

World Softball

Behind The Plate

Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires



*ISF World Softball Magazine Articles
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Bob Stanton
ISF Director of Umpires

Activities:

In the last issue I told you about a few of the sub-committees that were established under the umpiring program of the ISF. These committees provide valuable input and feedback on initiatives that the Regional Umpire Coordinators Committee brings forward from time to time.

At the Regional Umpire Coordinators Committee meeting held in Plant City, Florida, on the weekend of February 20-22:

- Regional Umpire Coordinators reported on the past year's activities in their region.
- The reports of the Sub-committees on Rules and Mechanics were reviewed. Recommendations based on the reports will be taken forward to the Rules and Umpires Commissions at the ISF Congress to be held in October.
- A selection process and relative criteria were developed for world championships and ISF-sponsored or sanctioned events – to be submitted to the Administrative Commission at the 2009 Congress
- Mandates were approved for Education, Administration and Women in Umpiring Sub-committees.
- The Education Sub-committee, it was decided, will be working on a format for our umpire manual, an instructor/evaluator manual, umpire clinics and educational material delivery options. The Coordinators agreed to explore the benefits of an interactive website for umpires.
- The Administrative Sub-committee will be working on the updating of our umpire lists, including defining active and inactive categories as well as establishing the process and criteria for maintaining active status for consideration for selection to a world championship or ISF event. The development of a strategic plan for the umpire program is also on the work plan.
- The Women in Umpiring Sub-committee will be making recommendations on best practices how to recruit, retain, and promote female umpires.

It is hoped that the efforts of the Regional Coordinators will lead to more transparency in how the umpire program operates and provides more emphasis on education.

Clinics:

Wayne Saunders, Oceania Regional Umpire Coordinator assisted at a number of well-attended umpire clinics that were successfully held in Oceania. As Director of Umpires I was pleased to lead 30 umpires in a clinic held in Panzhihua, China. The clinic consisted of three days of classroom sessions and three days of competition.

Umpiring Tip:

No matter where we are in our umpiring year, start, middle or near the end, it is always beneficial to reflect on those qualities of an effective umpire. Effective umpires exhibit the following qualities:

- Respectful attitude, both on and off the field. Umpires should always approach the game with a high regard for the sport, the players, coaches, administrators and fans. We must let our pride in being part of the sport show through at all times.
- Commitment to being in the best position to make the call. This requires hustle on the part of the umpire, coupled with an understanding of how the game is played and an awareness of the situation at any given moment.
- Appropriate and consistent judgement. Players and coaches do not expect perfection; they do however expect an umpire's judgement to be appropriate for the level of ball being played and consistent from pitch to pitch, play to play and game to game.
- Handles pressure well. An umpire is expected to maintain his or her composure in any circumstance. The ability to remain objective allows umpires to deal fairly with situations as they arise.
- Communicates effectively. The best communication tool an umpire can have is the ability to listen. It is very hard to know what is on a coach's or player's mind without listening to his or her concerns. Once you understand the concern, you can quickly deal with it.
- Rules knowledgeable. Understanding a rule and the reason behind the rule are essential to knowing when to apply the rule. Applying the right rule at the right time can save an umpire from many arguments.

As umpires we have to continually work at honing our effective qualities. We must always be on our guard to live up to the good reputations that we have earned. We can lose a lot of goodwill if we fail to show respect, fail to hustle to a good position to see a play and make a call, lose our focus and our consistency, buckle under pressure, fail to communicate, or misapply a rule. These are things that we can and must control in order to be an effective umpire. These qualities not only make us good and effective umpires, they make us good and effective people. Remember always give your best and continually work at making your best even better.



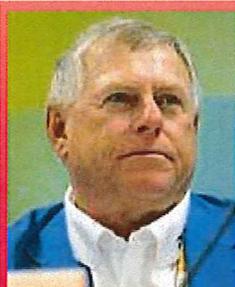
At the Regional Umpire Coordinators meeting at the ISF world headquarters in Plant City, Florida, in February are (front row, left to right) Margo Koskelainen (Australia), ISF Umpires Commission Chair Kevin Quinn (Canada), ISF Director of Umpires Bob Stanton (Canada), Marlies Struyve (Netherlands), (back row, left to right) Santos Vasquez (Puerto Rico), Julio Hellburg (Netherlands Antilles), Vincent Maoeng (South Africa), Wayne Saunders (New Zealand), Tommy Wang (Chinese Taipei)

Absent - Julie Johnson (USA)

BEHIND THE PLATE

Umpires Do Give Back To The Game

By Bob Stanton
ISF Director of Umpires



Bob Stanton
ISF Director of Umpires

July and August saw the playing of two very good competitions, the XII Men's World Championship and the Easton Foundation Youth World Cup. We also saw a high level of softball being played at the Canada Cup in British Columbia; the World Games in Taiwan; the World Cup of Softball 4 in Oklahoma City (USA), and the Pan American Softball Championship for Women in Venezuela. At each of these prestigious events certified ISF umpires were used almost exclusively to officiate the games.

On behalf of the International Softball Federation, I take this opportunity to thank each and every one of these umpires for giving of their time to work these events. The ISF knows that in more than one case individuals have paid the airfare out of their own funds to get to the tournament. While the ideal situation is for an umpire's federation to pay, we know that this is not always possible. We are truly impressed with the dedication and love of softball that is shown by our umpires time and time again.

Umpires are nominated for selection to a world championship or world cup by their federation. A selection committee reviews the nominations and selects the umpires for the particular event based on the needs of the tournament and the abilities of the umpires nominated. Once selected the work begins for those umpires long before the championship or cup begins.

