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Opening Day in Cincinnati and the Death of Umpire John McSherry

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The opening of Baseball Season is a time to celebrate, a time of renewal and hope. It is in some ways one of the most joyous days on the American Sports Calendar. Full of optimism this day offers the promise of summer, the renewal of spring, the spectacle of a great and grand ritual.

This year in Cincinnati the joy of opening day was marred by death. John McSherry, a veteran National League umpire of 25 years suffered a massive heart attack and died at age 51. Following the seventh pitch of the game, McSherry who was working behind the plate, turned his 328 pound body toward the stands and beckoned for assistance. He took a few steps and fell face down to the ground. The crowd stood in silence, the players and other umpires were in shock, and finally at the insistence of the players the game was postponed.

This will be an opener that will not soon be forgotten for those who were there at Riverfront Stadium.

John McSherry was a respected umpire who seemed to have the jolly disposition of a large man. He often joked or talked with players, was said to be able to admit when he was wrong, and had an excellent reputation for competence and fairness. On the Braves telecasts Skip Carey always referred to McSherry as his favorite umpire because of the weight problem that Carey shared with McSherry.

With his death I began to think about the umpire and his role in the game, as well as his evolving image. It once was an axiom that the best umpire was the one that you did not notice. That of course is gone and now the common complaint is that umpires have assumed too large a showbiz posture and have become too obtrusive.

Back in the late 19th century with the rise of professional baseball, and the prevalence of gamblers around the game, the umpire was a figure of mixed images. He was the authority figure, but often his authority was ignored. He was the enforcer of rules, but could himself be a victim of fan and player lawlessness. Physically threatened by players, spectators, and gamblers, umpires had to be strong, brave and/or fleet-of-foot to survive.

In the early 20th century, especially with the emergence of the American League under the leadership of Ban Johnson, the lot of the umpire began to improve. Johnson was determined to elevate the status of umpires in the new American League and the overall result was an improved life for the men in blue.

However they continued to be the subject of public vilification. Sometimes on the field by managers and players, sometimes by fans, sometimes in the press. John McGraw, the legendary Giant's manager, was especially nasty to the men in blue.

Umpiring was and still is a difficult life. On the road for nearly the entire season the umpire's life can be a lonely one. He must be careful where he goes, where he stays, who he is with, always guarding his integrity and the integrity of the game. He is the great arbiter, and the fairness of his decisions are central to the credibility of the game.

Unless you have umpired it is difficult to imagine how much responsibility you feel for the game, how much you feel the game is in your hands. It is at once a wonderful feeling of responsibility, while at the same time a bit frightening. The game literally cannot go on without you, and yet you are considerably less than a centerpiece of the action.

Over the last fifteen years, years that were encompassed by John McSherry's career, the role and life of the umpire has changed considerably. After the umpires succeeded in unionizing, their salaries increased and their life on the road improved, with more expense money, time off for R and R, and a strong union to air their grievances.

Umpires have come out of the shadows to become celebrities. Joe West has build a career in country-western music, while Ron Luciano hit the best seller lists with tales from on and off the field. He became a regular on the late night talk circuit, and Luciano turned umpiring into a form of show business. Some would argue that this has not been a positive development, that the umpires have become too visible.

In addition the coming of instant replay has been both a blessing and a curse, revealing how often the umpire is right, but at the same time leaving them vulnerable to the slow motion revelations of human error for all to see.

But whatever the changes one thing remains constant, and John McSherry illustrated this as well as anyone, umpires are

essential to the game and we probably don't appreciate them enough. John McSherry will be missed because he was a good umpire, but even moreso because he brought joy to the game, and that is the one thing that cannot be allowed to die.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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