



BETWEEN THE LINES

A SOFTBALL CANADA OFFICIATING PUBLICATION

SPRING 2011 – ISSUE

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BETWEEN the LINES

A Softball Canada publication dedicated to the development of umpiring in Canada.

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As virtual connections continue to flourish in this age of increasing connectivity, the Softball Canada umpiring family has found a new home – on Facebook.

As part of our continuing efforts to grow our community to include all levels of umpires from coast to coast to coast, this new online presence will allow us to share information and conversations to ensure our national umpires program is responsive and relevant to the needs of our officials, regardless of the level of play they might officiate or where they live.

If you're online you can find us by linking to <http://on.fb.me/hkUZbK> or by searching for Softball Canada Umpires in Facebook. Be sure to "Like" us to continue to receive all the latest information on what's happening in your national umpiring program.



RULE CHANGES FOR 2011

Like all sports, softball has seen great changes in athlete development, game strategy and equipment over the past several years. These changes demand a constant revisiting of the rules that govern our sport as well. Every two years delegates from provincial and territorial softball organizations from coast to coast consider new rule proposals – put forward by the organizations themselves – to better govern our game.

Out of Softball Canada's latest AGM, held in Regina last November, a number of rule changes were approved. There were a number of small tweaks to better define the adult male pitching rule and bat standards and an addition to place some penalties for defensive equipment left on the field, but perhaps the biggest change that will effect umpires is a reworking of the rule the governs charged conferences and pitching eligibility in Fast Pitch.

Starting in 2011, if a coach enters the playing field and makes a pitching change it will not count as a charged conference. Previously, if the coach entered the playing field and went directly to the umpire to announce the change there would be no conference charged, but if s/he went to confer with the pitcher first and then announced the change then a conference would be charged. This meant that, if this were the second conference in that inning, the pitcher would then be ineligible to return as a pitcher.

With the new change, any time a pitcher is changed there is no conference charged. The effectively means that all pitchers removed from the game were done so after only one conference and thus would be eligible to return. From an official's perspective, this will certainly make administration of the rule easier – all pitchers who are removed from the pitching position will be eligible to return.

For detailed information on the rule changes for 2011 please link to the following web documents:

Fast Pitch Rule Changes - <http://bit.ly/g4ugKY>

Slo-Pitch Rule Changes - <http://bit.ly/ewA2Nh>

MESSAGE FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF UMPIRES



Another year of softball is beginning. I hope you all are getting ready to attend your local or provincial/territorial clinics to update your rule knowledge and keep your mechanics up to date. The ODC has worked hard to introduce some new initiatives this year including the delivery of a web-based Level 4 clinic. This is our attempt to reach more remote areas of the country and help individuals reduce their costs of attending this important clinic. We are continuing to respond to the demands of the softball umpiring community. In 2012 we plan to introduce a second uniform for Softball Canada umpires, including grey pants and a new second shirt, the colour of which has not been finalized. Two options being considered are red with blue/white trim or navy blue with red/white trim. This uniform will be optional but could be worn in Canadian Championships if all members of a crew wear the new uniform. This is an addition to the existing blue pants and powder blue shirt in use now.

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Umpires are necessary for good competition with each and every umpire registered in Softball Canada appreciated by provincial and national organizational leaders. You are a necessary part of a successful softball organization. The Board of Directors of Softball Canada supports the umpire program. Our fee for you to be part of Softball Canada is only \$16. That fee has not changed in the past ten years and we feel umpires get good value for being a Softball Canada registered umpire.

Softball Canada Umpires have helped produce the Umpire Casebook, Umpire manuals and are leading the way with new initiatives like our new web-based UmpSchool program, designed to help umpires stay in tune with the latest umpire rules and techniques. This year we hope to introduce video streaming on our website which will help all our umpires to stay up-to-date on mechanics and rule issues.

Nationally, we have seen an increase of 275 umpires over the past two years. You can do your part by staying registered and bringing a friend into the umpiring family. Umpiring brings a lot of rewards including lifetime friendships. By staying registered you can help your local, provincial and national organizations – and the sport of softball – grow.