Preparing for an international championship or cup takes more than just arranging for airfare. Umpires must prepare themselves physically and mentally. Umpires are expected to be in good physical condition when they arrive at a championship or cup tournament. They will be expected to umpire multiple games each day for an 8-10 day period. They must review the ISF rules and mechanics to be aware of differences that may exist between the ISF and their own federation. In addition, they must arrange for time away from their work and families. On the social side of things, umpires traditionally bring something of their home country to the tournament to give to their fellow umpires.

It is always amazing to watch the members of a crew come together over the duration of a championship or cup. During those tentative first days everyone is hit with information overload and tries to get their feet under them to where the crew learns to rely on and trust in each other. Once that trust is established on the field the crew quickly gels professionally and socially. It truly is wonderful to see a group of individuals from different countries, cultures, and languages find a way to communicate and to pull together to attain the common goal of providing the best officiating that they can for the teams, the fans, and the tournament organizers. It is little wonder as they go through the pressures of championship play that lifelong friendships become established and flourish in the years long after the championship.

For those of you who are certified but have not yet been to a world championship or cup recently or never have been, there are things that you can do to help yourself get nominated and selected.

1. Let your national federation know that you are interested in being nominated. You should do this annually.
2. Keep up on the rules.
3. Work as many highly competitive or elite level games as you can.
4. Try to do national and regional championships yearly or at least every two years.
5. Attend or teach umpire clinics in your country or region.
6. Keep up to date on ISF mechanics. Talk to umpires who have returned from a world championship or cup to get the latest in mechanics and rule interpretations.
7. Check the ISF website for rule interpretations or technical bulletins.
8. Stay physically and mental prepared.

In 2010, the ISF hopes to hold a number of umpire clinics and certification seminars around the world. Talk to your federation's umpire-in-chief about hosting one in your country or getting together with a country close by to host a clinic or certification seminar.

Staying on top of your umpiring game takes work. We can never stop acquiring better rule knowledge, improving on our mechanics and positioning and enhancing our game control skills. Keep it up.

May your next game be the perfect one we are all looking to umpire.



(Photo by Sharon Melnyk)

Shown are the umpires that worked July's ISF XII Men's World Championship in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (Canada), plus ISF Director of Umpires Bob Stanton (left end, middle row), who was assisted by Brian Van Os (right end, middle row) and Julie Johnson (next to Van Os).

Behind The Plate

Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires

As you know, the recent ISF Congress held in Venezuela included both a Rules Commission and an Umpires Commission meeting. The Rules Commission made a number of rule change recommendations, which were accepted by the Congress at the general session.

The most significant change was to the pitching rule, allowing the pitcher, male or female, to leap from the pitching plate, land, and deliver the pitch. The hands must separate and the windmill motion must start with the push-off, whether the pitcher uses a leap or push and drag. All motion must be continuous. If a leap is used, upon the landing of the pivot foot there may be a secondary push or follow-through, which is permissible providing all action is continuous. The pitcher may not step off and then push off from a point other than the pitcher's plate.

Other rule changes for the most part deal with clarification of existing rules and their enforcement. Rule changes can be found at the ISF website under Rules and Standards.

At the Umpires Commission meeting the main topic of discussion was changes to our umpire systems. Eight changes were recommended and accepted by the Umpires Commission. The changes involve umpire responsibilities in the 3- and 4-umpire systems. The changes are only minor in nature and again reflect in most cases what we in fact are doing. The mechanic changes will soon be on the ISF website.

Last Fall was busy for those involved in our umpiring program, with rule and mechanic changes to be managed and placed in the Rule Book and Umpire Manual. The rules have been updated with the changes from the Congress. As always, when you change something in one rule, it usually has an affect on another rule. Ensuring that rule changes do not result in conflict as well as eliminating unclear wording of other rules took up quite a bit of time, however the end product is more clearly written rules. Again, you can reference the complete document online at www.ISFsoftball.org.



Our new Umpire Manual will launch soon and will be available on the ISF UmpSchool site, which can be accessed through a graphic link on the various pages of the Umpiring section of the ISF website. The ISF UmpSchool provides a means for testing yourself on the rules as well as providing the following reference materials: the 2010-2013 Official Rules, the ISF Case Book, the ISF Umpire Manual, rule interpretations, and Technical Bulletins.

Umpiring at elite levels requires a never ending quest for knowledge. Umpires need to know the rationale for a rule, the interpretations that have been given for a rule, as well as when to apply a rule. Umpires have to keep updated with improvements to umpiring position and systems. As the person responsible to ensure that the game is played fairly and by the rules, umpires have the responsibility to always be at their best. If you continually work at understanding and applying the rules, getting to the best position to see a play and using proper mechanics to communicate your decisions, you will be seen as giving your best.

Just as it is beneficial for umpires to understand game strategies, coaches and players need to become students of the rules. Knowing the spirit and intention behind a rule will assist coaches and players to play the game within the rules. If you know how a rule will be interpreted and applied, it is much easier to stay with the intent of the rule.

In 2010 the ISF umpiring program will continue to move forward with the refinement of its educational materials and delivery program. A certification seminar is being planned for Europe and training clinics will be held in the various regions on a national or regional basis. The development of an instructor/evaluator manual is close to completion and it is hoped that the first instructor/evaluator clinic will be held in conjunction with a tournament.

Regardless of the time of year or where you are, it is always time to improve on your umpiring knowledge and skills. Check the ISF website regularly for information on upcoming clinics, seminars, or conventions.

