

Officials: the gatekeepers of America’s favorite pastimes

By Mike Courson

On June 2, 2010, Armando Galarraga was having some kind of night. Pitching at home for the Detroit Tigers, he was on the verge of becoming just the 21st pitcher in major league history to throw a perfect game.

Needing just one more out, Galarraga faced the bottom of the Cleveland Indian order in shortstop Jason Donald, who hit a weak grounder toward right field. Tiger first baseman Miguel Cabrera ranged over to snag the ground ball, then tossed to Galarraga, who was covering first base. Though the throw beat Donald by half a step, veteran umpire Jim Joyce ruled Donald safe. There would be no perfect game, not even a no-hitter.

After the game, Joyce admitted he missed the call. Because instant replay was not an option in 2010, the first thing Joyce did after the game was look at the play on video. That missed call cost Galarraga the eternal prestige that comes with throwing a perfect game. Instead, he has the dubious honor of being the pitcher in the “Imperfect Game” or the “Galarraga game.”

Not every call an umpire or official makes rises to the level of that final out in Detroit. Major League Baseball has gone so far, via the use of instant replay, to ensure something like that never happens again.

But for a handful of local officials there is no instant replay. Area high school officials have only their split-decision judgments to get the call right. Though officials play an important role in local sports, they are often cast as the villains because of those calls. In spite of that, many still sign on to be officials.

WHY OFFICIATE?

Most umpires have been involved in sports in one way or another since childhood. Many get into the officiating side of things after their own athletic careers have ended, or because family members have officiated.

Todd Tichenor is entering his eighth season as a Major League Baseball umpire. He got his start earlier than most while growing up in Garden City.

“When I was little I used to go to the ball fields with my mom,” he said. “She was a supervisor. I starting umpiring little league when I was little and it just grew into a passion. It was fun. I loved being one step ahead of the players, and especially in the big leagues, you have to be two steps ahead of them.”

By the time Tichenor was a senior at Garden City High School, he already had a full slate of varsity basketball games to referee. In those early years, he officiated football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, and fast-pitch softball.

“I did anything and everything growing up,” he said. “I grew up in a single-parent home so I didn’t get to have money just given to me, so that’s how I made my money. Getting into college, that was my job.”

Scott Goodheart has officiated 11 years of basketball, six years of softball, and four years of volleyball. His father was an official so Scott saw that side of sports from a young age.

“I enjoyed getting to watch him and tag along with him,” Goodheart said. “I (began officiating) as a way to make some money in college, but the



Tichenor

more I did it the more I enjoyed it and became passionate about it. It allowed me to stay involved with sports.”

Eric Dysinger has officiated football and basketball for six years. He was a multi-sport athlete growing up and uses officiating to stay involved.

“I was big into sports when I was in junior high and high school,” he said. “I knew without officials there would not be high school sports. I thought I could give back to the community in that manner.”

Bailey Crandall, a “kindergarten teacher by day, basketball official by night,” has been officiating for 10 years, including six years as a registered Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) official. She, too, has made it a family tradition.

“Growing up, I would travel around the area with my dad, watching him officiate high school basketball,” she said. “That is what initially got me interested. Then when I was in high school, I began officiating youth basketball and volleyball games, working for my mother, who runs the local recreation commission. Since then, it has been a great part-time job. I love the game of basketball, and officiating gives me the chance to stay involved in the game.”

The Crandall crew takes the idea of family a little further. Bailey’s varsity crew consists of her dad, Doug, and her older brother, Brooks. When someone needs a sub, Bailey’s little sister, Bridget, fills in.

“When we meet with the coaches before each game, we hand them a card with our names on it,” Bailey said. “Any coaches who don’t already know us usually do a double take, then a triple take, at the card, which has the last name ‘Crandall’ listed on it three times.”

“People always ask, ‘So what if you disagree on a call?’, thinking this may stir up some family drama,” she joked. “But we are all very level headed, can admit to making mistakes, and are always open to advice from each other. My dad always responds, ‘She’s the boss,’ referring to me being the ‘bossy’ one. It’s been fun to work with them.”

OFFICIAL AMBITIONS

Most umpires around the state of Kansas have full-time jobs. For Tichenor, the goal was always to make umpiring a career. When he met his wife, he told her that’s what he wanted to be. Then he made it happen.

Tichenor played baseball at Garden City Community College. That freshman year, he refereed his first state basketball game in Salina. After two years of college, he headed to umpire school in Orlanda, Fla. After six weeks there, he was invited to a two-week evaluation course in Cocoa Beach, Fla. Upon completion, he was invited to umpire in the minor leagues. He spent 14 years there before making it to the show.

“I was doing mostly a main



Regardless of the season, a handful of men and women make sports possible by officiating. (photo by Mike Courson)

schedule of junior college basketball during those minor league years, then substitute teaching while I was home because the minor leagues didn’t pay enough to get by,” said Tichenor.

Tichenor is rare in that he wanted to make a career of officiating. Many officials are either content to stay part-time or forced into sporadic work because of full-time careers and families.

“The goal for officiating is calling the perfect game,” Goodheart joked. “Once that happens, I may have to retire. The goal of college has always been in the back of my mind, but that dream is quickly dwindling as I become older and start a family. I am pretty content with high school. I enjoy the rivalries, the atmospheres, and culture of the high school game.”