On a final note, Ontario has just been finalized as the host of the next Blue Convention, to be held in the spring of 2013. The convention will be held in the Hamilton on Easter weekend (March 29-31) so start planning and fundraising now and expect the best Blue Convention to ever. Our friends in Regina did a great job in 2010 and our feedback was excellent and the ideas Ontario are tossing around look to make the next Blue Convention one you will not want to miss.

Have a great season. Hope to see you at the ball field – Brian Van Os

BLUE CONVENTION 2013 AWARDED TO ONTARIO

For the third time in the history of Blue Convention, Softball Canada umpires will gather in Ontario to share and learn in the spring of 2013.

After last year's highly successful event in Regina and the tremendous positive feedback received from participants Softball Canada and the Officiating Development Committee moved quickly to close a host for the next convention, scheduled for three years away. After entertaining interest from a couple of jurisdictions, Softball Canada reached an agreement with Ontario to host the event in Hamilton, Ontario from March 29-31, 2013.

"We are excited to have such a great partner in Softball Ontario," notes National Director of Umpires Brian Van Os. "They have hosted the event twice previously and have some great ideas for innovative additions to the program. I expect this will be the best Blue Convention yet."

While it's still two years away, it's never too early to begin making your plans to attend. Some local umpire organizations have begun to raise funds and make plans to bring significant portions of their membership to Hamilton on Easter weekend in 2013.

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STEPPING UP FOR THE CALL

As players and umpires have adjusted to the new Fastpitch pitching rule last season, the focus on enforcement in 2011 will be on ensuring pitchers are stepping directly towards home plate and keeping their front (landing) foot within the bounds of the 24" pitching plate as they deliver the pitch.

As fastpitch players, especially the men, leap forward even further than before many of them are tempted to leap towards the side, gaining extra leverage, offering the pitch from a different angle and placing the batter at a disadvantage.

The key to identifying and enforcing this somewhat common infraction of the rules is to focus on the front foot during the delivery. Only the plate umpire will have the correct angle to see and make this call.

As a plate umpire, take a couple of the pitcher's warm-up throws at the beginning on the game from behind the plate. Watch to see if the pitcher is indicating a tendency to drift to the side as they deliver the pitch. While your primary responsibility is to track the ball and judge balls and strikes, it is also imperative that you make identify other pitching infractions.



Figure 1: Legal pitch



Figure 2: Illegal pitch

Figure one (left) indicates a good pitch. Note that the pitcher's front (lead) foot lands within the confines of the edges of the 24" pitching plate. The landing spot of the back (drag) foot is irrelevant to the enforcement of this rule.

In contrast, the lead foot of the pitcher on the right (Figure 2) has clearly landed outside the boundaries of the 24" pitcher's plate, resulting in an illegal pitch that will be called by the plate umpire. It is key to get this call early and consistently to be enforced throughout the game. Waiting for the offense to call it to your attention or, worse yet, identification and enforcement at a critical stage late in the game is not acceptable, resulting in poor game management.

Softball Canada

EXPLORES ON-LINE LEARNING

As technology becomes more pervasive throughout society, the world we work, play and learn is has become very different. Softball Canada is looking at embracing and leveraging that technology for learning and the first step was to hold the first virtual on-line Level IV Certification clinic this spring.

The clinic, with seven umpires participating from various regions of the country, took place over five weekly two-hour sessions during March. Participants and instructors joined together in a virtual classroom environment to share and learn in real time, all from the comfort of their own homes.

“The opportunities to bring together communities of learners is impressive.” notes National Director of Umpires Brian Van Os. “We see this as an opportunity to bring together umpires in a new and cost efficient way.”

This pilot will pave the way for increased use of technology to share and communicate a common story across the country, building on the development of the National Certification Program as a tool for ensuring a shared standard for mechanics and interpretations from coast to coast.

It is anticipated that Softball Canada will partner with provincial / territorial programs in the future to leverage technology to deliver other parts of the certification programs and other educational opportunities for umpires.

ALTERNATE UMPIRE UNIFORM CONSIDERED FOR 2012



Could umpires be seeing red across the country in 2012?



Softball Alberta youth umpire Bo Biggs may have a second choice to the traditional powder blue jersey in 2012.

