

# **Working With Umpires Better The Game**

**By JOHN BENNETT**  
*Longtime Umpire*

Last month we discussed the third team on the field: the umpire crew. Here are some thoughts from an umpire's perspective on how players and coaches can work with umpires for the betterment of the game.

## **Players**

Umpires for the most part do not interact with players during a game and umpire manuals have clear language about not fraternizing with players. That is the way it should be.

The players have a job to do, so unless it is pertinent to the action in a game an umpire should not initiate conversations with them nor engage in idle chitchat.

My experience has been that players do not initiate conversations with umpires except for an occasional "hello," or a catcher introducing himself or herself to the plate umpire at the beginning of the game. Again, that is the way it should be.

But because umpires and players share the field, there are a few instances where they could work together to make each of their jobs easier:

- If a player is backing up a play, be aware of the umpire's position and not block his or her view.
- Catchers should not hold the glove too long after a ball call. Not as common, but also a bad habit is for a catcher is to turn around to the plate umpire to ask where the pitch was.
- Batters should not draw a line with their bat to indicate a pitch was too far inside or outside to be called a strike, nor gesture to indicate a pitch was too high or too low.

For these last two bullets, umpires view these actions as arguing balls and strikes. Usually the umpire will say something to the catcher if it is done more than once. Hopefully the catcher gets the message, as a plate umpire *does* want to establish good rapport with a catcher. Remember, in all codes the rules state that an umpire should warn a team for arguing balls and strikes and take further action if not stopped. And a plate umpire certainly wants a team's first-string catcher to play the entire game.

## **Base coaches**

Most base coaches do not have a lot of interaction with umpires. Here are few items which may be detrimental to a good working relationship with umpires:

- A base coach making a big safe signal or yelling "safe" on a close play at a base. This signal and verbal call belongs to umpires, and they should be the only one who use it on the field. It is a distraction to the umpire and can confuse both the offensive and defensive players.
- Running toward the plate and making a loud comment after a questionable strike call. See the comments above about arguing balls and strikes.
- Moving out of the coach's box to talk to the dugout or on-deck hitter. By rule, a coach must stay in the coach's box unless signaling a runner or moving out of the way of a fielder.

## **All coaches**

Especially at the higher levels, the game management part of an umpire's job is critical. We realize that the nature of the contest sometimes leads to a difference of opinion between a coach and an umpire. So how can we reach a compromise such that we respect the job that each of us has during the game and work together in a way which is respectful of the game of softball? Here are a few suggestions from an umpire's perspective:

### **Balls and strikes**

- Arguing balls/strikes on the first few pitches is not a good way to start the game.
- Arguing ball/strikes from the dugout on in and out pitches really makes no sense to umpires; we know the angle from the dugout makes it very difficult to determine whether a pitched ball hit the corner or just missed.
- Instead of insisting the plate umpire is missing the pitch calls, perhaps between innings you can ask how far they are missing or ask the umpire what you can tell your pitcher so she can make adjustments.
- If you question the strike zone or a judgment call not worth going onto the field to discuss, do it privately between innings.
- Yelling "where was that pitch" and then saying, "I was talking to my catcher," makes this transparent way of arguing balls and strikes even worse.

### **Judgment calls**

- Running out of the dugout to argue a judgment call before an umpire has called timeout is contrary to the rules of the game. Since the ball is still live until an umpire calls "time," such action could put the coach in a position that interferes with a play. If that team is on offense, coach's interference results in a runner being declared out and all runners returning to the last base touched.
- Using a louder and/or higher voice, either when approaching an umpire or at the very beginning of the discussion (a nice word for argument), is not the way to start the interaction.
- Gesturing during the discussion with an umpire is considered showing up an umpire and could result in an ejection.
- Forget about the play that happened two or three innings earlier or in a previous game, as continuing to comment about it does nobody any good. Please leave past history for the books and stay in the now.

### **Let the umpires do their job**

- Yelling about illegal pitches makes it difficult for the umpire to call them. Now if we call one, it appears that a coach can influence an umpire.
- Yelling at an umpire to "watch that runner leaving early" makes it difficult to call it for the same reason as the above bullet.
- Drawing lines on the field showing where the batter was out of box, where a pitch was, where the runner slid and missed the base, etc. is another action often considered "crossing the line."
- When making substitutions, go to the plate umpire and give the changes instead of hollering them halfway from the dugout. Most codes strongly encourage the umpire to have the coach next to them so he or she can verify that the change is being made exactly as the coach wants it.
- Protect your players from unsporting behavior. Once an incident occurs, how you react is important. If you see an act of unsporting behavior by your player, prevent her from being ejected by getting her calmed down. Umpires respect that and will tolerate game intensity if controlled by the coaches.
- Rolling game balls out of the dugout toward the plate area when neither the catcher nor plate umpire are watching is dangerous. If we do not see the ball coming, somebody could step on it and get hurt. And the plate umpire, who is doing hundreds of squats during the game to get into his or her set position to call a pitch, does not appreciate having to bend over again to pick up the ball.

The bottom line is that the coaches who are respected by umpires are the coaches who are respectful of the game regardless of the situation. Umpires recognize that a coach should have passion for the game and fight for their team, but they appreciate the coach who will maintain a professional decorum.

I welcome any suggestions from a coaches' perspective on how umpires can work better with coaches. Email me at [bennettjoh@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bennettjoh@sbcglobal.net).