Behind The Plate

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The game of softball continues to be played around the world. As the season ends in some regions it is just beginning or is well underway in others. Where the game is being played umpires are out on the field calling balls and strikes, fair and foul, and safe and out. In those areas where the season is just about to begin, umpires are attending clinics to be brought up to date on new rules and mechanics. In those regions where the season has just finished, plans are already underway to provide clinics for umpires and to recruit new umpires.

The ISF umpiring program is making every effort to get as much information on new rules, mechanics, and rule interpretations to member Federations and their umpires. One of the newest information and reference delivery programs is starting to really take off. The ISF UmpSchool can be accessed from a number of links on the ISF website. The link appears as an ad in the right-hand column on every webpage under the Umpiring section. (Just single-click on that graphic!)

The ISF UmpSchool provides access to the rules, the Umpire Manual, the Case Book, the 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-umpire systems, Technical Bulletins, Rule interpretations, Point of Emphasis, and Policies. The website is updated on a regular basis so please take the time to review these important information documents. A notice will be posted on the UmpSchool website when a document has been updated.

The ISF UmpSchool also allows you the opportunity to test yourself on rule knowledge. You can go into the rule-testing portion of ISF UmpSchool and it will randomly select questions for you to answer. You can select the number of questions you wish to answer and after answering the questions you will get immediate feedback on your answers. This is an ideal way for you to prepare for the upcoming season.

We recommend that any umpire who is planning to attend a world championship or ISF certification seminar join the ISF UmpSchool as one tool to use in getting prepared for either the championship or the seminar.

Speaking of seminars, the ISF is hosting one in Haarlem, Netherlands, from August 12-18th. There is also the



possibility of hosting a seminar in Puerto Rico in June. In 2011 interest in hosting a certification seminar has been expressed by both Softball Australia and Softball Canada.

As part of our efforts to enhance our education program, we are currently working on an Instructor-Evaluator Clinic that we would offer to federations who are looking to train clinicians and evaluators for their umpire program. We are not looking to re-invent the wheel here and will borrow best practices from member federations in the design and delivery of this clinic. In addition, work has begun to breakdown our Umpire Manual, mechanic, and umpire systems into appropriate training modules that can be adopted by member federations to train new, intermediate, and advanced umpires.

One of the responsibilities of the ISF umpiring program is to certify elite umpires from the federation for selection to ISF world cup and world championships. The ISF also recognizes the importance and obligation on the umpiring program to provide educational materials and training for member federations who do not have a formalized umpire training program. It is amazing how willing and generous member federations who have formal programs are when it comes to sharing and providing information, materials, and individuals to allow us to begin to create an umpiring training resource for our member federation umpires.

I attended an umpire convention called Blue Convention in Regina, Saskatchewan (Canada) in April of this year. While the majority of umpires were from Canada, there were umpires in attendance from the (ASA and NCAA of) United States of America, South Korea, and New Zealand. The sharing of ideas, opinions, and stories of softball was delightful to see and hear. Many thanks to Brian Van Os and the host committee and a special group of Canadian umpires for their hospitality and generosity. These umpires went out of their way to make their international guests feel welcomed and accepted.

In one conversation we soon discovered that the pitching regulation is always an interesting and sometimes hot topic. It appears that the various pitching regulations being followed are becoming more similar. More about this in a future article.

Enjoy yourself, no matter what stage of the season you are in.

Behind The Plate

Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires

In my recent travels I have been fortunate to observe a number of softball tournaments and discuss a number of softball issues with many people. There were some umpire traits that I noticed were happening consistently.

Working the plate:

Strike Zone – there is an old adage or saying, especially with respect to elite fast pitch, narrow the zone from top to bottom and widen it out, especially when the ball is belt high. I think we have taken this too far. The strike zones that I was observing were fine with respect to height but were far too wide. We are now calling ‘strike’ on pitches that are two or three ball widths off the plate on the outside. Strikes should only be called if a portion of the ball is over the black outline of the plate. If you change your plate position and mental concept of a strike, your strike zone will become more consistent and appropriate.

Top of the strike zone – Umpires take the same position regardless of the height of the batter. Umpires need to adjust the level of their eyes so that the eyes are at the top of the strike zone and they are looking down through the strike zone. Strike calling will get better and more consistent if you adjust your set position to have your eyes at the top of the strike zone. You have to constantly be checking this or you will slip into the habit of setting at the same height every time.

Working the Slot – For the most part, umpires I observed are too far behind the catcher. I feel this is one of the reasons why our strike zone has gotten too wide. Umpires need to be more out and up into the slot to see the entire plate and better judge the strike zone. Use the heel to toe stance, with the foot behind the catcher located behind the catcher’s foot that is closest to the batter. You can best align your body by having the center of your body (use your belt buckle if worn properly to determine this) with the middle of the side



of home plate closest to the pitcher. Set your eyes at the top of the strike zone and you are set to establish a good strike zone. Use the same set-up on both sides of the plate. To be consistent in doing this, step behind the catcher first then step up into the slot using the heel and toe stance.

Game Control – I was really pleased to see umpires working with coaches and players. It is important to develop a rapport with players and coaches. Everyone has a role to play in the game and the more we recognize each other’s roles and treat each other with respect, the more enjoyable the experience will be. The game is the sum of the parts and no part is more important than any other.

