



Why We Do It?

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Throughout my career as an umpire, I have been greeted with both great anticipation and doubt. When I took this job, I knew that I would go through some difficult bumps with coaches, parents, and even the children taking the game too seriously. With some people treating it like it was a major league game, where if you committed the biggest mistake everyone is on your back, saying that it should have been that call or that you're blind, there's bound to be trouble.

This job seems to only have negative thoughts and may lead to stressful lives, but this is just the stereotype. My purpose here is to show you the true perspective of a teenage umpire and why on Earth a high school student may perform this task when he already has too much on his plate from school and from his social life. It occurs to people that becoming an umpire is just another way of saying, "I'm insane!" What doesn't occur to them is why we decide to take the risk and go out on the field.

Let me tell you how I became interested with umpiring. When I was playing in the Bronco Division (a 2-year division for kids ages 11-13), I was chosen by my coach, Ken Law, to be a captain for the team. He told me personally that I was a good supporter and if he were to administer a test of the rules, I would receive the highest score. Over the season, I thought about what he said. I realized that my curiosity for the rules was the driving force. Also, during the season, I noticed the umpires were teenagers. Right there, I knew that I could be an umpire and I could gain more knowledge of the rules. So, when the opportunity came to sign up and become an umpire, I naturally went for it.

I also decided to do this because of the love for the game. I knew for a long time that I loved baseball. The question about it was, "How much?" I realized how much after umpiring behind the plate for a Mustang Division game (another division for kids of ages

8-10). It was in the 5th inning with the Pirates leading the Cubs by nine runs, one less than what was required for an automatic forfeit. With games in the division only lasting for 6 innings, it looked as if the game was over. The Cubs, all of a sudden, presented a different set of gloves and bats. They were performing plays that were above what was expected. They sent the ball in flight when they were swinging. It all came down to the final out with the score tied and a man on first. The batter swung and hit a line drive down straight towards the center fielder. He bobbled with the ball until it landed on the ground. The runner from first was rounding third. The fielder picked it up and threw it past the cut-off man, an in-fielder who is supposed to receive the ball, and straight into the catcher's mitt. The play was in action. As the runner slid into home, the catcher tried to tag the runner out, but the ball came out of his glove and traveled into the backboard. With no sign of obstructive, I declared the runner safe. The Cubs won the game. When I'm umpiring, I don't care about who wins or loses, all I want from my experiences was to get the sense of action. This game didn't bring a short supply.

Being a teenage umpire may have its good moments, but there are some very stressful parts of the job. For example, after that play, the coach of the Pirates came over and talked to me about what just happened. He thought runner should have been called out. I basically told him that the runner did nothing wrong and that he shouldn't say another word about it. It's a judgment call and nobody, except me, has a say in it. He was a bit frustrated and walked back to his team. Of course, I have been through worse, as you will learn later on.

There are some similarities between Major league and Pony league umpires. Most of the similarities come from the training that MLB and Pony provide. One of my

interviewees and colleagues of Pony, Brian Huwe, told me about the training. “Well, for the first two years of being an umpire, I went through an eight-week training course where I would learn about the rules and this was a class taught by Andy Palay. It was once a week for eight weeks and we just went over different rulings of baseball. (2)”

For the umpires who go into the majors, there is a five-step guide. Step one is to attend one of two schools located in Florida. For five weeks, 300 umpires spend time in classes where, “Pretty much every aspect of what it takes to become a professional umpire is taught”, says the MLB Director of Umpire Administration, Tom Lepperd. Step two is to get noticed by the officials. Not only are officials looking for an umpire that knows the rules, according to Lepperd, but they also are looking for characteristics that help out show who has true potential to be umpires. “Confidence, a strong presence on the field, knowledge of the mechanics -- where to go when the ball is hit, forceful calls, good use of voice, hustle and ability to handle situations on the field are important.”(3)

For us it is, not surprisingly, not as hard, but it is still difficult for a 13, 14 or 15 year old to be an efficient judge. I asked my boss and chief umpire of Pony League Baseball, Andrew Palay, about the difficulties for an umpire in Pony League; what I discovered from his words was that this is the constant for all umpires. “It actually takes a while to really become a reasonable umpire. Most kids, it actually takes them about to their third year before they really have a good handle of what they’re doing. Now it’s not difficult for anybody go out and call most plays, but to really understand where they are supposed to be and to be really confident about their calls; it takes them to the second year, if not, into their third year for them to get to that point. (1)”

I'm not saying that after two years, an umpire is officially good, but that it does take time for anyone to be a very reasonable umpire. For the major leagues, this is the very variable that they despise. This is where it gets hard for anyone to become an umpire. Step three just states to be "top of the class", where only umpires on the top 16 percentile may advance to the evaluation course. Now with only five weeks to impress any official with 299 other competitors reaching for the same goal is very challenging.