For years the call of “Hey, Blue!” have echoed across the diamonds from coast to coast, but beginning in 2012 players and spectators may have another colour option to catch the umpire’s attention.

Softball Canada is looking at options for introducing a second optional uniform to complement the current blue pants / powder blue shirt that has been the stalwart of blue crews for many years.

National Director of Umpires Brian Van Os notes that there are two current suggestions; grey pants with a red shirt (see image) or grey pants with a dark blue shirt.

“We are looking at a couple of colour combinations and even different options within those colours for trim and such.” notes Van Os. “ We are looking to measure the membership as to their interest in terms of what colours they see as the best fit for our program.”

Umpires are invited to offer their input into the new uniform proposal online at

<http://svy.mk/dZIxUJ>

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TWO HONORARY CREW CHIEFS AT SENIOR MEN'S CANADIANS



Two long-time Level V umpires from Atlantic Canada who were struggling with health issues were honoured as honorary members of the crew at the 2010 Senior Men's Fastpitch Championships in Charlottetown in late August.

In this photo the final game crew are shown on the diamond prior to the Championship game with Level V umpire Earl Rice of New Brunswick (3rd from left) who was struggling with a battle with cancer and the wife of Frank Hughes, a Level V umpire and former PEI UIC who continues his struggle with health issues.

Earl Rice subsequently lost his battle with cancer on December 12th, 2010.

MOSES NEW CANADIAN FORCES UIC



Warrant Officer and Softball Canada Level 5 SP Umpire, Ron Moses, was appointed as the new Chief Official for the sport of Slo-Pitch in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Ron started his umpiring days back in 1989 when he started umpiring his daughter's Pee Wee league, since the league would have folded if no one stepped forward to help out. Ron gave it a try thinking that it would not be too difficult. He soon came to like the control he had of the game and making the calls, right or wrong. He quickly realized that half the parents in the league, on any given day, liked him and the other half weren't so fond of him.

Over the next several years Ron took the appropriate courses, got the proper equipment and in just two years did his first Fast Pitch Regional in the Military world and was for whatever reason, totally hooked on being an umpire. Over the years, Ron umpired numerous Armed Forces Fast Pitch Regional and National Championships. In 2002, Ron officiated at the Junior Women's Canadian FP Championship followed in 2003 with the Senior Women's Canadian Championship. Throughout his umpiring years Ron also honed his Slo-pitch skills and was rewarded with selections to the 2004-2006 Senior Men's Canadian SP Championships. In 2006, Ron attained his Level 5 in SP, worked as the DUIC at the Senior Women's Canadian SP Championship in 2007 and was a working Level 5 at the Senior Men's in 2008.

Ron's other accomplishments include being named Official of the Year for Softball New Brunswick in 2006 as well as being named the 2007 Military Official of the Year for the Maritime Command.

Ron enjoys the officiating world with a passion, regardless of the level or gender, since they all require the best officials and Ron gives his best at all times when he steps on the field.

The Canadian SP community salutes you on your prestigious appointment and well-deserved recognition.

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Ron Moses, Canadian Forces UIC

Softball Canada ANNOUNCES NEW UMPIRE FOOTWEAR STANDARD

As shoe companies look for ways to increase brand exposure through shoe design, it has become increasingly hard for umpires to locate appropriate, umpire-specific footwear that meets Softball Canada's current requirement that the shoe be completely black. Many umpires had resorted to purchasing current models with white logos and design elements, only to have to go through the hassle, and the cost, of having the white designs blacked out.



In recognition of this challenge, Softball Canada has recently announced a new standard for footwear that allows corporate trademarks and simple word or letter based logos to appear in white or grey on visible parts of the shoe. This will allow simple logos like New Balance's "N" to appear on the side of the shoe (see photo to left).

This change will still not allow major design elements of the shoe or any part of the shoe sole to be in white. For instance, the Mizuno shoe (shown at left) that has become popular at ISF World Championships and is worn by many Major League Baseball umpires will continue to be unwelcome at Canadian Championships due to the large white portions on the sole and the "running bird" design on the side of the shoe. The small Mizuno logo on the top of the tongue would be acceptable.



