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Demanding Perfection from Umpires:Why?

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There was Chuck Knoblauch standing at first base holding an umpiring clinic for Ted Hendry during the 12th inning of game two of the ALCS. Chuck now admits, "I should have went and got the ball." When the Texas A&M English major failed to went, the runners did went, and were quickly gone, with Enrique Wilson circling the bases and scoring the go-ahead run.

Ted Hendry was booed by the fans, but then so was Knoblauch when he came to the plate, proving that Yankee fans are smart enough to recognize that there was more than one mistake here.

It is now established as THE play of the baseball playoff season. So far.

The interference non-call has superseded Umpire Joe Brinkman's bad calls and confrontational behavior in the Red Sox-Cleveland series of a week ago. Hendry's gaff is now listed on that ledger of bad calls made while a nation of umpires is watching. Some have turned around games and some have turned around series. It is yet to be determined what the final effect of this one will be.

In point of fact there seems to be an inordinate amount of complaining about the umpiring this playoff season; perhaps because there have been some astounding strike zones appearing on the TV and some really bad calls to boot. Strike zones seem wider and there seem to be several umpires working the playoffs who have nomadic strike zones. Whatever it is, it is being noticed.

ESPN's Ray Knight, former manager and player, got into an amusing shouting match with the chief of the Umpire's Union, Richie Phillips, over the issue of whether or not there are "incompetent" umpires working at the major league level. I really doubt if there are, but clearly some umpires are more competent than others, just as some players and managers are more competent than others. The less competent ought not to be umpiring in the playoffs and World Series.

For his part Richie Phillips provided the most revealing information when Bob Lea asked him how many umpires had

been dismissed from the major leagues in the past ten years.

His answer.

None.

What interests me most about these discussions is that baseball fans seem to expect perfection from the umpires. Unlike the NBA, the NFL, and the NHL, where inconsistency is expected and mistakes are a routine part of the games, the standards for umpires seem to be much higher.

Why is this so? What is it about baseball that does not let us simply laugh at the officiating and dismiss it as irrelevant? Why do we hold baseball umpires to a higher standard? A look at history may shed some light here.

In the early years of baseball the umpires were an object of derision and were often physically intimidated by the crowds. They were felt to be either a "homer" or in the pay of gamblers and therefore accorded no respect and little pay. Their authority was tenuous at best.

The person most responsible for changing this was American League founder and President Ban Johnson. When the Western League became the American League at the beginning of this century, Johnson decided that one of the marks of his league would be an upgrading of the umpiring. Greater skill and impeccable integrity would accompany more pay.

Players, managers and fans would be required to respect the person and the authority of the umpire. Indeed one of the reasons that John McGraw left Baltimore and the American League to go off to the New York Giants of the National League was Johnson's determination to protect his umpires from the abuse of the likes of John McGraw.

Slowly but surely the Umpire emerged in baseball as a figure of considerable authority and unquestioned integrity. League officials began defending umpires and their decisions. Players and managers were fined for physical confrontation with umpires or in many cases even public criticism. Abusive fans were removed from the ballparks.

The Umpire came to be seen as above the fray, the final authority, with a status akin to a Supreme Court judge. The dark blue uniforms signaled the same disinterested objectivity as the black robes of the judge. Umpires were taught to never question themselves or their fellow umpires, to be decisive and firm and always in control of both the game and themselves. Even in the most heated of arguments the code of the umpire was "never lose your composure."

It became part of the folklore of baseball that the best umpire was one who went unnoticed both on and off the field. They traveled apart from the players, stayed in different hotels, lived the life of monk-like isolation. There was an axiom among fans that if you went to a game and left never having discussed the umpires or the umpiring you knew the men in blue had done a good job.

All of this began to change as some umpires moved into the media, as many became confrontational with the players and managers, and as they became concerned with developing their own special style. As a group they organized a union to address their economic needs and conditions of employment. Umpires are being noticed more and have begun to feel collective power. The televising of nearly every game has added to the scrutiny given to umpires and umpiring, and this too has ended their anonymity, and made them more paranoid.

Nonetheless umpires have retained that aura of authority that came out of the first half of this century. Unlike many other institutions, which lost their respect and authority under the glare of constant examination and over-exposure in the past half-century, baseball umpires still retain some of their mythic power. It is dwindling, but it still is there, and therefore our expectations remain high.

In all probability, however, we are at the end of an era. We live in the Age of Accountability where no authority is "received," all decisions are questioned, and virtually no respect is accorded to "office." The decline of the umpire's authority from both within and without seems inevitable.

Don't kill the umpire!

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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