“I would like to continue to work high school varsity games, but would like to get a few more postseason games,” Crandall said. “Last year, I officiated in my first sub-state tournament. In the next few years, I would like to work my way up to getting a state tournament game.”

“I’m also interested in working some junior college games in the future. I played in the KJCAA at Seward County Community College, and I can see that experience being valuable in trying to move on to the next level of officiating.”

THE BIG GAME

Officials are graded in a variety of ways. The goal is to have the best officials for the biggest sporting events. Leagues around the state have their own ways to weed out bad officials, and KSHSAA also picks the best of the best for its premiere events.

“We have a tremendous group of former officials in a rich history throughout the state,” Goodheart said. “It varies from league to league. Some officials are evaluated on numerous things: their physical ability, their judgment, their mechanics, their management of a game.”

“These evaluations can be done through a critique sheet from a live setting or through video. Sometimes administrators are former officials who have knowledge of how the game is officiated.”

Crandall works for between three and five leagues in Southwest Kansas. Doing a good job is crucial to getting a foot in the door with any organization.

“Most league commissioners hire officials a year in advance,” she said. “They use an online program to assign

games, and officials use it to accept or decline those games. I work on my own crew for most of my games, then I fill in for two other crews for other games.

“The easiest thing to do to get hired for games is to be seen and give out your contact information. There are always situations where an official can’t make it and someone is needed to fill in. Word of mouth goes a long way in the officiating business.”

Towards the end of a season, coaches, athletic directors, and league commissioners vote for the best officials. Officials with the most votes are invited to sub-state, regional, and state games.

“Since there is not an official grading system, I think the best way to stay sharp is to accept feedback from your partners and other officials,” Crandall said. “I appreciate when other officials give me pointers or suggestions. There is always something new to learn or things you can improve on to help you call a better game.”

“It’s important to realize you can’t always call a perfect game. It’s like being a basketball player - some games you are on and you can’t miss, and some games you are off and mess up.”

CONTINUING EDUCATION

As with many professions, officials must stay up to speed with the various rule changes in each sport each season. Even physical fitness can be part of the routine as long games behind home plate or up-and-down trips down the basketball court require great stamina.

Though high school games take place in the nine months between August and May each year, there are ample opportunities for officials to stay sharp in off-season.

“There are great opportunities in the summer time,” said Goodheart. “Using basketball as an example, that’s where student-athletes are playing year-round. Officials need to be doing the same and keeping up with rule changes, staying in shape, and keeping a crisp mindset.”

“There are camps and clinics offered as a teaching tool to help educate officials who want to improve their skills or are just starting up. It’s a great way to be seen by commissioners or leagues to be hired.”

DOWNSIDE OF OFFICIATING

People make mistakes at work. Often times, those mistakes go unnoticed or are corrected without incident. When officials miss a call, everyone sees it. Increasingly in recent

years, crowds, coaches, and players have been more vocal about missed calls, or even perceived missed calls.

“It’s something I think is growing to be a problem, and it was back then, too,” Tichenor said. “Too many parents get involved too much in the game and it becomes more about winning and losing. That’s just how it is. Unfortunately, the people it gets taken out on is us, the umpires. It does nothing but hurt officiating, especially in Western Kansas. We’re not a metropolis area where we can just call people to come referee or umpire our games.”

“At the level I’m at now, you don’t have parents, you have fanatics. On that side of it, you really don’t hear 40,000 people, you just hear the big boos. I’m dealing with people who are getting paid to win ball games. There’s a lot of money involved and it’s my job to get it correct. When you’re not right, it’s no fun. I had to learn quickly that I wasn’t always right. It helps sometime to admit when you’re wrong.”

“For the most part, the student athletes are friendly and respectful,” Crandall said. “They hustle after the ball and hand it to you. They help the opposing players up off of the floor. They usually don’t get upset with the officials when they call something on them.”

“This all stems from the coaches though. Everyone in the gym feeds off of the coach. If a coach expects their players to play with good sportsmanship and demonstrates good sportsmanship, the game goes well for everybody. When the coach gets worked up and becomes upset, the players think they can do the same. That then seems to allow the parents and fans to do the same.”

“A coach can seem like your worst enemy, then your best friend in the matter of a few seconds and a couple of calls that either go their way or not. It’s always interesting.”

Goodheart said sportsmanship varies from year to year. Administrators staying on top of the issue can make it a more pleasant experience, but that’s not always the case. “You hear how some officials are treated by fans, coaches, or players and it’s harder and harder for officials to stay involved or to bring in new ones,” he said.

Dysinger recalls giving officials a hard time, but having been on the other side now, knows how difficult the job can be. “I was probably more against the officials than most people were in high school,” he said. “I got a couple technicals in high school and didn’t agree with some of the calls. Looking back, I wish I’d never done that because I know now how hard it is to officiate.”

Tichenor is in a unique position because Major League Baseball has implemented instant replay. Balls and strikes are still up to the umpire, but most other crucial calls, like Joyce’s missed call in 2010, are now reviewed.

In 2015, the Denver Post looked at the some 1,300 major league calls that were challenged that season. Even with the use of slow motion from multiple angles, just 49.2 percent of those calls were overturned. Tichenor had just 14 calls reviewed, and only six overturned.

“Replay has definitely benefited umpires,” said Tichenor.

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