

Umpire Professionalism

Attend any collegiate or national umpiring conference, and one of the first words you hear out the keynote speakers mouth is professionalism. One and all think to them selves, "I've got that covered, where is the SEC assignor?" You generally here this "conference professionalism" described as, look the part of an umpire, be groomed neatly, have a tailored uniform, always polish your shoes, etc., etc. We have all heard it, and everybody is going to hear it again. Don't get me wrong, these are important keys to becoming the best umpire you can, but if all it took was polished shoes, and shaving every morning to become an NL umpire, we'd have 1000 times as many umpires as players. When I'm talking about professionalism, I'm talking about an attitude or better described as a confidence and knowledge that should be carried by all umpires. From the 14 year old umpires working their first year of little league, to 30 year veterans working the NCAA Div. 1, College World Series. This confidence ISN'T arrogance, it is a confidence in knowing that when you walk onto that field, you are there to do a job as defined by your rule book and to enforce your rules as defined by common sense, the spirit of those rules, and interpretation of those rules by your case book. As a umpire you have one of the least forgiving, least understood, and most under-appreciated jobs in the world. You must be prepared, before you walk onto that field, for anything to happen, and expect that anything to happen on every pitch. Being a true professional prepares you for that.

The two items that compose this professionalism are knowledge and confidence. A basic knowledge is required to umpire baseball period, but a true knowledge of umpiring lies a complete understanding of the rules, correct positioning, and proper mechanics.

An understanding of the rules, is probably the easiest cornerstone of umpiring to grasp. Begin with a basic knowledge and expand it. Read 10 pages of your rule book a day during baseball season. It takes ten minutes, and will expand your comprehension of the rules enormously.

Correct positioning is in the simplest terms, angle and distance. Understand that having a proper angle is more important than being five feet from the play. Most umpires use two-man mechanics and it isn't possible to be standing directly behind the bag to make each call. Know where you need to be, get a good angle, see the play, and make the call.

Proper mechanics allow you as an umpire to correctly communicate with your partner, and to allow your self as an umpire to be in the best possible position to see the play. Proper two-man mechanics get you in correct position, and lets the rest fall into place.

The confidence portion of professionalism, is really the part of umpiring that you won't find in the rule book. This confidence allows you to deal with situations that don't normally occur, and to best handle outlying factors during a game. Utilizing these six keys will make the greatest difference in your ability to umpire effectively.

Get the call right!

If you have to sell the call, then you probably didn't get the call right. I don't like hearing from association presidents "if all else fails, sell the call." It is better to stop and discuss the situation with your partner, and even get the rule book out if necessary, and ultimately get the call right, then to decide something on the fly and have it come back to bite you in the end. Our job as umpires is to be the final authority during a baseball game, and that requires for you to get the call correct at all costs. Use your keys of understanding the rules, correct positioning and proper mechanics to put you in the best frame of mind and best position to make the call and to get it right.

Competitiveness

Accept the fact the every player is giving their maximum effort, you should too. Being lazy will let the game slip

away from you. As an umpire you have to be willing to call the first pitch of the game the same way you call the last pitch of the game. If you don't your going to be in trouble. Realize that every pitch means something to someone on that field, and it should be important to you also. That 0-2 pitch, in the bottom of the fifth inning, that is low and outside may mean you get to go home if you call it a strike, but it may be the only at bat this player gets all month long. If you call a strike because you want to go home, you have done yourself and those players a disservice, you should have found somebody else to do the game for you. That pitch is important to that player, and it should be important to you.

Every blue shirt doesn't come with a license for respect

Just because you wear an umpire uniform doesn't mean you deserve respect. You don't deserve anything until you earn it. If you walk onto the field with the attitude that no matter what you call you are always right, then you do deserve something. You deserve to have that manager stapled to back riding you the entire game. Earn your respect with confidence, your knowledge of the rule, correct positioning, and proper mechanics.

Don't be afraid to answer questions

Answer all reasonable questions with reasonable answers. If a manager has a reasonable question, then tell him why you made the call the way you did. Don't allow a manager to use this chew on you, but use it as a tool to diffuse a situation and regain the confidence of players and managers. Remember, if you don't give a reasonable answer your not going to get a reasonable response.

Don't be the judge, jury and executioner

Your job is to umpire the game, not to pass judgment on individuals. Some players may not be the most outstanding of individuals, but don't let that distract you from what your job is. Accept the players for what they are, baseball players, and do your job, umpire the game. Control the game as necessary, and never pass judgment on players

Most importantly, leave the game on the field!

Once the last strike is called, leave the baseball game on the field. Use the situations that happened during the game to make you a better umpire by going back and reading your rule book or asking another umpire, but that is as far as it goes. Managers that ate you up during that game are just regular people outside the diamond, as are you. Don't let a situation that occurred during the game relive itself somewhere else. Decide how the situation could have been handled better, learn from it, and let it go.

If you as an umpire can combine all these elements into your job, that is when you are a professional. We all have fell short at one time or another during a baseball game, but use those situations and these keys to continually improve as an umpire, and each time you walk onto the field think of yourself as a professional and your job as an umpire will become one that continually is filled with satisfaction.