

82 Hitherto, umpires have refrained from calling strikes on batsmen, who have refused to strike at good
83 balls, because there has been nothing to offset the advantage thus given to the pitcher; there being
84 no rule hitherto whereby the umpire could inflict a penalty on the pitcher as well as the batsman, for
85 his unfair practices. This new rule remedies this evil, and now we shall, no doubt, see both batsmen
86 and pitchers kept down to their legitimate work by the threat of imposing the penalties the rules now
87 inflict upon both parties. New York Sunday Mercury March 2, 1864

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89 Several games early in the season were carefully set up with a hand-selected umpire to
90 demonstrate the new rule:

91

92 [a practice game of the Atlantics of Brooklyn 5/5/1864] The new rule, too, in reference to calling balls
93 on pitchers who fail to pitch fair balls—viz.: such as are over the home base, and for the striker, was
94 strictly observed, and balls were called on all the pitchers, including Sprague, Pratt, and Chapman.
95 The way it was done was this: The umpire, in Sprague's case, seeing that while standing square on

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96 the ground to deliver the ball he would not pitch straightly and accurately, too, warned him that he was
97 liable to incur the penalty named in section 6 of the rules, unless he pitched balls for the striker, and
98 as near as possible over the home base, after he had pitched two or three balls out of the legitimate
99 reach of the batsman, called first one ball; and the next time a ball was pitched so nearly as to touch
100 the batsman, or out of his reach, two and three balls, and then ordered the striker to take his first
101 base. This enforcement of the rule led to fair pitching, and then began full play for the fielders and a
102 lively and interesting game. New York Clipper May 14, 1864
103

104 Confusion soon set in, as players and umpires tried to understand this strange new rule:

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106 [Eckford vs. the field in a practice game, 6/7/1864] The Eckfords first went to the bat, and by a
107 mistake of the umpire, who called balls on the pitcher when he should simply have called baulks, their
108 first striker had to take his first base. Brooklyn Eagle June 8, 1864

109

110 [Empire vs. Active 6/11/1864] The Empire and Active match on Saturday at Hoboken turned out to be
111 a very singular contest, it being made so by the very novel interpretation of rule six by McMahon of
112 the Mutual, who acted as umpire on the occasion. From the first to the last innings he called balls on
113 the pitcher every time he failed to deliver the ball exactly to the spot the striker pointed out; and also,
114 when the striker failed on his part to strike at the first ball that came to him where he had said he
115 wanted it, he called strikes on him, his decisions throughout being thoroughly impartial and consistent
116 with his peculiar definition of the rule. Brooklyn Eagle June 13, 1864
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118 Soon, players and umpires gave up and simply ignored the rules:

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120 [Atlantics vs. Mutuals 6/27/1864] Ball after ball was delivered on both sides yesterday that were
121 unquestionably unfair, being entirely out of reach of the batsmen. The strikers too, especially
122 McKeever, were allowed altogether too much latitude, although it would not have been fair to have
123 made them pay the penalty of unfair play while the pitchers were not punished for their errors.
124 Brooklyn Eagle June 28, 1864

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126 [Empire vs. Atlantic 7/9/1864] The decisions of the umpire were characteristically fair and impartial,
127 but he erred in ignoring the sixth section of the rules—the pitchers on both sides taking advantage of
128 his laxity in this respect to try their hands at the old style of trying to intimidate the batsman, by
129 pitching at him, instead of for him—Pratt especially. On this account, the game was lengthened nearly
130 an hour, and much good fielding lost sight of. New York Sunday Mercury July 10, 1864
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132 The following season was hoped to bring a fresh start and revivify the rule:

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134 The rule that will be observed in reference to the enforcement of fair pitching by Umpires is as
135 follows: When the game commences, the Umpire, after making such allowance for accidental errors
136 in pitching, as generally mark the opening play of a game, will, without appeal, call 'ball to the bat,'
137 after which notice, should the pitcher 'repeatedly' fail to deliver fair balls to the bat, viz: twice or three
138 times—then the Umpire shall call 'one ball,' and if the pitcher persists in such action—that is, delivers
139 one or two unfair balls directly after such warning, two or three balls must be , and the player given
140 his base. Less latitude is to be allowed this season than last, and the custom of taking the opinion of
141 the respective nines as to the degree of latitude to be allowed the pitcher, will be entirely done away
142 with, as a practice adverse alike to the interests of the game and the rules of the National Association.
143 Philadelphia City Item April 8, 1865
144

