

Coach's Guide to Officials

The following are some insights into the procedures and expectations of a softball official. The art of umpiring at any level requires a blend of qualities that all umpires are trying to attain. Often terms heard for these qualities could be:

- 1) Consistency
- 2) Hustle
- 3) Rule Knowledge
- 4) Positioning
- 5) Game control
- 6) Approachability

Despite the constant attention to education and development by the Umpire Program, any umpire will be at various stages of comfort with the qualities needed to do the job.

With this comfort level being at various stages comes the need for experience to further move the qualities along. If the umpire cannot gain experiences through better competition, the umpire's growth will struggle to gain the needed skills that all seem to think are what a quality umpire needs. One of the common questions mentioned is "WHY DID THAT UMPIRE DO THAT??" or "WHAT IS THE UMPIRE DOING"??

The following information is a guide to what the expectations are for the umpire working a competition at any level:

Pre Game:

The pre game conference at home plate is clearly the most visible contact coaches and umpires have. Lineups should be clear and concise. Any changes should be noted at this point. After this, any change will constitute a substitute being used. Other conversation items could include: ground rules, time limits, run rules, or any out of the ordinary rules governing the game. The home team often has this information so please feel free to speak to any or all of the points listed. Lastly, before the conference actually begins, introduce yourself to the umpire and get his/her name as well. Instead of "HEY BLUE", try using the name in a courteous manner to gain attention. If there is controversy at home plate during pre game, you can imagine the fun the game should hold for all involved.

Position:

Umpires are trained to try to achieve the best possible ANGLE on a play. This angle is always trying to be 90 degrees to the throw but another rule of thumb, on a tag play, is to always be looking for the space between the body and the glove or ball. The umpire system of choice (2-6) is setup to allow the umpire to achieve this position on any play with moderate hustle or speed. The theory is to always have an umpire 1 base in front of any runner so as to not have to chase runners around bases. The system of having an umpire 1 base in front also allows for movement or rotations during the play to handle constantly changing situations during the course of play.

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Judgement vs Rule:

Most decisions during a game come under these 2 headings. The definition of a rule is simply the enforcing of the needed part of the rules at the appropriate time. These types of situations are rule book interpretations by the umpire and thus can be checked in the rule book. The only question that remains on this type is “ does the decision match the needed rule being applied”. The second type is of the judgement variety. These types of decisions are based on the umpire being able to discern how something transpired. Basics like safe, out, fair, foul, ball, strike are examples of judgement calls and thus not really something to protest. Judgements can turn into rules if what was described and what resulted are not consistent with the rules.

Mechanics:

The mechanics of umpiring are basically the ways an umpire conducts the game. The mechanics of an umpire can be broken into 2 parts: signals and procedures. The visible movements of a call are what we class as signals. Hand movements are what the umpire uses in lieu of the voice being heard. The procedures can take on many different forms but for the most part it is simply how an umpire will conduct the inning to inning business of the game of softball. Examples could include line-up changes, conferences, and even rule interpretations.

Approachability:

Conduct between coaches, players, and officials can at times become heated when the parties involved are not approachable by the other groups. Being approachable can be simply listening to what is said before starting your story or rendering judgement. A lot of what goes on could be avoided if the initial contact was done in a calm and polite manner. Things to remember when coming out to confer would include:

- 1) Make sure all play has ceased and time is called before venturing out onto the field.
- 2) The first thing to clarify is what you have a question about
- 3) Remember to allow the umpire a chance to explain the reasoning involved as perception may differ on a play.
- 4) Once the umpire clarifies, the team perspective could be given
- 5) Once the umpire has confirmed the initial call as the final call, depart the meeting. It is this dwelling on a call that will influence the umpire to be less likely to listen the next time.

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Game Management:

The key to most good games from an umpire's point of view is timing. If the game proceeds at a good pace, then there is a less likely chance of problems occurring. The need for hustle and control by the teams is echoed in the reactions of the umpires. When the game is not progressing, there is a likely chance that emotions and attitudes can begin to clash. Whether it be team to team or team to umpire, it is ultimately the job of the umpire to deal with the incidents and get things back to an even state. The job of the umpire involves dealing with many individuals who have their own goals and thoughts and thus may differ from either the other team or the umpire. The job often takes the umpire into conflict where the situation becomes past tolerable. It is at this point an umpire will take the situation into hand and either remove the problem or simply try to come to a just solution.

Recruitment and Retention:

The two largest issues in the officiating world have always been attracting new people and even keeping the existing population base. Officials constantly battle to have enough quality officials to supply the ever growing demand for games to be played. The coaches of any sport have a lot to do with the impressions a new official will have in terms of advancement. Whether to stay or whether to pursue other hobbies will often be dependent on how the young official is treated by coaches, players, or even umpires. If the umpire is constantly under attack from all parties, the love of the game can quickly diminish and thus have the umpire looking for other options for recreation. Through mentorship, the umpires of Saskatchewan are trying to create an atmosphere of safety and education for all those young officials who are deciding whether being an umpire is right for them. Any help by the coaches and players would only add to the overall growth of these new umpires and thus guarantee officials for years to come.

Conclusion:

The key to having a quality relationship between all parties in a game is to simply work together to achieve good lines of communication. An umpire should feel as if the coaches want to help control the game and thus work with the umpire to secure good conduct from the teams. On the other side, the coaches should feel as if their questions and concerns are falling on the ears of someone who will enforce the necessary decision to the appropriate situation. The lines of communication need to be working in both directions before a good rapport between all 3 teams can be created. Once that task has been completed, the game is a joy to watch with all three parties working together to achieve a fair and level playing field.