There has been lots of discussion about the new ISF pitching rule. I will write more about it the next time but in the meantime remember, the rule is written to allow pitchers to pitch. Leaping is allowed and when pitchers land there will be a secondary twist and push. This is part of the permitted pitching style. Umpires should not be analyzing the leaping pitching style. If there is an obvious second push off, it will be very noticeable. A twist and follow through should not be considered illegal. The same applies to the arm movement. We want to see a smooth and continuous movement prior to and at the time of release. Arm movement and the time of hand separation are indicators but it is the obvious second push off that is the violation. Landing, twisting with a follow through having a slight push is not illegal. Remember the rule is written to allow the pitchers to pitch and as umpires we should not be looking to find illegal pitches, we should only call them if we see them and have no doubt.

Observations on base mechanics in the next issue.

Hope you had, are having, or will have a great season.

Behind The Plate

Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires

In my last Behind the Plate, I talked about some things I observed plate umpires doing or not doing over the previous 12 months. In this article I would like to share some random observations I made of umpires who were working the bases.

Overall I was impressed by the level of officiating I observed in 2010. Umpires are a dedicated lot who take great delight in discussing rule interpretations, mechanics, and, in general, the game of softball. It is easy to see that umpires are steadily improving on their rule knowledge and mechanics. I did, however, notice some habits that I think umpires need to overcome.



Working the Bases:

Ready Position – Umpires are bending too much at the waist. When taking the ready position, we should hold our body like a fielder; have a slight flex at our knees and shift our weight to the balls of our feet. By shifting the weight to the balls of our feet we are able to react and move more quickly.

Tracking – Base umpires are forgetting to track the ball as it is being thrown from one fielder to another for a play. Much the same as plate umpires track the pitch from the pitcher's hand through the strike zone, base umpires should be tracking the ball from the fielder's hand to the other defensive player. Once we set, we should allow the ball to turn our head into the play. I have noticed umpires turning their back to the ball when moving between their primary and secondary positions, then turning and trying to pick up the ball again. In some cases it was too late and the umpire found him or herself in the path of the throw. Always know where the ball is and only take your eye off it for a fraction of a second at a time. Practice moving laterally.

Angles and Distances - The starting position of umpires with runners on is too deep. We should move closer, say, to a position four meters (15 feet) from the bag. On a force play at 1st base and a throw from the infield, we need only come one or two steps into fair territory, i.e., 1.5 meters (four feet). At other bases, on a force play, take a 90-degree angle to the throw. On tag plays, take a 90-degree angle to the runner's path. Be prepared to adjust

based on the four elements you need to have in front of you: ball, base, defensive player, and offensive player. If a ball is thrown wide of the defensive player, move to get a position where you can see if a tag is applied. When moving with a runner always move parallel to the path that the runner is taking to the next base.

Primary and secondary positioning – I noticed that many umpires are now correctly allowing the location of the ball and players decide where their primary position for a call will be, however umpires also need to think about that next play or call, often referred to as the secondary position. Umpires should know where they are going next. If a runner advances from 1st to 2nd base, our primary

position should be the edge of 2nd base closest to 1st base. Once the runner reaches 2nd base then umpires need to change position to the other side of the base, the side closest to third base, as this now becomes the leading or play edge

Leading or play edge – When we talk about the leading or play edge of a base, we are referring to the side of the base to which the runner is heading. This is normally where the action is going to occur on a tag play or force play. Umpires should be looking into the leading or play edge whenever possible on a tag play. Again, you must always be aware of the location of the ball, the base, and the defensive and offensive player. Let the four elements be the final determining factor of where you should be to see a play.

Inside out theory – Instructors have always preached the proper position for an umpire when the ball in outfield is for the umpire to be 3.5-4.5 meters (12-15 feet) inside the base line and when the ball is in the infield the umpire should be 3.4-4.5 meters (12-15) on the outfield side of the base path. This is an excellent guideline but we know there are times when the location of the ball/runners/fielders may dictate that we stay out when the ball is out. Always let the play and the next possible play dictate where the best position is for you.

Next Time: Improving Judgement and Working the 4-umpire system

Best wishes for a healthy and happy 2011

Behind The Plate

Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires

It is often said that you cannot teach judgement. I disagree. There are many things we can do to improve our judgement. The major element in judgement is proper positioning. If you do not see the play properly it is difficult to make the right judgement. Like any decision you make, the more facts you have, the better decision you will make.

Working the plate requires that you see the entire strike zone. We teach the staggered stance using heel to toe with good plate alignment (center of the body aligned slightly off-center of the front edge of home plate). This will assist with judging inside and outside pitches. Proper eye height at the top of the strike zone so you are looking down through the zone will provide the best look at the top and bottom of the strike zone.

Working the bases requires that you keep the four elements in front of you, the ball, the base or play, the defensive player, and the offensive player. We recommend that you get to a point that is 90 degrees to the throw on a force play and 90 degrees to the path of the runner on a force play. Proper distances on a force play or a tag play are also important.

So how do we improve judgment? First, we have to get to the best position possible to see the play. We do not take a position to see a play because that is the spot on a diagram contained in an umpire manual. Such diagrams are only a reference point that helps guide us to getting to the right position. We must always let the play dictate the best position to be in. The ball, the players, and the location of where the play will take place will tell us where to be, not a diagram.

Once we get in the proper position, whether at the plate or on the bases, it is our knowledge and experience that takes over and renders our judgement on the facts as we see them. To improve our judgement, we then must improve our knowledge and gain more experience. Rule knowledge is one area that should be easy to improve. Studying the rules to gain an understanding of the spirit and intent of the rules takes effort. It is more than understanding the words, it is digging deeper to understand why the rule exists and why it was written the way it was. Knowing how to interpret what you see as it relates to the rules is part of the judgement you need to use when making a call.