As with all Softball Canada uniform standards, these criteria apply only for umpires at Canadian Championships. Provincial and local associations are free to adopt variances to the uniform policies to meet local demands.

THE ART OF CRAFTING AN EXAM



Death, taxes and the Softball Canada national umpires exam. All of them are a certainty. As the midst of winter grips diamonds across the country in an icy blanket, many umpires from across the country remain active preparing for the upcoming season, and one of the first things that demands attention is the preparation of the annual rules exam for umpires across the country.

Before the exam shows up at clinics and in registration packages across the country a number of people have a lot of work to do. It all starts in the early Fall of the previous year with a call sent out to Level V umpires from across the country from both the FP and SP exam coordinators (members of the ODC) requesting questions for inclusion on the exam. Contributors are asked to submit questions, answers, rule references and suggest an appropriate level for placement (the exam has five sections from Level I to Level V).

After gathering all the questions, the exam coordinators (Bonnie Gostola and Len Gorgei) then begin to craft a series of questions for each of the five sections on the exam, making sure that all the rules are represented throughout the exam.

Once a draft is completed, it is shared with both the ODC and a small group of editors for each exam. Once edits are complete the exam is sent to Softball Canada staff for final design, layout, printing and distribution.

This year Softball Canada would like to recognize the following umpires from across the country for their contributions to the 2011 exams; Noreen Atkinson, Joel Balberman, Stuart Bowden, Ben Clements, Doug Cundall, Steve Doyle, Sal Gara, Len Gorgei, Bonnie Gostola, Murray Harvey, Keith Hazel, Daryl Helmer, Chris Lee, Jeff Luscombe, Nancy Morrison, Ron Moses, Aaron Poulin, Joyce Schroeder, Brian Sharples, Gary Skjerven, Stephane Soucy, Bob Stanton, Susan Strafford, Jim Thompson, Jack Van Bynen, Brian Van Os, Tim Whitelaw, Terry Wolowiec, Gerry Zvonkin and the members of the Fastpitch Forum for their editing.

BEING NUMBER TWO IS AN OPPORTUNITY!

by Tim Whitelaw, Level V, ON

“Tim, What does it mean when the Provincial Umpire in Chief calls and says I’ve been selected as an alternate for a Canadian?”

This was the question posed to me in the summer of 2009 by one of the umpires in my local association. While he was excited to receive “the call” from our provincial UIC he really didn’t know what it meant.

I tried to explain.

The highest honour that an umpire can achieve from his province is to be selected to umpire at a Canadian Championship. For each event, each province is asked to submit a first selection to Softball Canada. Many provinces also submit the name of an alternate choice if for some reason the first selection is not able to attend the event.

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For most Canadian Championships, there is usually a handful of spots left to be filled after the initial selections have been filled. In these cases, the host province or other neighboring provinces are given the opportunity to send additional umpires to complete the crew requirements.

2010 was an exceptional year for the province of Ontario with seven Canadian Championships in the province in the space of three weeks! This provided the Provincial Umpire-in-Chief with an opportunity to fill these the events with quality and deserving umpires. Many umpires would benefit, and being second or third choice should matter little to them now.

In 2002, I was asked to be an alternate umpire – a standby if you will - by Ontario for the Junior Women’s Canadian Championships in Edmonton. I told them I would gladly help out if needed. I booked my vacation around the date and waited. I waited more and then, finally, the phone rang. “Tim, You are going to Edmonton.” I was thrilled to attend, had a great tournament and received a recommendation for my level 4 certification. It was the stuff dreams are made of!

In 2005, I was again asked to standby the phone as an alternate selection to the Senior Women’s Canadian Championships in Kars Ontario. Once again, the call came from the Provincial UIC. I had a great event with a plate assignment in the Bronze Medal Game. Two “alternate” selections and two Canadian Championships – it was something most umpires can only dream of!!

Three years later, in 2008, I was again asked to be Ontario’s first alternate to the Senior Men’s Canadian Championships in Saskatoon! I couldn’t believe my ultimate goal was so close at hand and might finally come true!! The Senior Men’s Canadian Championships and a chance to get my “5”!! What every umpire dreams about!! I was PUMPED!!

