

The Mental and Interpersonal Aspects of Calling Pitches

We have touched on many of these things already. Like the section just read, some of these items are controversial and to a large extent depend on your personality and the type of ball being worked.

- No controversy to start with. Have on a clean, pressed and non-frayed uniform when you walk on the field. First impressions are hard to break. It is not important whether the uniform is expensive, just like the pros, or stylish, only that it looks neat and professional. In the last few years, there is a trend among umpires to get all excited about the latest major league style. Your money can be better spent.
- As discussed earlier, I call pitches that I am not sure about a "ball" except on a steal. As I gained more confidence in my game, I discovered that the only reason that I was ever not sure about a pitch was because something happened to break my concentration. What was that something? Usually it is something that the catcher does; such as: move his body, leap up and throw to second base, drop his glove into the ground, etc. At lower levels of baseball, try to get actively involved in coaching the catcher. If you are doing primarily 15 and under baseball, ask the coaches permission to help his catcher. Be careful with this, the coach has to be one of the smart guys that we talked about earlier or he will take this as an insult. Make sure the catcher does not dramatically move his glove after catching the pitch. Move him up as close to the batter as possible. He should line up where he wants the pitch thrown, etc. However, try to talk catchers out of lining up inside. (Lining up inside obstructs your view.) If they want an inside pitch, have them to just place their glove over there for the pitcher to aim at. Tell them that you will call it if they catch it. Why go through all of this? You will rarely have a bad game with a good catcher. Even 12 year olds can be taught to catch properly. They have to be athletic 12 year olds, which leads to the next point.
- Stop umpiring "minors" games or call them from behind the mound. What is a "minors" game? This is a league where all of the good players have been removed to play in the "majors". So for 10-12 year olds, the league drafts all of the good players into the majors and the rejects go to the minors. A 13 year old league, that has all the players playing in one league, is to be preferred over a 14-15 year old league where the players have been separated into majors and minors, unless of course you are doing the majors. Why not umpire minors games? Two reasons. One, minors' leagues have no athletes and thus no one who can pitch or catch. This destroys your game in a hurry. Two, the catchers cannot even stop the ball and you are going to take some shots. Taking shots will break your concentration and get you into bad habits. I had more bruises on my body when umpiring 14 year old minors that I get today with 85-90mph NCAA fastballs. A 13 year old league that contains all of the 13 year old players in that area will contain 3 or 4 athletes on each team. They will be playing pitcher, catcher, short and 3rd base. The catcher will more than likely be teachable.
- Do not umpire for free. People do not respect what they do not pay for. Lack of respect means more catcalls and arguments. As we saw in the previous section, this destroys your game and, by the way, your fun as well. (I have helped several umpires do their taxes on their umpire income. It costs the average umpire, who owns his equipment, \$12 to go out and do a game. Even a low budget umpire is spending \$9 and an NCAA umpire is probably spending \$20+ per game. At \$10 an hour for your time, one should be getting at least \$30 to umpire a baseball game. The income will also deflect the anger that your wife may feel when you leave the house to umpire.) In the late 1980's, I organized the volunteer umpires for our local 13-15 year old league. We did some training, I did all the scheduling and the league saved a bunch of money. The fans (parents) abused us unmercifully. After a couple of years, they decided to pay outsiders to umpire the games because they said that we so bad. I then joined my present organization and was sent to other areas to umpire and was surprised to learn that in other communities I did not get yelled at, cursed at, and worse. I was also getting paid. Many of the other volunteer umps joined this organization and noticed the same thing. But then one day, our assignor sent me to my old stomping grounds and that leads to my next point.
- Like a prophet, an umpire is rarely respected in his home country (read neighborhood). It helps if the coaches know you, but not too well. Be friendly and helpful with coaches, but do not socialize with them. One of the strengths of my present organization is that the assignor keeps the umpires in rotation from area to area. We rarely go to the same place twice within a month's time. This means that an isolated idiot coach can develop a dislike for umpires in general but not for specific individuals.

This leads to far fewer problems and ejections. It also prevents "homers" from developing which is a problem or perceived problem in smaller communities.