Malcolm Gladwell in his book "Blink" talks of the ability of art experts to make a snap decision on whether a painting is a forgery or not. They follow their instincts. What takes them just a matter of seconds would take a non-expert months to figure out after tests and sifting through the facts. This instinct is the brain sifting through the fact, eliminating what is not relevant and isolating only the most important of facts. He says that these experts have developed their instincts only after years and years of study and practice. He is often quoted as saying, "It takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert." So if you want to improve your judgement, practice, practice, practice and rely on your instincts. Let your expertise take over. If your instincts are telling you it is a strike, then it probably is. If your expertise says it is an out, it

probably is.

Remember, however, good practice is what counts. In order for you to know that those 10,000 hours of practice are taking you in the right direction, you need help. We can validate our practice with observation and feedback. Watch others work, see what their strike zone is, see how they handle close plays, see how they deal with a tag play or a force play. Watch for feedback on your own use of judgement – do catchers or batters look back at you on your strike calls? Are pitchers always giving you a look? Do players overreact on safe or out calls? While some of this could be just emotions, it can also be a sign that you are not calling the game the way the players expect it to be called. Ask your fellow umpires for feedback on your judgement. Find a mentor.

Judgement is an individual thing; however, we can borrow from others as we develop our own judgement skills. No one is perfect, but we can all work on trying to get there.



2011 ISF Umpires Certification Clinic, Oceania
Front: Phil Waller, Scott Rindfleisch Tricia Sibraa, Leigh Evans, Mark Porteous.
Centre: Darren Sibraa, Ian Frame, Jason Carter, Howard Watt, Jeremy England, Ron Houlison, Helen Strauss, Stacey Loveridge, Wayne Saunders.
Back: Yvonne Kahler, Amanda Houlison Bob Stanton, Riki Tourangi, Dave Shedlock

The participants in and instructors from an ISF umpire certification seminar held in February in Queensland, Australia. (Photo by Wies Fajzullin)

WHEN THINGS GO BUMP YOU CAN COUNT ON A FELLOW UMP

It has been said time and again how the sport of softball brings people together. Sure, there are players on a team. Then there are usually the parents in the stands. And definitely not to be overlooked is the tight-knit umpiring community.



The infield at this softball diamond was almost completely underwater. (Photo courtesy of Cheryl Kemp)

However, it's the stories about these groups away from the field that best demonstrate how softball has really made for a special presence in their lives.

One such example comes from New Zealand, as told below by Nicola Ogier, an umpire from Canterbury.

We were jolted from our sleep on September 4, 2010, at 4:35am. Too dark to see anything, and no power, we checked the basics and went back to bed to wait for the morning light to expose what it would. A magnitude 7.4 earthquake had hit and many areas of the city were without power and water.

We were one of the lucky ones. Our water came back almost immediately, and power was restored by 10am. A few softballs had fallen off the display shelves, but otherwise, nothing of any consequence. Not all our umpires were so fortunate. Dave Beaumont lives in an area where liquification rose from the depths of the earth like miniature volcanoes, disrupting water and sewer lines and relocating all in its path. Roads, houses, buildings, nothing was spared. For two days he was marooned in his house unable to get out of his street due to the levels of water, too high to enable a vehicle to drive through. And no certainty whether there was a road or hole beneath the muddy surface.

In Christchurch, many of those playing softball reside in the eastern suburbs. Many were affected by damage to their homes, and their normal routes were disrupted. As a softball fraternity we all banded together to recreate a sense of normalcy and support. Our season got underway and we all looked forward to the opportunities provided by the national tournaments. Each of us made a concerted effort to cover as many games as we could and enjoy our sport. And yet the tremors continued.

Half our season completed, we took an earned break for Christmas, all expecting to move forward. Boxing Day mid-morning brought a new tremor, and once again those in the eastern suburbs, already challenged with daily basics highly compromised, once again took to the streets to clear away the new liquification. A new level of uncertainty was developing as we each asked the question that no-one could answer, "When will it all end?" Once again Dave B was trapped in his house as the liquification and the water levels rose.

Mark and I travelled out of town to chief the Under 19s in Hutt Valley and Dunedin and with the umpires that traveled we put to the back of our minds the daily challenges of life as we know it. Canterbury umpires all have a similar tale to tell of the experiences we each were encountering. Charlie Gaze works as a linesman and he tells of the power lines that normally stand 30m above the ground. In one street they had sunk to less than half their normal height. Who sees that? What forces are in play in order to achieve that! Pip Tuhoro and her family were required to shift from one side of Christchurch to the other due to the damage of their house, making their property uninhabitable. She is still having challenges getting her son to sleep in his bed or even be out of her sight. Karen & Tai's flat is OK but their landlord's flat (next door), is a write-off. John Wilson's job with the Salvation Army night shelter has increased as less people cope with their day-to-day stress.



Remains of Trinity Church – left – and part of Manchester Street
(Photo by Ross Becker)

WHEN THINGS GO BUMP YOU CAN COUNT ON A FELLOW UMP CONTINUED

Fresh back from National Tournaments, the season recommences. Once again the fellowship is strong as we each regale the tales of near-misses or frustrating encounters. We take the opportunity to get away for a club tournament in Auckland and last minute opportunities to work with the ISF candidates. It also gives us an insight into what procedures we will need to have in place to meet our National Tournament commitments. While we are away, the tremors continue.