This time the call never came, I had booked my vacation around the date, got physically and mentally prepared, but the phone never rang. As Ontario’s first choice, my good friend Paul Baier got to go, had a great event and got his Level 5. I think I was happier than he was! What a thrill it was to share in his moment.

The next year I again was asked if I would be Ontario’s second alternate from the Senior Men’s Candian Championships, to be held in my home province. What were the odds? But finally my opportunity arrived. I was off to St. Thomas to work the Senior Men’s Canadians!!

When tournament time came around I was overwhelmed. You couldn’t imagine my feelings! I was at Softball Canada’s premier fast pitch showcase, The Senior Men’s! Pinch me!

Did I have a shot at the elusive “5”? I figured it wasn’t likely as I was second alternate from Ontario. I was getting pretty used to the scenario by now. However, with hard work and perseverance dreams do come true!!

I had a great tournament! I tried to follow the direction of my supervisors to the fullest extent. I did everything possible to let them see that this was my shot – my chance at the ultimate goal - and I was determined to do what ever it took to get their stamp of approval. It must have worked.

That unimaginable moment, the one that any umpire in Canada can only dream of, came on September 29th, 2009!

“Tim, this is the National Director of Umpires calling and I just wanted to congratulate you on receiving your Level 5 certification due to your performance at your Canadian Championships this year”. Can you imagine? I got my Level 5 after being an alternate – a second choice - three times at three Canadian Championships! I haven’t stopped smiling yet!

So you see, if you ever get “the call” and you are asked to be an “alternate” it doesn’t mean you are second best and you don’t have a chance. It means that you have been recognized for your abilities, your involvement in the program, and your determination to be the best umpire you can be!!

Grab hold of the chance--be patient waiting for your opportunity and don’t be disappointed if it doesn’t come right away. Keep applying and let the people who can help you know that you are still waiting for your chance at your ultimate goal - whatever that goal may be!!

Tim Whitelaw is a Level 5 Umpire from Kitchener, Ont.

HOW DID I GET HERE?

by **Sal Gara, Level V, ON**

There I was in Charlottetown, PEI. It was Saturday afternoon prior to the start of the 2010 Senior Men's Canadian Championships. Yes - the Senior Men's. The ultimate stage. The big show!

As I walked the Central Field diamonds with the rest of the crew and our supervisors, I remember thinking to myself "How on earth did I ever get here?" It was almost surreal. I had to stay in the moment and concentrate on the task at hand - listen to the supervisor's comments and instructions and focus on any ground rules that might need clarification. But my thoughts kept drifting. This was a long way from the days when I walked the fields as a coach prior to every tournament. I guess the purpose was similar but I certainly don't recall having the same feelings in the pit of my stomach.

So how did I get here? As I think back to the early months of 1996 when my daughter announced she was done playing softball, my thoughts were "What now?" Having never played the game, it was amazing how much I had grown to love softball during the previous seven years of coaching in Orleans, just outside of Ottawa. Should I continue coaching or perhaps even begin playing recreationally myself? I can't recall how or why it entered my mind but my thoughts turned to umpiring.

I had always admired the local officials that handled our games in Orleans and thought it might be a good way to stay involved in the game. So as was the case when I began coaching, I immediately inquired about clinics and luckily there were both Level 1 and 2 clinics running back to back in our area. And since it was permitted at that time, I registered for both. Those clinics clinched it for me. I had enthusiastic clinicians with an obvious passion for the game and it immediately rubbed off on me.

A lot had happened between then and now that helped get me to the Senior Men's. As I mentioned, those clinics started it off and when I stop to think about it, my Level 3 clinic in 1998 and level 4 in 2000 were great as well with top notch clinicians with an in depth knowledge of the game. That's been the norm in all my experiences in umpiring. Top-notch individuals ready to share their knowledge and experience have always surrounded me.

In 1996, I began by umpiring in the local Orleans association where I had coached, on the other side of the fence so to speak. The Orleans UIC at the time was Richard Coleman, (the very deserving recipient of the 2009 Home Run Sports Softball Canada Umpire of the Year award). For those of you who don't know Dick or haven't had the opportunity to work with or for him, let me simply say that I couldn't have been luckier to have Dick kick start my umpiring career.