145 There was some limited success:

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147 [Athletics vs. Unions of Morrisania 6/14/1865] Frank [Pidgeon, umpire] called strikes when any
148 evidences of “waiting” were shown, and called a “balk” on each pitcher. That 6th rule wants
149 enforcing a little and it will make the difference of an hour in a game. Brooklyn Daily Eagle June 15,
150 1865

151
152 Mr. Galvin acted as Umpire, and made a most excellent man in that position. He did not hesitate to
153 call strikes and balls on both clubs, and in three instances gave bases on balls widely pitched.
154 Brooklyn Daily Eagle August 7, 1865
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156 But occasions for such praise were rare. Going into the 1866 season the campaign was
157 renewed. The old Knickerbocker club gave the rule their endorsement through the
158 remarkable fact that they called balls and strikes even in practice games:

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160 The Knickerbockers play ball in the spirit it ought to be played, and not as if it was an important
161 business, to be attended to as a business. Another thing we notice, and in this as in other respects
162 their example should be followed, and that is, that even in their practice-games they play according to
163 the strict rules of the game, balls being called for unfair delivery, and strikes for failure to bat at good
164 balls, as promptly as if they were engaged in a regular match. This is the right way to practice, even
165 for “the fun of the thing,” as the saying is. New York Sunday Mercury May 13, 1866
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167 The practice gradually spread to the general baseball fraternity, and with the season of
168 1866 called balls and strikes began:

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170 [Atlantic vs. Peconic 6/18/1866] For the first time this season, an Umpire—it was Mr. Cummings,
171 of the Enterprise—performed his whole duty. He kept both pitcher and striker closely to their
172 business, calling balls and strikes promptly and at the same time keeping a keen eye to the field and
173 bases.

174 Mr. Cummings deserves the thanks of all base ball players, and it is to be hoped his example will
175 be followed—it cannot be improved on—by other Umpires in future matches. Owing to his rulings,
176 the game was short, lively and interesting, as all games should and may be. Brooklyn Eagle June 19,
177 1866
178

179 It is with the season of 1866 that called balls and strikes begin to lose the air of being
180 remarkable exceptions. The novelty of the base ball on balls is shown by instances
181 where batters refused to take first base. It didn’t seem like a legitimate and honorable
182 part of the game:

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184 [Union of Morrisania vs. Surprise 5/19/1866] We would suggest to Pabor, that in the future, he drop
185 such boyish play as that of refusing to take his base on three balls. He would not hesitate to take his
186 base on three strikes or on a missed catch, both of which are discreditable to the play of the batsman,
187 whereas, boy-like, he refused to take his base on three balls, which is not discreditable to the
188 batsman. The rule in this case says that the player “shall” take his base on three balls. Smith acted
189 very properly in running his base for him. Another such act should lead to his being put off the nine
190 for disobedience of orders. New York Sunday Mercury May 27, 1866
191

192 [Eureka of Newark vs. Union of Morrisania 6/12/1866] Brientnall opened play in the fifth inning and
193 was sent to his first-base on three balls, and, as usual, he took the base very reluctantly. There
194 appears to be considerable objection to taking a base on three balls on the part of players, and in this
195 they show both a lack of sense and great inconsistency of conduct. There is not a player who, the
196 moment a ball is missed on the bound on the third strike, won’t run as fast as he can for his base, and
197 he will run just as early for it and take it readily on a missed flycatch from a poor hit, and yet will make

198 a fuss about taking a base on three balls. In the first place a base made either on the third strike or a
199 missed catch from a poor hit is really a discredit to the batsman, and he would be right in feeling
200 ashamed of it; but there is no discredit in taking a base on three balls, and we hope to see the boyish
201 objection shown by players in this respect done away with. New York Sunday Mercury June 17, 1866
202

