

It's How You Play the Game That Counts

Submitted by Michael J. Bolander

Donald Jenson was struck in the head by a thrown bat while umpiring a Little League game in Terre Haute, Indiana. He continued to work the game, but later that evening was placed in a hospital by a doctor. While being kept overnight for observation, Jenson wrote the following letter:

Dear Parent of a Little Leaguer:

I am an umpire. I don't do it for a living, but on Saturdays and Sundays for fun.

I've played the game, coached it and watched it. But somehow, nothing takes the place of umpiring. Maybe it's because I feel that deep down I'm providing a fair chance for all the kids to play the game without disagreements and arguments.

With all the fun I've had, there is still something that bothers me about my job ... Some of you folks don't understand why I'm there. Some of you think I'm there to exert authority over your son or daughter. For that reason, you often yell at me when I make a mistake, or encourage your son or daughter to say things that hurt my feelings.

How many of you really understand that I try to be perfect? I try not to make a mistake. I don't want your child to feel that he got a bad deal from an umpire.

Yet no matter how hard I try, I can't be perfect. I counted the number of calls I made in a six-inning game today. The total number of decisions, whether on balls and strikes or safes and outs, was 146.

I tried my best to get them all right, but I'm sure I missed some. When I figured out my percentage on paper, I could have missed eight calls today and still got about 95 percent of the calls right ... In most occupations that percentage would be considered excellent. If I were in school, that grade would receive an "A" for sure.

But your demands are higher than that. Let me tell you more about my game today.

There was one real close call that ended the game ... a runner for the home team was trying to steal the plate on a passed ball. The catcher chased the ball down and threw to the pitcher covering the plate. The pitcher made the tag, and I called the runner out.

As I was getting my equipment to leave, I overheard one of the parents' comments: "It's too bad the kids have to lose because of rotten umpires. That was one of the lousiest calls I've ever seen."

Later at the concession stand, a couple of kids were telling their friends, "Boy, the umpires were lousy today. They lost the game for us."

The purpose of Little League is to teach baseball skills to young people. Obviously, a team that does not play well in a given game, yet is given the opportunity to blame that loss on an umpire for one call or two, is being given the chance to take all responsibility for the loss from its shoulders.

A parent or adult leader who permits the younger player to blame his or her failures on an umpire, regardless of the quality of that umpire, is doing the worst kind of injustice to that youngster ... Rather than learning responsibility, such an attitude is fostering an improper outlook toward the ideals of the game itself. The irresponsibility is bound to carry over to future years.

As I sit here writing this letter, I am no longer as upset as I was this afternoon. I wanted to quit umpiring. But fortunately, my wife reminded me of another situation that occurred last week.

I was behind the plate, umpiring for a pitcher who pantomimed his displeasure at any call on a borderline pitch that was not in his teams' favor. One could sense that he wanted the crowd to realize that he was a fine, talented player who was doing his best to get along, and that I was a black-hearted villain who was working against him.

The kid continued in this vein for two innings ... while at the same time yelling at his own players who dared to make a mistake. For two innings, the manager watched this. When the kid returned to the dugout to bat in the top of the third, the manager called him aside.

In a loud enough voice that I was able to overhear, the lecture went like this: "Listen, Son, it's time you made a decision. You can be an umpire, or an actor, or a pitcher. But you can only be one at a time when you're playing for me. Right now it is your job to pitch, and you are basically doing a lousy job. Leave the acting to the actors, the umpiring to the umpires, or you won't do any pitching

here. Now what is it going to be?"

Needless to say, the kid chose the pitching route and went on to win the game. When the game was over the kid followed me to my car. Fighting his hardest to keep back the tears, he apologized for his actions and thanked me for umpiring his game. He said he had learned a lesson that he would never forget.

I can't help but wonder ... how many fine young men are missing their chance to develop into outstanding ballplayers because their parents encourage them to spend time umpiring, rather than working harder to play the game as it should be played.

The following morning, Donald Jenson died of a brain concussion.

Danny Warrick



Officials who stay in peak condition are better prepared to work the most demanding games. Officials grow older while athletes remain the same age.

Photo by Gary Shook-Otsego