A worker walks along the destruction at Cashel Mall.
(Photo by Ross Becker)

We return home to be faced with painting the same property for the third time, as subsequent tremors re-damage the building. The workload is increasing and with it the responsibilities of meeting timeframes and contractual expectations. Add to our dilemma, four of our foremen are attending the NFC and the challenges increase. How do we take the time to attend the same tournament if we are currently working ten-hour days, six days a week? We aren't going to be able to make the Dean Schick Tournament either, and the time is now to send that email. Yes, we are out of pocket for unused airfares, but this is no ordinary set of circumstances.

Fortunately, the National umpiring programme is more understanding, and we still have National Clubs to look forward to and then of course we have the

secondary schools here at home.

February 22nd, however, would forever change the face of Christchurch. Three strikes and you're out? For those still trying to live in the eastern suburbs, this would be the last straw. Once again Dave B is marooned. His cell phone is running hot as roofs collapse and chimneys topple. Four days of rest and relaxation at the NFC has all been in vain. This time the cover of darkness can't hide the willful destruction of Mother Nature. And this time there is loss of life.

I was stationary in my car when the first shock hit. My first thought was "I've driven into the gutter," but I was stationary. My car rose and dropped as if I was on a rollercoaster. Had I been at my desk, I would most likely not be here now. This time we experienced more damage, but fortunately, our properties suffered very little if any structural damage.

Once again, our umpiring fraternity stood strong and rallied around. Our season would come to an early close as the main diamonds took a major hit. Nevertheless, the spirit lives on, and for the teams traveling to the National Clubs there was a new challenge – where if anywhere to be able to practice? Grit and determination proved the motto for those venturing away from the city.

The realization that the attendance of any further National tournaments is all but a pipe dream away. Further challenged by the realization that the tournament scheduled to be held in Christchurch is an impossibility. Not only are there no longer any fields to play on, but there is no accommodation for any visiting teams. Sadly only a few umpires are now able to be spared from their private versions of hell to attend, but once again the National programme steps up as umpires volunteer to fill the gaps. And all the while, the tremors continue.

Of course it's no surprise for Ogier's story to end with another example of umpires stepping up. After all, they're there for each other off the field. On the field suddenly becomes the easy part.



The destruction there has left the old Civic Theatre barely recognizable.
(Photo by Ross Becker)



Behind the Plate

Learning and Improving

We should never lose the desire to be better. By keeping our eyes and ears open we will continue to learn from those around us.

I was recently at an umpire seminar and overheard some umpires talking about doing their 3Ps. My interest was intrigued so I asked what was this "3P" thing. The explanation was simple but the more I thought about it, the more I knew that this was one of those practices that makes for better umpires.

3Ps means PRE PITCH PREPARATION. Simply explained; before every pitch an umpire should think about what his or her responsibilities and movements should be if the ball is hit, is not hit, if there is a passed ball, etc. By thinking about all the possibilities that may occur on the pitch and the appropriate reaction and movement, an umpire has given him or herself a distinct advantage. Having thought of how you are going to react if a certain event happens enables an umpire to get into position more quickly and, more importantly, an umpire will be aware of what his or her responsibilities are before arriving at his or her position.

An umpire has many responsibilities and may be required to react to plays in a split second. Umpires can only be ready to meet these responsibilities and to react this quickly by mentally preparing themselves. Remember your 3Ps and I am sure you will find that your reaction times will have improved and you will not forget your responsibilities on a play.

Another conversation I have been involved in from time to time is, "How do we keep our elite umpires at the top of their game?" I and others have noticed that many elite umpires tend to show an improvement in their game skills for a 2- or 3-year period after they have achieved elite status. After that, some elite umpires begin to adopt non-approved mechanics and become less enthusiastic in carrying out their responsibilities on the field. I am not sure of the reason, but assume it is because these umpires feel they have achieved the top and no longer need work at their umpiring skills. Perhaps they feel that it will come to them naturally and like riding a bike, once you learn, you never forget.

Being an elite umpire is more than just knowing what to do or knowing what the rules are. It is having your mind and body in condition to react quickly and appropriately in any given situation. If you are not constantly fine tuning your mind and body to do this, you will not react in time and all that hard work you did in the past will be lost over one bad call or failure to react.

Elite umpires need to work as hard, if not harder than an umpire who is aspiring to reach elite status. Elite umpires must continuously study the rules, test their rule knowledge and attend clinics. This will keep you up to date with the theory and the mechanics of umpiring. In addition to this, elite umpires must receive honest and constructive evaluations. Programs that have a stringent regimen of testing and evaluations are the programs that have the strongest officials. Too often, elite umpires are not properly tested or evaluated because everyone knows that they have achieved elite status and it will not be taken away from them. This mindset has to change.

For one minute do you think professional officials are not subject to rigorous testing and evaluations? Well, they are and if they do not meet the standards that are set, they no longer work in the professional ranks. Should we expect anything less from our elite amateur umpires? No. Our elite umpires are officiating State or Provincial Championships, National Championships, Regional Championships, Multi-Sport Events, and World Championships. How can we not expect and ask our umpires to be at the top of their game? Elite umpires must be held accountable in maintaining the skill levels necessary to officiate at these events.

Program administrators need to ensure that the proper testing and evaluation procedures are in place to allow the elite umpire to maintain his or her elite status. We must constantly test and observe our elite umpires so that they are, in fact, still elite. Those who do not want to undergo a tighter scrutiny are those umpires who no longer want to be elite, they just like the title.

There are many elite umpires out there who work very hard at maintaining their high standards and continuously work at improving their umpiring skills. There are also many umpiring programs that are assisting their elite umpires in staying elite by providing testing and constructive evaluations. To you, I say, keep up the good work. To those who are not, it is time to get to work at maintaining your skill levels though proper testing and evaluations.