203 We also arrive at the first known instance of the batter arguing a called strike:

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205 [Eckford vs. Active 8/22/1866] In the ninth inning, when Klein went to the bat, three runs had been
206 scored, thereby making the score a tie, and Beach was on the first-base. Klein had previously struck
207 out twice, and was "kinder riled" at his ill-luck. Being over particular in selecting a ball to strike at, and
208 having struck once without effect, and refusing to strike at a good ball, the umpire—as he had
209 impartially done with one of the Actives the previous inning—called a "strike" on him, whereupon Klein
210 turned round to the umpire and remarked to him that he "wasn't going to stand any of his nonsense
211 any more!" Not being willing to submit to this kind of talk, Mr. Rogers called "Time!" asked who was
212 the Eckford Captain, and at once inquired of him whether he was satisfied with his
213 decision—"because, if you are not," said Mr. Rogers, "I want you to get another umpire." Beach asked
214 him what the trouble was, and Klein answering, said, "I want a ball here, and he calls strikes when
215 they are there," both times indicating the spot where he wanted a ball. Beach, instead of telling Klein
216 to keep silent, as should have done, countenanced him [in questioning the] decision of the umpire by
217 telling him to wait until he got a good ball to hit. Mr. Rogers, not content with this, against asked
218 Beach whether he was satisfied with his decisions or not, Beach replying to the effect that he had
219 not seen any one disputing them. Finally, the crowd sustaining the umpire, he retained his position;
220 and the next ball Klein struck out, the crowd greeting his being put out with applause. New York
221 Sunday Mercury August 26, 1866
222

223 This reluctance to take a base on balls did indeed pass: first base is first base. But its
224 vestige can still be seen in the traditional use of batting average rather than on-base
225 percentage to measure a batter's performance.

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227 While called balls and strikes were by 1866 no longer exceptional, neither would it be
228 unusual for several years, into the professional era, for the umpire to refuse to call them,
229 or to call them often:

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231 [Union of Morrisania vs. Surprise 5/19/1866] Out of about a hundred unfairly-pitched balls during the
232 game, only twice did the umpire give the striker his base on "three balls". Why do not umpires ignore
233 calling balls and strikes altogether, and also balks. They might as well break the rule in one instance
234 as in another. New York Sunday Mercury May 27, 1866

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236 [Unions of Morrisania vs. Irvingtons 7/2/1867] The umpire, Mr. McKeller, of the Harlem Club, was the
237 most silent man on the field, and kept his place while ball after ball was sent in the wildest kind of
238 style, about as apt to hit the striker or go behind him, as over the base. New York Dispatch July 7,
239 1867

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241 [Mutual vs. Irvington 6/1/1869] Mr. Nelson impartially discharged his duties as umpire, but he labors
242 under the same mistake as others do in his construction of the rules in calling balls and strikes. For
243 instance, after expressly stating to the pitcher where the striker wanted a ball, if balls were sent in
244 close to the batsman, over his head, or out of his legitimate reach, he would call out, "over the base,"
245 "Get them down," or call out again and again where the ball should be pitched. Now this style of thing
246 is not only in direct opposition to the rules, but is playing into the hands of the pitchers. Any ball not
247 within the legitimate reach of the bat is now required to be called after due warning has *once* been
248 given the pitcher. When the pitcher sends in a high ball, the umpire, instead of calling out to him to

249 “get them down” or to “pitch lower,” should promptly call balls. In regard to strikes, more latitude is
250 allowed, no strike being permitted to be called unless the striker is previously warned, and then, even
251 if must be apparent that he is wilfully refusing to strike. National Chronicle June 12, 1869

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253 [Harvard vs. Atlantic 8/12/1870] Mr. Hatfield was elected umpire, and although he gave general
254 satisfaction, he seems to suffer, like many others in a similar position, from a disinclination to call
255 “balls” or “strikes,” as the rules direct. It is only fair to a good pitcher, that the rule should be *strictly*
256 *enforced*, otherwise an immediate and decided advantage is given to the side whose pitcher is not so
257 careful or effective. ... [The umpire] is not there to give his idea on the subject, but to fulfill his duties
258 as prescribed by the rules of the convention. New York Sunday Dispatch August 14, 1870

259
260 [Chicago vs. Athletic 10/30/1871] The umpire allowed both the pitchers full play for strategy by his
261 failure to punish wide balls. Whatever option an umpire may have in regard to calling balls which are
262 within the batsman’s reach, and yet not over the home-plate or as the batsman calls for, he has no
263 choice but to call every ball which is out of the legitimate reach of the bat, viz., all those balls which
264 are enumerated under the head of “unfair” balls, the rules expressly requiring the umpire to call all
265 such balls “in the order of their delivery.” New York Sunday Mercury November 5, 1871

266
267 [Baltimore vs. Mutual 5/4/1872] All were surprised at Ferguson’s umpiring. Several times he allowed
268 wide balls to be delivered uncalled in direct violation of the rules, and he was altogether too lenient in
269 calling strikers. Umpires have no right to be judges of the law, or to decide otherwise than by the
270 letter of the rules. Ferguson ought to be better posted. All “unfair” balls must be called whenever
271 delivered. New York Sunday Mercury May 5, 1872

272
273 And, probably inevitably, as umpires grew more willing to make these calls, they were
274 criticized for it:

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276 [Cincinnati vs. Union of Lansingburgh 6/7/1869] The contest from this point was chiefly interesting
277 from the heavy batting on both sides, and the constant calling of balls and giving of bases by the
278 umpire, who seemed disposed to play the game himself, instead of allowing the players that privilege.
279 Thirteen times on the Union side the players were given their first base, and four times on the
280 Cincinnati side, and this, taken in connection with the heavy batting, ran up the score to larger figures
281 than we are accustomed to seeing in championship matches. New York Sunday Dispatch June 13,
282 1869

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284 [Boston vs. Olympic of Washington 5/5/1871] Mr. Dobson umpired the game in an impartial manner,
285 and claimed he did so in accordance with the rules. He followed the letter, but surely not the spirit of
286 the law. No pitcher in the country can be expected to pitch every ball over the plate, nor must the
287 batsman be expected to hit at every ball so pitched. There must be some latitude allowed or the
288 whole beauty of the game is destroyed. New York Sunday Mercury May 7, 1871

289
290 So returning to the original question, there is no entirely satisfactory answer. The safe
291 generalization is that balls and strikes were rarely called before 1866, and gradually
292 became more and more a routine part of the game, with the process reaching
293 completion at some point in the professional era.

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295 This article is already over-long, but I will briefly offer three reasons for the reluctance of
296 umpires to enforce these rules:

297
298 (1) The new rule vastly expanded the umpire’s role, and exposed him to criticism. The
299 early umpire was there to resolve disputes brought before him. The new rules called on

300 him to interpose himself into the game, in a way that was bound to provoke criticism.
301 This was entirely predictable and predicted:

302

303 This rule, although, doubtless, very necessary, is yet calculated to make some troubles, and excite
304 dispute; what one umpire may deem to be "good balls," another may only consider "from fair to
305 middling," and their decisions be continually excepted to. Porter's Spirit of the Times April 17, 1858

306

307 (2) The players didn't like the new rule. Umpires were not yet a separate class from
308 players. Typically they were active players, members of an outside club, called upon to
309 serve for the game. So when we have, as we have seen, evidence of players resisting
310 the rules, this is also evidence of umpires' attitudes. Even as enforcement grew more
311 common, sometimes the competing sides would agree to disregard these rules:

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313 [Typographical vs. American Bank Note Company 8/6/1866] The Umpire was Mr. Garrison, of the
314 Stars. His decisions were impartially given; but, by mutual consent of the contestants, he ignored the
315 sixth rule almost entirely, and the consequence was a game of over four hours duration and but seven
316 innings played at that. It is better in all cases to "stick to the text" closely. Brooklyn Eagle August 7,
317 1866

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319 (3) Institutional inertia slowed implementation. Even absent active resistance, players
320 and umpires tended to act as they had always. Major changes were easier to enact
321 than to implement. It was easier to persuade players and umpires from outlying areas,
322 as they were used to taking their cue from New York, with the written word the main
323 conduit for information. For all that the baseball press was centered on New York City, it
324 had an easier time influence the rest of the country. This led to the observation that
325 umpires from outlying areas often stayed closer to the official rules than did those from
326 the metropolis:

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328 [Mutual vs. Star 8/21/1866] His [umpire John A. Lowell of Boston] intelligent interpretation of the rules
329 in this game, and the thoroughly impartial and resolute manner in which he held the contestants up to
330 the strict letter of the law, merits commendation. His decisions, in regard to calling balls and strikes
331 for unfair delivery or efforts to play a waiting game, afforded an excellent example for our city-umpires
332 to follow; and even those noted referees, Messrs. Grum and P. O'Brien, can take a lesson from him to
333 advantage. New York Sunday Mercury August 26, 1866

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335 The result was that constant haranguing over a span of years was necessary to get
336 umpires to consistently—or at all—enforce called strikes and ball.

337

338 On a final note, the question examined here is a very small slice of a much larger
339 development. The duel between the pitcher and the batter developed slowly. Both
340 practice and ideology took years to work through the implications of called balls and
341 strikes. There are many other aspects that merit examination. Even when the umpire
342 was willing to call balls and strikes, under what circumstances would he? The modern
343 doctrine that every pitch must be either a ball or a strike developed slowly. This requires
344 that the set of all possible pitch locations be divided into inside or outside a strike zone,
345 with no neutral middle ground. It also requires that every pitch not swung at be called.
346 Neither was true from the beginning. The development of the strike zone is its own

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347 story, as is the adjustment to the number of balls and strikes for a walk or an out.