I learned early on from Dick that there's so much more to umpiring than simply calling balls, strikes, fair, foul, safes, and outs. Conduct on and off the field, relationships with coaches and players, earning and giving respect, managing confrontations, and on and on. And thanks to Dick, I focused on these elements very early in my career. Dick remains to this day an excellent role model and, more importantly, a dear friend. Lately, I only get to do a few games with Dick each season, but I anxiously look forward to them. I'm still learning from him!

A few years later I also joined the local association in Ottawa to gain more experience doing adult ball. The Ottawa area (Softball Ontario Fast Pitch Zone 10) has always had an abundance of excellent officials and I have been so fortunate to work alongside them for all these years. I truly feel there's a bit of all of them in me, and it always makes me proud to represent our zone in whatever I do.

My first Canadian Championship experience (Bantam Girls, 2001) was incredible. I couldn't possibly have imagined how much I would come away with from the experience. And each championship after that just got better and better. I came away from each one with a wealth of knowledge and new friendships, many of which will likely last a lifetime. And as I became more involved in the umpire program as an evaluator, a clinic instructor, and eventually as a zone umpire-in-chief, it gave me the opportunity to meet more of the individuals responsible for our program in Ontario. It was truly refreshing to see so many ready to give freely of their time to ensure that others have the opportunities available to them.

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So all that being said, how did I get to Senior Men's? One might say through hard work and dedication and that's certainly a part of it. And of course we all must credit Softball Canada and, in my case, Softball Ontario for creating and promoting the best softball program in the world. But I truly feel it's mostly due to all those who have been there along the way. First and foremost, I am forever grateful to my wife Jocelyne for her endless encouragement and patience. The season seems to get longer every year with more time away from home and I just couldn't, and wouldn't, have done this without her support. And of course there are all the individuals I've encountered along the journey.

Whether it was fellow officials, supervisors, players, coaches, friends or family, they have all had a hand in molding who I am. I wish you all the same fortune and also urge you all to avail yourselves of the knowledge, experience, and friendship that our umpiring community has to offer.

Sal Gara is a newly minted Level V umpire from Ontario.

THE COMFORT ZONE

by Serge Laflamme, Level V, QC

For over 32 years I have had the opportunity to officiate all over the world, blessed with the good fortune to umpire in Australia, Italy and the United States as well as Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia here at home. I have also led several clinics in Europe and across Canada. Each time, I have been witness to what I call "Umpire's Fear". I see people who are never comfortable with the duties of the job. I sometimes ask myself if the word "umpire" might not actually mean "masochism".

All too often I see men and women who fear being involved in a situation or a decision that might change the game. They focus so hard on avoiding those situations that suddenly the sky begins to fall on their head. Is there a reason for this? Is the job so stressful that we forget to have fun on field?

When a game is playing without any apparent problems we are generally happy with a job well done. This provides a source of satisfaction after the game. But during the game, is there a way to think, a way to act, or a way to react that will help us take advantage of the time we are spending on the playing field? I am convinced that the answer is "YES", even if we are working in pressure-filled events like World Championships, Canada Cup or the Olympic Games.

Many years ago, I was taught that when a game is done and we did not see the umpires they did a tremendous job. For the most part, I agree with that statement. However, with my experience, I would now add that the umpire who is able to handle confrontations or critical situations in a visible, professional manner is even more critical and will receive praise from everyone.

I remember the semi-final game of the Sydney Olympics in 2000. I was officiating behind the plate and one of my fellow umpires looked so stressed that he seemed to be on another planet. At the end of the 4th inning, I asked him to meet me halfway on the line between home and the base he was working and I asked him if he was "having fun". He looked straight at me and told me that this game was the most important one in his career with more than one billion people watching and that he could not understand how I can think about "having fun" in that situation.

I asked him what would he say if, when he returns home after the event, somebody asks him how he felt at that particular moment, working the semi-final game of the Olympics, the most prestigious competition in the world? Will you want to tell them: "I was just hoping not to be involved in a situation that would change the game", or would you rather be able to say "I felt the crowd, the media, the caliber of the game and the professionalism of the players, the pressure and the game itself energizing me."