- (Up until now, the observations presented have been a collection from a large group of umpires. The next four points are my personal observations only. In some ways they may be suitable to my personality only, and would not work for someone else. They are interesting and are included here in order to give the reader something to think about.) As already mentioned, we all do our best when we can totally focus on the game at hand. Here is the situation: A positive game atmosphere is in effect. There is not a cloud in the sky. Out in left field if you look carefully, there is a buffalo roaming. Over in right field, the deer and the antelope are playing. We are not missing a pitch. **And seldom is heard a discouraging word...** Man this is great. And then some a#%hole in the stands starts yelling discouraging words. We, as umpires in amateur baseball, have a duty and responsibility to deal with these jerks!* They are not only destroying our good time and ball/strike calling ability but they **are also destroying others' enjoyment as well.** An additional reason to deal with this is that a mob mentality can develop which can threaten your safety. In youth baseball, inappropriate behavior in the stands will ultimately spill out onto the field.* (40-50% of on field ejections in youth baseball start with problems in the stands.) Kids see their parents misbehaving and so they start to misbehave. Years ago after two separate incidents in which my partner was assaulted after the game, I resolved to nip these problems in the bud. If chipping starts from the bench, I ignore one or two comments but then I stop the game, bring the coach out to talk to me and tell him quietly that there will be no more. I follow up with ejections but this is rarely necessary. Have your base partner spot the culprits in the dugout if necessary. Much more likely is the idiot in the stands. We have been taught to ignore these guys but this is foolish advice in **youth** baseball. Unlike basketball and football games that often have police in attendance in our area, baseball has no security force. We do not want to end up giving license to some unstable personality in the stands to do something crazy. Now, we are not talking about the occasional groan or stray comment, we are talking about the guy who directs specific insults at you or **especially other people on the field.** When this happens, between innings, talk quietly to the coach of the team who this guy appears to be supporting, or the home team coach depending on the circumstances, and remind him about the responsibilities of home team security according to the rules. The coach will say that there is no security. Tell him that you have just appointed him to the position and that he is to take action to correct the problem. You may direct the action such as a removal of a specific fan or leave the action to be taken up to him. The coach usually says that he has no control over what goes on in the stands. Put it right back on him and say that you are going to continue to stand here on the foul line and not restart the game until he deals with it. He then might say that this is not fair, not in the rules, etc. Tell him to read rule 3.18 and then say that you will eject him if he does not comply. (Note: This is a stretch of rule 3.18 but combine it with 9.01c and we can do whatever is necessary to insure our protection and the protection of others in the game.) Here are some of the results that have happened in our area when this has been tried in youth baseball:
 1. After the game, fans have come up and thanked the umpire for removing the jerk that was destroying every game.
 2. As the umpire was instructing the coach on what to do, the coach said that he had been wanting to get rid of that guy all year.
 3. A player told the umpire that he was glad that the ump had ejected the fan instead of taking it out on the team **like other umpires do.** (I doubt that umpires do this deliberately.) This is just one more example of how negativity affects your performance without you knowing it. Everyone else sees it, however.
 4. A 14 year old asked the umpire to officiate all of the rest of his games and to keep ejecting his father. He said that his old man was ruining his fun.
 5. The coach of the other team once said that he also had a bad parent. He pointed him out to the umpire and told him that if he would just give the word, the coach would have him removed. He thought that this was a great idea.
- I have never tried this but have resolved to give it a whirl this year. Last November, I replaced my bulky cell phone with a small digital Nokia that fits in a pocket of my ball bag. When a situation like the

above occurs, I will dial 911 between innings. Someone will ask what I am doing. I will tell him that I just called the police about a specific person in the stands. Let that jerk try to explain his behavior to the police when they show up. He will probably leave before the police get there and that is exactly the desired result.

- Although I was never able to quite understand how a hostile atmosphere degraded my performance, I knew that it was true and for one year I decided to take extreme action. I do not recommend this necessarily to anyone; I am only relating the story in order to drive home a point. A few years ago, I was frustrated in dealing with negativity and I knew that I was excellent as long as things were going well. However, dugout chipping and fans were destroying at least a quarter of my games so I resolved to be a raging lion. I went to each game looking for reasons to eject people. I wanted to get my ejection count up as high as possible. This had some unexpected results. I looked more confident on the field and so people left me alone and my performance improved. I had about 30 ejections in 120 games so my reputation got around and people left me alone even more. When I did eject someone, my performance improved because I had just had a success! Employment specialists have done studies that show employees are more productive when they are in control of their job situation, even if that situation is not good. I was in control that year. The assignor was driven crazy with complaints. The next year, I went back to a more mild mannered style but every so often I resurrect Mr. Hyde just to keep them guessing. I have heard MLB umpires comment that they will manufacture an ejection if they have not had one in a long time. My performance has stayed better because there is a halo effect from that year. This control factor is very important in maintaining concentration in calling pitches.*
- The coaches know when you are having a bad game. Just admit it. Last year I was doing a NCAA level game and the catcher was not good. He was making good pitches look ugly. I violated some of the rules outlined above and started calling strikes even when the catcher butchered the pitch. This created problems and resulted in an ejection. After the game, I went to the home team owner, who had paid me \$60 cash before the game and offered him the money back since my performance had not been up to par. He declined, but I had unusually good rapport with that team for the 3 other games that I had with them later in the season. Out in the parking lot, my partner, Dave Speaks, who is one of the top umpires in the state of Virginia, gave me the following great advice. "At this level, you must make the catchers do their job. If they don't do their job, just keep saying 'ball'."

IV TRAINING

This was covered in the beginning of the article but is worth mentioning again, it is so important. In order to get good and stay good, your mechanics must be continually checked out by a competent authority. If you do not have a training committee in your area, start one. You, as an instructor, will learn more than the people that you instruct.* My 17 year old son is in the top 30% in my association in terms of calling balls and strikes consistently. This is in spite of the fact that he is lackadaisical, and not a serious student of umpiring. He does it for the money. One of the main reasons for his consistency is that I work about 4-6 games a year with him. Any bad habits that he gets into, I correct. Most umpires, even in my association, go a year without anyone correcting a bad habit.

V POSTSCRIPT

In rereading this article several times, I realize that there is not adequate documentation or explanation for some to the observations that I have laid out. I have much more that could be written about this subject but the article is too long already. You can take this on faith or you can do what I do. Go out and watch umpires work. Study what happens on each and every pitch. What does the catcher do? What does the batter do? What does the umpire do? What is the reaction of the bench? What is the reaction of the fans? You can then create a plan to make all of your games go like the song "Home On The Range".

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