



Tales of an amatuer umpire...



By Mike Courson

Maybe by now you’ve read my feature on officials and umpires on page 15. It was an idea I had midway through the basketball season but, unfortunately, took until the spring to round up. Basketball officials and baseball/softball umpires, given their proximity to the crowd, may have it the worst of all officials. I wanted to share their story.

My own is pretty simple: I used to enjoy coaching third and fourth grade recreation softball. Many of the kids I coached went on to successful high school careers, and it was neat to see their growth over the years. I might not have paid as much attention had I not known those kids.

I love to win as much as the next guy but that’s not the point of rec sports. So rules and fair play always come first, and rec sports are a good place to learn that. If you can’t win within the rules, play harder.

One year, I watched as my pitcher released a high pitch that came in higher than the batter’s head. Strike! Wait, what?

As a coach, you cannot responsibly teach your players to swing at pitches that high. It is the umpire’s duty to fairly call the pitches, then it is the batter’s duty to swing at strikes. When calls like that are made, the whole system goes down the drain.

So I started umpiring. I might not get all the calls right, but I surely would not do something like calling an over-the-head pitch a strike.

I’ve only umpired baseball and softball so my experience is quite limited. In general, officials are told to put down their “rabbit ears” - in other words, don’t let the fanatics get to you. If only it were that easy. Here are a few of my favorite stories...

- **Pecos disaster.** I was not having a good week. I was not eating or feeling well and I was ready to watch the Royals and go to sleep when the phone rang around 6 p.m. one evening. Could I umpire a Pecos League (Great Bend Boom) game? They

really needed someone.

I explained my lack of experience. I explained my lack of uniform. Promised decent pay and experience, and with the idea that they just needed an umpire, I decided to do it.

Given my lack of uniform - I wore wind pants and my rec umpire T-shirt - I was a target as soon as I stepped on the field. That’s fine, but judge a guy by his calls, not his wardrobe.

All was fine until a Garden City player tried to steal second. I tell you what... everything happens fast at that level. It was a bang-bang play and I called him out. The player was kind enough about it. On the way to the dugout, he asked where he was tagged. I indicated his wrist. He said, “No man, he got my chest.” The implication was that his hands were already on the bag.

His coach was not as pleasant. He waddled out near first base. “Could you get some help?” he asked. I looked at the home plate umpire, who let coach and I know it was my call. I reaffirmed my call and took a little more verbal abuse from the coach.

Later in the game, there was a bang-bang play at first. There was all kinds of movement with someone else covering the bag and the runner diving to beat the throw. Many MLB plays like that end up getting reviewed. I thought I saw the runner’s arm break on the bag before the ball hit the glove so I called him safe.

Again, the coach waddled out. “Can you get some help?” By this time, I’d had it. I made it clear it was my call and why I called him safe. At some point, the home plate umpire came down to say enough was enough.

That’s when the coach looked at me and asked, “Did you dress up for tonight?”

I’ve long stood up to bullies and I wanted to go right then and there. Instead, I maintained my cool and put up with some pretty terrible things after that. To this day, I believe I was targeted because of my outfit that night, not the actual calls. That said, I’d love to see the replays to see if I’d made the correct calls. Unfortunately, that’s not an option for local umpires. They make a call and they’re stuck with it, right or not.

- **Pushed off the bag.** In a rec game, a girl simply refused to slide. It cost her at second as her momentum carried her off the bag. How could I tell? She was jumping on one foot trying to stay on the bag before she came off. A tag was then applied and I

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Black Bears

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Offensively, the loss of Comley at the top of the lineup means a loss of speed on the bases. Defensively, Mantz plans to shift Gilmore from first to catcher, and Raegan Mantz will take over Comley’s spot at short.

“Last year we could be aggressive on the bases since we knew our offense was explosive,” Coach Mantz said. “This year we will need to be more patient and put the ball in play, forcing the other teams to make the routine plays on a regular basis.”

The other Sterling squads have adjusted well in the new league. The Lady Black Bears will so no former CKL foes in the regular season, and the schedule features just two non-HOA games against Cheney and Canton-Galva.

“All games are key for our program to be successful,” Mantz said. “We do have a history with Hutchinson Trinity from fac-

ing them the last couple years in regionals as well as in summer league. Now being in the same league, both of us will be looking to start the season off well in the season opener.

“We will also look forward to playing teams with history like Ell-Saline, Remington, Marion, Sedgwick and Cheney. However, we respect everyone on our schedule whether it is league or non-league games.”

The program has also grown for the 2017 campaign and Mantz should have enough players to field some JV squads.

“Our program has generally been small in numbers,” he said. “Thus, not having depth to challenge the starters kept us from having competitive practice on a regular basis. Now, our numbers will allow for all positions to be challenged along with developing flexibility and playing some girls in multiple positions.”

Officials

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“There’s never going to be a missed perfect game on a bad call at first base again. That’s a good thing. We ultimately want to get it right. It’s proven, for the most part, we are right most of the time. The times we are wrong, now we can get it right and that’s a good thing.”

Especially in late-game situations, an official may need the courage to come up with a pivotal call. In 1985, MLB Umpire Don Denkinger missed a call at first base. That blown call in the ninth inning of Game 6 of the World Series may have cost the St. Louis Cardinals a championship. Instead, the Kansas City Royals came from behind to take Game 6, then cruised to an 11-0 win and the championship in Game 7.

No matter the time of the call or the crowd’s reaction, the only goal of officials is to get the call correct. “It doesn’t affect me,” Dysinger said. “I know either way I’m never going to make anyone happy. As long as I call a game correctly I’m happy with myself.”

A LITTLE RESPECT

Officials are just hard-working people trying to do a job. Most of the time, they travel to officiate, so the idea of bias towards a certain team, especially the home one, is nonsensical. Sports officials, like other professionals, merely want to be treated with respect.

“One of the very first varsity basketball games I worked, I was the baseline official and a kid blocked a shot,” Goodheart recalled. “Everyone in the gym saw

it as a blocked shot, and I just kicked the very first call of the game. The opposing coach asked, ‘Sir, where did he foul him?’ I asked, ‘Coach, do you play golf?’ He looks at me like what are you talking about? I said, ‘Well that’s my mulligan.’

“Officials are humans. We don’t go out there to try and kick calls, but we make mistakes. It can be much easier to sit back and watch a game and say that’s at travel.”

Again, Tichenor is in a unique spot because his calls can impact a multi-billion dollar sport. High-paid superstars earn their money by performing well, and bad calls can affect their livelihood.

“Most of these guys, I’ve spent 14 years in the minor leagues with,” Tichenor said. “We’re co-workers on that end. They don’t look down on me and I don’t look up at them. It’s mutual respect for the most part.”

Crandall is also in a unique position as one of the few female officials around Kansas. “As a female in a predominantly male business, I feel like I get a lot of respect,” she said. “It comes from the players, who rush over and

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