

MLB's Automated Ball-Strike System and Its Impact on the Game

Major League Baseball (MLB) introduced the Automated Ball-Strike System (ABS) in Spring Training this year, changing how balls and strikes are called. This system, also known as “robo umps,” uses Hawk-Eye camera technology to track pitches and adjust the strike zone to each batter’s stance and height. Rather than fully automating calls, MLB has opted for a challenge-based approach.

So, how does the challenge system work?

Each team starts with two challenges per game. Only the pitcher, catcher, or batter can issue a challenge by tapping their cap or helmet immediately after the umpire’s call. The Hawk-Eye system then provides an instant video review, displaying the ball’s exact location to fans and broadcasters. If the challenge is successful, the team retains its challenge; if not, the team loses it. On average, each review adds only 17 seconds to the game, which will help minimize delays.

The ABS has gone through extensive testing before its introduction in Spring Training. MLB first experimented with ABS in the independent Atlantic League in 2019 before expanding to the minor leagues in 2021. The system has been used at the Triple-A level, with different implementations. From Tuesday through Thursday, full ABS determined every pitch, and from Friday to Sunday, umpires called the game with the challenge system in place. Ultimately, the challenge system was favored over full automation due to concerns about increased walk rates and game length.

An advantage of ABS is its individualized strike zone. Traditional strike zone overlays on broadcasts apply a uniform box for all hitters, which did not account for differences in height and batting stance. ABS addresses this by tracking players’ build and stance to define a strike zone unique to each batter. This change will bring more consistency in umpiring decisions. Not all Spring Training games will feature ABS, as the necessary technology is only available at select ballparks. CBS Sports reports that, on average, each team will participate in 20 games with the challenge system, though this varies; The Arizona Diamondbacks will play 29 such games, while the Chicago Cubs will only have seven. While ABS will not be implemented in the 2025 MLB regular season, its future remains a topic of discussion. Commissioner Rob Manfred has expressed interest in introducing the system as early as 2026.

Cubs pitcher Cody Poteet became the first pitcher at the major league level to successfully challenge a ball-strike call under the system. Poteet challenged a pitch against Max Muncy in the first inning. “I was pretty positive it was a strike and the umpire balled it. I knew it was going to get overturned, and I went, ‘Oh, man, I’m going to be the first one.’ Great,” said Muncy to ESPN.

The ABS challenge system is a compromise between traditional umpiring and complete automation. It preserves the human element while leveraging technology to minimize mistakes and enhance accuracy. Whether it will become a permanent fixture in MLB is unknown, but Spring Training will serve as a testing ground for its potential future implementation.

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503 words.

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