Yours in officiating

Bob Stanton
ISF Director of Umpires





Behind the Plate

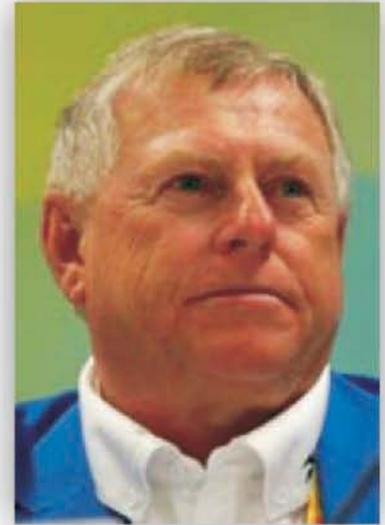
By: Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires

I wish you all a healthy and prosperous 2012. As we embark on a new year I would like to reflect on the positives of 2011.

Writing this after having just returned home from the IX ISF Junior Women's World Championship held in Cape Town, South Africa, I am pleased to report that umpires from around the world continue to find ways to communicate with each other. The willingness of umpires to teach and learn from each other is one of the strengths of the umpire fraternity and the commitment to one another is the reason that we refer to ourselves as family. This was very evident at this championship.

In 2011, two certification seminars were held, one fast pitch seminar in February in Redlands, Australia, and a combined fast pitch and slow pitch seminar in London, Ontario, in June. We introduced the pre-qualification exam at both seminars and feel that by taking and passing the pre-qualification exam, candidates are much more relaxed and able to absorb more information and perform better in drills than in previous seminars.

I have been asked on occasion if I feel the quality of umpires has improved at world championships as a result of the certification seminars being introduced a number of years ago. While there is no definitive measure for this, I do feel that over my past six years being involved with the ISF umpiring program that there has been improvement. Do I attribute this solely to the certification seminars? No, however I do feel that the seminars have played a role along with providing greater access to education materials through UmpSchool and other publications. We still have a long way to go yet.



What I do note and see as a challenge to meet in the future is the distribution of our educational materials and bulletins that report on changes to our mechanics, rule interpretations, etc. While it is important to prepare and publish manuals, umpire systems, equipment changes, and new rule interpretation, the greater challenge is getting this information to our umpires. I cannot recall the number of times that I have heard the response, "I have never seen that change," when asking an umpire why they are using an old mechanic or calling position. We are hoping to exploit social media in the future to address some of these communication challenges.



At a banquet held in Halifax, Nova Scotia in November, ISF Director of Umpires Bob Stanton was inducted into the Softball Canada Hall of Fame in the Builders category. A native of New Brunswick, he umpired for 26 years and had been appointed as Softball Canada's National Director of Umpires in 2005. (Photo by Lance Lee)

The game of softball is evolving and umpires must evolve with it. We must continually seek out best practices. No longer can we defend our reluctance to change by using the excuse, "But we always did it that way." However, we must never change just for the sake of change. Any changes that we consider introducing must be based on best practices and must be brought forward to improve the quality of umpiring that we provide to the teams and not be brought in just to satisfy someone's personal preference or ego. Before we make changes we must always consider why we are doing what we do now and carefully weigh the pros and cons of any change that is being suggested. If the benefits do not outweigh the cons or if no appreciable improvement is offered by the change, we should not make the change.

As we move forward into 2012, I ask each federation to provide their umpires with as much access to the education material offered by the ISF as possible. I would also ask those federations who have educational materials that coincide with the ISF materials to share those resources with those federations who are not quite so fortunate to have this type of material available. It is only through the sharing of information and materials, sharing teachers and clinicians, and providing mentors and guidance that our umpiring program will truly improve and ensure that we are providing the best umpiring we can at world championships and similar events.

As our umpires at world championships share information, mentor, and guide each other, I ask that the umpire leaders within our federations follow that example and do the same. It is essential that we provide current information to our umpires on a timely basis and we need your help to ensure that the information gets out to all our umpires.

In closing I look forward to a busy but rewarding year ahead. In 2012 and in following years we will have two world championships per year that will provide many opportunities for umpires to step onto the world stage. Please help us ensure that your umpires are ready to meet that challenge.

Again, best wishes for a happy and successful 2012.



UMPIRE OPPORTUNITIES AND SELECTIONS

By: Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires

We are well into 2012 and depending on where you live, the softball season is just ending or is just beginning. Umpiring opportunities on the international level are numerous. We have the sanctioned Cup tournaments such as the World Cup of Softball and the Canadian Open International Fastpitch Championship. We have world championship qualifiers such as the VIII Pan American Men's Softball Championship, XI European Men's Championship, and the 9th Asian Men's Softball Championship, all three of which will be qualifying tournaments for the ISF XIII Men's World Championship to be held in Auckland, New Zealand, in March of 2013. Finally, we have two ISF world championships, the XIII Women's, to be held in the Yukon, Canada, in July, and the Junior Men's, to be held in Parana, Argentina, in November.

Many umpires wonder how umpires are selected for the various events. For sanctioned Cups, umpires are selected by the host federation. Most host federations offer the opportunity for federations sending teams to the Cup to bring along an umpire. These umpires are normally selected by their own Federation and approved by the host federation. On occasion, umpires from Federations not sending teams or umpires not selected by their federation seek opportunities to umpire at the Cups. Umpires should only make contact with the host federation by going through their own federation. Host federations should only accept umpires from other Federations after receiving approval from the umpire's own federation. Prior to the start of the competition, a list of umpires should be forwarded to the ISF for verification purposes, and at the end of the Cup evaluations of all ISF-certified umpires should be forwarded to the ISF office.