Steps four and five are mainly assignments for games, where four represents the minors and five stands for the MLB. After the evaluation course, the instructors inspect the students' performance and write up recommendations for Class-A presidents, thus starting the road to the majors for umpires. When they reach Triple-A, (MLB) looks them over and gives them "the call" to promote them to the Majors. According to Professional Baseball Umpire Corp. (PBUC) Director Mike Fitzpatrick, "There are 68 umpires in the Majors, and 225 in the minor leagues. With the small amount of openings and the low turnover, it's very difficult for an umpire to make it past the minor leagues. (3)"

For Pony, assignments are about the same. The better or more experienced you are, the better the offer. "I must admit that in my early years as an umpire it was very difficult because I was probably about 5'2" with an incredibly high voice, resulting in lots of coaches to think that I wasn't as experienced as they were in umpiring. But, as I grew older, it's just getting easier and easier for me with lots of experience. Now, it's become rather routine and easy for me."(2) In our case, the highest division you can umpire would be Bronco and the best position during the game is behind the plate. For us, it is not as extreme. There are some umpires that will eventually quit and there are

others that will, “do much better job and move much, much faster in [umpiring]. But they’re rare.”(1)

Through this research, I wasn’t really shocked to find out that there is no preparation for the stress for umpires. All I’ve been taught about it was to take charge and to tell coaches, players or parents to calm down when they are out of control and to take care of them when they ignore you. The stress aspect of the job comes with the experience. When I was in class, Mr. Palay would explain to us that there are times when coaches will get out of hand and that you have to take control, that he pretty much has no right to try to convince you to change your call.

I had my first experience with troubled coaches in my second year, which is a miracle for most umpires. Imagine this, a runner was on third and the pitch goes behind the catcher. The runner starts to steal home. While this play was unfolding, the batter just stands there in the box. The catcher grabs the ball, throws it to the pitcher, who is at home plate by now. Then the runner tries to slide, but the batter is still in the way of the play. The runner basically wasn’t able to slide into home (in Pony, it is required for the runner to slide when the play is close). I call the runner out for not sliding, but the batter remains in play. The offensive coach comes and pretty much has the kind of talk that can lead to an argument. The next second, the other coach comes to the home plate and now is arguing in my favor. I didn’t want to argue about anything, so I told both coaches that I would think is over and that whatever conclusion comes into my mind will stand. I took about thirty seconds to think and changed my call so that the run would count and that the batter is out. The second may have been correct, but it was wrong in the first place to change my call. For the next three weeks, I would just think about that play.

I'm not alone in this world of stress. Brian told me about some of his experiences. "I had that. The kid got [hit in the cheek] and blood just started to pour out, so they had to take him to the hospital. That was one of them. And then also, after the pitch, the next batter hit a comeback straight to the pitcher and actually hurt him a lot, so we had to remove him from the game. Those were some of the more serious experiences I have had. (2)"

By now, you're wondering, "If there just so much stress in getting prepared and even more of it on the field, then why on Earth would you want to be an umpire of any sort?" There are many reasons to be an umpire. Cash, fame (although very limited) and the yearn for knowledge are maybe general reasons, but for most of us there is a very deep and emotional connection. For my boss, there were two reasons. The first was his son who made him join. "My son wanted to be an umpire when he turned 13...Daniel decided, knowing that I had umpired before and actually been chief umpire one year for Mountain View Bobby Sox softball that I dealt with umpiring, he twisted my arm to get me to join him... I've tried to convince other parents, other fathers who umpire that umpiring with my kid was probably the most rewarding part of this experience; because I got to deal with my son as an equal, because were both umpires out there... The other thing with my son, which will always stick in my head, was my son has a much better dramatic flare than I do. I would make a call and I would look at him and he would end up shaking his head. It turned out he wasn't shaking his head as a result of thinking I missed the call. He would shake his head because it was basically him telling me, 'Dad, you have no style.' Over years, he helped me refine the way I made calls because he would shame me to changing."(1)

The other reason why he is in the organization is to see his students in action. “What’s really memorable over time, besides my son, is watching kids who I’ve trained grow into young men who are very confident of being out there and umpiring. In many ways, that’s one of the reasons I’ve ended up doing this for as long as I have. There as been great and personal skills that people develop because they are out there on their own in many ways and they have to learn the confidence to handle those situations.”(1)

For my colleague, it was for the love of the game. “When I was younger, starting my Pony year of baseball, there were sign ups for umpires, and I figured I liked baseball, or at the time I really loved baseball, and I figured I might as well be an umpire.”(2)

For me, I loved being out on the field, playing the game. I never wanted to leave that when I was too old to play Pony League Baseball. Every time I would walk on the field, I would remember makings great hits, unbelievable catches and screaming up to the top of my lungs to support my teammates (I usually played in the outfield, so when the pitcher wasn’t doing too well, I would just scream, “I believe in you! ”). I loved every moment of it. I would imagine the players on the field to be me when they are playing their hearts out.

So, if you want to be an umpire, but you don’t know anything about baseball, you may want to go to a class, read a rulebook, watch a couple of baseball games, talk to an umpire about the position and, the most important thing to do, be LOUD about your calls. The most important thing about umpiring is to sell your calls. In this occupation, you will encounter situations where you won’t know, for example, whether the runner is safe or out. Whatever you decide in your head, you have to say it loud and be confident about of your call.

Well, lets PLAY BALL!!!

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