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With experience I have discovered a zone of transition in my career. I call it “My Comfort Zone”. To get to this state I have always tried to live by the philosophy to “remove the snow when its falls, not when they forecast it”. If we spend our time in fear that something might happen, we are not thinking about living in the present and our concentration is not at the top level.

To think this way, we must put forth the efforts to prepare both physically and mentally. If we know the rules, the mechanics and techniques, if we know the caliber of ball we are working with, if our equipment is impeccable and if we are forgetting for that moment our personal problems then we are well on our way to achieve this state.

Many umpires think that we need a lot of luck to avoid games with confrontations and critical situations. This is simply not true. There is no secret that the way you present yourself will, most of the time, help you to diffuse confrontations. The way you communicate with all the participants will help the game run smoothly, like water gently flowing down the river.

In 2007, I had the privilege to be invited to officiate at the Canada Cup and the ISC World Tournament and, more recently in 2008, at the A.A.U. Tournament in Orlando, Florida with many of my Canadian umpire friends. It was a pleasure to hear from some knowledgeable people involved in softball; “Thanks Serge, it was a great game and fun to watch” or “It was going so well that we almost forgot the importance of the game”.

We can never hear this sentence enough. Our approach, presentation and active presence are fundamental and essential parts of the job that we all need to continue to develop. It took many years and many tournaments to be able to find my own “Comfort Zone” and I really believe that it should be part of our personal goals as an official.

What caliber of ball would we like to achieve in the future? An important factor is to be able to objectively determine which caliber we can achieve. If the goal of an umpire is to work the best caliber of ball in his province or his country, he must make a plan and take actions to achieve it. When we do achieve it, it is then the time to work on what I call the “Comfort Zone”, seeing the reality of that caliber of ball, the players, the mentality of that game, the competition and the exposure on a regular basis.

If you follow these steps, you will develop a way of thinking that will help you to be more confident, a confidence that will show on the field. You will find more success and you will get more personal satisfaction in your career if you feel “comfortable”.

Two seasons ago, I finally discovered my “comfort zone” with the best caliber of ball in the world - both on the men and women sides - and I really want to share these things with you, to help you to apply it in your career as soon as possible to achieve your comfort zone.

I always thought that the word “luck” is reserved for those who are guessing or gambling, and the word “success” is made for those who work hard and persist to become better.

Then, I do not say “Best of luck”. Instead I offer “Best of success”.

Serge Laflamme is a Level V umpire from Quebec. Serge has represented Canada at many international events, including the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia.

REFLECTIONS ON THE AVOCATION* OF UMPIRING

by Joel Balberman, Level V, ON

As it approached, I knew that the year 2010 was a significant one for me personally. My 60th birthday was coming up. The advent of this new year marked the beginning of a new decade and somewhere along the line, I realized that it was the start of my fifth decade as an umpire, as I had first set foot on the diamond as an official in 1973. Long ago, I had lost track of the exact number of baseball, slo-pitch and fastpitch games I had officiated, but I know that the total number was, by my best estimate, in the neighbourhood of 3500.

I felt blessed. I had retained the passion to be able to pursue my love of the game and I was heading into my 38th season. I had avoided serious injury or illness; my eyesight had not failed; my wife and family made sacrifices that allowed me the time I needed to be away from home; and I had the kinship of my brethren in blue.

Looking back, because at this stage of my career, I have a lot more to look back on than I do to look forward to, I reflected on the years I had spent as an official. What had being an umpire done to shape me? What were some of the lessons that I had learned?

There no denying that there is a definite “culture” surrounding umpiring. In many ancient cultures, there existed a rich oral tradition of legends, fables, stories and myths. Umpiring has that same oral history which gets passed on from generation to generation of umpires. We call these tales “war stories”, and many of them are humorous and self-deprecating. The stories have a useful purpose - to provide mentorship; to nurture, tutor and counsel the younger, less-experienced official. There is a responsibility placed on more experienced umpire to pass on lessons learned on the diamond and teach others. It is expected that we help others to grow. In so doing, we also improve and learn from each other all that we can. Instead of campfires, the stories get told in cheap motels over a cold beer or at restaurants at the end of a long day.