Umpires used in qualifying tournaments are normally selected by the regional organization hosting the qualifying event. Again, use of ISF-certified umpires should only occur with the permission of their federations. As in sanctioned Cups, a list of umpires should be forwarded to the ISF prior to the event and a copy of any evaluations of ISF-certified umpires should also be sent to the ISF office.

The selection of umpires for world championships follows Article 15 of the ISF Competition and Technical Code. Each member federation is entitled to nominate up to four umpires for a world championship. From those nominations, the selection committee recommends 16-20 umpires for selection depending on the duration of the championship and the number of teams involved. In making their recommendations the selection committee first looks at the umpires nominated by federations sending teams, then secondly at the umpires from federations that are not sending teams but which have a strong regional team representation and then, thirdly, the rest of the nominations. Selections are made to ensure a strong umpire crew that will provide a quality service to the championship. It is not a mathematical exercise but one of selecting the best crew, giving consideration to regional and gender fairness.

These selection processes are taken very seriously and involve lots of discussion and information sharing. The evaluations given at sanctioned Cups and qualifiers play a high role in this selection process so it is very important that they be shared with the ISF. Also, please note that umpires who are not nominated by their own federation are not considered in the selection process.

Before leaving you, I would just like to comment on evaluations. We can use evaluations for two purposes, both of which are distinctively different. We can use an evaluation as a teaching tool or as a measuring tool.

When using evaluations as a teaching tool, the emphasis should be to acknowledge what is being done well and in providing helpful tips for the umpire to improve. Measuring the umpire on a scale has less importance here.

When evaluating for the purposes of measurement, such as advancement in umpire levels or determining the umpire performance for purposes of assignments, then the emphasis should be on what this umpire is capable of and how they measure up on a scale of excellence. This does not mean that helpful tips cannot be given and be useful, however the emphasis is to judge where on the scale of excellence this umpire fits.

More on evaluations next time.





UMPIRE EVALUATIONS

A TEACHING TOOL OR A MEASURING TOOL

By: Bob Stanton, ISF Director of Umpires

Umpire evaluations have been the dread of both the evaluator and the umpire receiving the evaluation. One of the reasons for this feeling of dread is that as evaluators we are not accustomed to judging people and giving them feedback; as umpires being evaluated, we are not used to having someone critiquing our umpire mechanics and positioning. We are uncomfortable in these roles because we have not fully identified the purpose of the evaluation and since evaluations are usually not done on a regular basis it is a bit out of our comfort zone.

Evaluations really should be a conversation between two people: the evaluator, who has an objective of teaching or measuring, and the umpire, whose objective is either to learn or to advance. The evaluator must be someone who has knowledge of the proper mechanics and rule interpretations. The umpire must be someone willing to learn or to be measured on a scale of competencies.

When an evaluation is being carried out, the main objective of the evaluation, either learning or measuring, must be clearly identified and communicated to the umpire being evaluated. Depending on the main objective, the secondary objective of teaching or measuring can also exist but is not the main focus.

Evaluations for the purpose of learning should be less formal and actually are best done as a conversation with a written follow-up. Things that the umpire is doing well should be noted and discussed. Evaluators should use words of encouragement that will enforce the good habits that the umpire has. Things that the umpire needs to improve on should be discussed in terms of suggesting alternative mechanics and why they would assist the umpire in improving his or her umpiring skills.



When evaluating for the purposes of learning, it is not necessary to score (measure) the umpire in terms of numeric values or in terms of subjective word descriptive ratings such as "needs improvement, sufficient, good, or excellent." However, umpires will want some indication of whether they are improving from their last evaluation. If there is not a system for recording evaluations this is a somewhat difficult task, especially if the evaluator is not the same person. In cases where there is no earlier evaluation to reference, evaluators should only use measurement terms as a general indication of the level of ball the umpire is capable of officiating based on the evaluation being done.

Evaluations for the purposes of measurement are used either to advance the umpire to a higher level or to assign the umpire to a championship game. When evaluating for the purposes of measurement, there should be a clear statement of competencies against which the umpire is being measured. Whether using a numeric system or the more subjective word description, the umpire must be aware of what the numbers or subjective ratings mean. Within the ISF, we are moving to a numeric system of measuring.

The first step in converting to a numeric system was to identify a number of competencies that the ISF felt were necessary traits of a good umpire and that were measurable. Once the competencies are determined, a range of scores must be established, in our case from 0 – 10. Ten indicates that the umpire displays all the elements of the competencies and zero indicates the absence of any part of the competency being measured.

Having established the competencies and the scale range, the next step was to identify the score needed to advance or be considered for a Championship playoff game assignment. A mark of 90 out of a possible 100 has been established for ISF certification purposes as well as for assignment to a Championship playoff game.

A list of competencies and range of scoring will soon be available online at the ISF UmpSchool site. A list of competencies is provided to all umpires selected to umpire at a world championship and to all candidates attending an ISF certification seminar. The intention of a good evaluation for the purposes of measurement is for the umpire to know what is expected so that the umpire's performance can be measured on a scale of excellence.

There are many valid methods of evaluation and evaluation forms. The important thing is that the umpire knows the purpose of the evaluation and what are the performance expectations. For the evaluator, it is of utmost importance that the expectations are well known and understood and that the measurement is made on the accepted competencies and not on the evaluator's own preferences.

Evaluations are important in the advancement of umpiring skills. We need to continually undertake and participate in evaluations for learning and measurement. Keep up the good work.