

MY SUMMER PASTIME

by
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Every summer for twelve years I played on some sort of baseball team. Within that twelve years many things changed—the leagues, the teams, coaches, teammates, fields, uniforms, and so on. The only thing that remained constant through the years was the rules of the game, which are enforced by umpires. During my years of playing ball I never paid much attention to these “men in blue.” The only time I noticed them was when they would make a bad call. Then, one day, I got the chance to umpire a game and at the same time realized what it takes to be an umpire.

Last summer I was sitting around my house watching television when the phone rang. It was my old Little League coach. He wanted to know if I would umpire a game of his that night. I was free that night and I told him, “Why not?” He and I had kept in touch throughout the years because he lived only a block away from me. He knew that I really enjoyed baseball and that is why he thought of me.

Although I had played in hundreds of games in my life, I had never umpired one. When I arrived at the field I really didn’t know what to expect. I was not scared, but I was worried about making a bad or wrong call. If I messed up, could I fix it? It was a lot of pressure. I went into the game thinking that umpiring was going to be all work and no fun. Afterwards, however, I would change my mind dramatically.

I met the man whom I was supposed to umpire with prior to the start of the game. He had only umpired a few games and told me that I could work the plate. I figured that I would be working bases and was shocked when he asked me to umpire behind the plate. Seconds later, I also found out that this game was for first place in the league. Before I had only been a little nervous; now I was terrified. Well, the national anthem was played and I shook hands with all the coaches, brushed off home plate, and yelled, “Play ball!”

The first pitch was right down the middle, I raised my hand and shouted out, “Strike one!” It felt so awkward. I was the one in charge. Whatever I said was the law. The next pitch came. It was a little low, but still a strike, strike two. The third pitch was over the batter’s head, but he swung and missed. I raised my arm and yelled, “Strike three, you’re out!” My nerves were so much calmer after that first batter. After the first half inning, I wasn’t even thinking about being nervous anymore. I was totally into the game.

The first few innings flew by. Before I knew it, the fifth inning was starting. The game was tied 5 to 5. So far I had not made any calls except balls and strikes. Then, in the bottom of the fifth inning, a player

was running home, trying to score. I thought he was going to stop at third base, but he rounded it and was coming towards me and the plate. At the same time the center fielder got hold of the ball and was throwing it to the catcher. The kid slid as the catcher caught the ball and applied the tag. What I saw and the crowd did not was that the catcher was still juggling the ball as he tagged the runner. The fielder must be in control of the ball in order for the runner to be tagged out. As soon as I shouted, "Out!" the runner's manager raced from the dugout screaming and yelling. I explained what happened, but the coach was unconvinced. After a few more minutes of arguing, he returned to the dugout mumbling. The next two innings went by quickly and without any more close plays.

Although I had been a part of many close plays in my playing days, I never felt the kind of rush I did during that close play at home plate. It felt so neat to have a great view of the play and then have everyone watching the game turn their attention to me to see my call. No matter what call I make there is a reaction to my call. That is what makes the rush I get from umpiring different from the rush of playing. No matter what call I make, someone cheers it and at the same time I get to be part of a great play. As a player you can be part of a great play and be on the losing end of it. Someone somewhere appreciates whatever an umpire does.

After the game, I was getting a drink at the concession stand when my old coach came up to me. He handed me a check for fifteen dollars. It never even entered my mind that I would get paid for this.

This had to be the greatest part-time job in the world for me. I got to be outside in the fresh air, getting a great rush, and at the same time getting paid. I quickly asked my coach if I could become a full-time umpire over the summer. He told me that he knew the president of the Umpires Association and could probably get me in. A week later, I was an official Little League Umpire. All I had to do was take a test and buy an umpire's uniform. This was the beginning of my umpiring career.

The Association scheduled me to umpire about five games a week. I did games in about seven different towns for kids ranging in ages from seven to twelve. The only bad thing was that I did not get to umpire behind the plate many more times. The best thing was that I made over \$800 this summer. It seemed like I was stealing the money. I never thought I could find a job that I got so much enjoyment from and at the same time got paid for.

Although I will probably not become a professional umpire, I do plan on doing it for many summers to come. I cannot think of anything in my life that I changed my mind about more after experiencing it than umpires and umpiring. As a player, I looked at umpires as idiots in blue shirts always making horrible calls. However, after experiencing umpiring I have totally changed my mind. I have come to love umpiring and it is now one of my favorite pastimes. Umpiring does not seem like a job to me. It is more of a hobby. It is the one job in my life that I would do for free.