Who of us cannot look back with gratitude at the umpires of the past who coached us and brought us along; had faith in us and gave us confidence? There is a huge tradition of mentorship in umpiring. It lives on today. We are all the products of many who shaped us by giving us little pieces of who we are and how we work a game - an amalgam of all those who have contributed to our umpire persons. The sharing we do takes place without reference to any petty jealousy. There is a total absence of fear that those who we help might somehow surpass us in ability and stature. Indeed, if they do, that was what was supposed to happen.

Umpiring is always about what is right, not who is right. We seek the truth, no matter what that leads to. What is right is enshrined in the rulebook and not governed by any code of moral relativity. Unfailingly, we want to get the call right; we want the proper rule interpretation and the correct penalties or awards that apply to each game situation. At times, we may have to make unpopular decisions. Players have to accept that not every call will go their way. There is a very human element in what we do. That means that the potential to err exists. We have to use all available clues to determine the truth - sounds, reactions of players or the crowd, past experience and our knowledge of the skills of individual players.

In our pursuit of the truth, we have to act as a team and ascertain what really happened in an unbiased way. Indeed, we are often referred to as the third team on the diamond. Ego has no place in this setting. It is never about you as an official but always about the teams, players and the game itself. What is the right call? Was the final and ultimate call correct? That is all that matters - even if changing the call on a play may make one of us look bad for the moment. Getting the call right, even if it has to be changed, enhances our stature and never diminishes it.

There is no better feeling than knowing that we are a part of something greater. The umpire club is open to umpires of both male and female and ties us all together in a bond of common kinship. The strength we gain from that affiliation is impossible to underestimate.

BETWEEN the LINES

Umpires do what it takes to get the games played; to have a decision rendered on the field. We overcome the obstacles be they weather, extra innings, slow play, injuries and game delays. We graciously accept what comes our way, even if we have to work the last plate game at night and the first plate game in the morning, not many hours later, we do what has to be done.

Despite our kinship, we also follow a lonely pursuit. It is a mistake to regard the players as friends, even though we may be well known to us. Umpires learn to be self-reliant; to trust our own judgment. We are very much alone when faced with a tag play at the plate with the potential deciding run sliding in. That is our call and only our call. All eyes are on the umpire. There is no escape from the need to make a call in that situation. We do not fear such moments. We embrace them. Umpires are not needed for routine plays.

A softball game is a competition under controlled conditions. The essence of the game is a competition between the pitcher and the defense against the batter and runners. Umpires are managers of the conflict arising from the competition, charged with the responsibility to see to it that the game is governed by principles of fair play. We facilitate the game for the players and the fans, for indeed, without us, there would be no game. Umpires are a part of each game.

As umpires, we want to be respected for the difficult job we do. Respect is not the same as praise. We do have the right to be treated with respect, even when others disagree with us, and an obligation to extend that same respect to all others involved with the game. To be praised as an umpire exceeds all of our expectations and it should be savoured on the rare occasions it does happen. We are not out there to earn accolades. Even without recognition from others, we know when we have done the job well. There is no feeling like coming off the diamond in after a close game and knowing you have “nailed it”. Hence we seek our gratification from self-assessment and from the approval of our peers.

Finally, umpiring teaches us that through striving to improve, we do get better. There is never such a thing as a perfect game for an umpire. There is always something that we could have done differently - a better angle, a different way of handling a player or a game situation. Hard work can get us to climb the ladder to better ball. There is a merit system in umpiring and we can work to attain the levels we want. If we work hard, listen to our mentors, engage in honest and reflective self-evaluation and expose ourselves to many and varied situations by working all levels of ball, both male and female, we can learn to be successful.

*Avocation - According to Wikipedia:

An avocation is an activity that one engages in as a hobby outside one's main occupation. There are many examples of people whose professions were the ways that they made their livings but for whom their activities outside of their workplaces were their true passions in life.

It is my hope that all of us have had our lives enriched by our pursuit of umpiring as one of our “true passions in life”. If I could do it all again, I would make the same decision and become an umpire. Best move I ever made.

Joel Balberman is a Level 5 Umpire from Brantford, Ontario



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