

ISC/SNZ UMPIRE BI-ANNUAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

2004 Inaugural Report by Lindsay Edwards

Appreciation - Let me start my report by thanking those involved in Softball, who were responsible for the setting up of this opportunity, and to those that sponsored it by facilitating the funding and the methodology of the trip itself. I am of course referring to the Exchange Programme that recently saw me attend the ISC World Tournament in Fargo North Dakota between 13 – 20th August 2004.

My trip lasted 6 weeks with me attending a number of warm-up invitational type tournaments 3 weeks before the main event, including a number of mid-week league matches. This provided ample opportunity to get back into the disciplines required of umpiring at this level, and also to meet some of those players and umpires that I would be ultimately working with at the World Tournament. Throughout my trip, the ISC Commissioner for the Wisconsin and Minnesota states, Les Novak, looked after us. He was an excellent host and went out of his way to make my wife Annette and I most welcome. I was given the opportunity to tour his country and officiate Softball played at a very good level.

The ISC focus their attention on meeting player's needs, and this is reflected in their umpiring mechanics, as well as the adjustments they make to the pitching rules. The pitchers over there and in their competition are required to have only one foot on the pitching plate, and most of the foot must be on it, which cannot move once the hands have come together, and until the ball is delivered. Once the pitcher starts his wind-up he can basically do what he likes – crow hop, re-plant, leap, step, or whatever.

This made umpiring illegalities easy to pick, and when one was spotted, the penalty was a ball only, not an advance of bases. This made for a harder line by the umpires particularly when a runner was sitting on third. Few pitchers showed technical skills and most tended to try to over-power the batters with pace. Variation of speed was the exception rather than the norm. The Kiwi players seemed to relish that situation, and it was significant that in the two teams in the final, 7 players were from our National Black Sox team.

I found the standard of umpiring excellent, with a strong emphasis on game control, and on the “**selling**” of close calls whether the call was ‘**safe**’ or ‘**out**’. The firmness with which they dealt with players and coaches was quite refreshing. I found that the players were very respectful to their umpires, with an acceptance of the part they played in making their game happen. Spectators were quite different. Very knowledgeable, and quite ‘**brutal**’ if they thought a particular call should have gone the other way. They certainly did not hold back, and let everyone around them know what they might have thought. Generally their grasp of the rules and the culture of the game was excellent.

By the term ‘**culture of the game**’ I mean something that should be experienced to fully explain it. I think it is something that is quite unique to North America and the United States. Different to ours in NZ but good. Suffice to say Fastpitch Softball is their game.

The weather was generally hot/humid and the clothing worn by umpires reflected that. Their tops were of that moisture-wicking material, which helped when it was hot, and even when it was cold. They used grey base/plate pants, which were ideal for tournaments in that dust and dirt did not easily show up on the material – making it possible to wear the clothing time and again without drycleaning/washing every day. I was provided with 4 tops (white and navy, 2 of each), 2 ball bags in both Navy and Grey, warm-up jacket, gear bag, and caps – all at no charge.

My appointments included umpiring two build-up tournaments, at St. Paul, and the Farm Tournament in Madison, and 3rd base umpire on the ISC final in Fargo. In total I umpired close to 45 games in my 6-week trip.

The organisation of the tournament was excellent although the crowd that followed the Fargo tournament was disappointing. Only 2 diamonds were used for the ISC tournament, although there was ample room for

more diamonds in the event of rained-out days. At the same time they ran a second ISC tournament involving 35 teams, which were not quite good enough playing strength-wise to participate in the main tournament. This provides an excellent opportunity for their programme to *'blood'* officials, and players for the main event, year in and year out. I thought this concept had lots of merit.

The ISC World tournament is a world tournament in every respect. All the teams involved host International players from every playing nation in the world. Some with as many as 9 International players.

Our tour finished with a week in Canada and once again the umpiring fraternity went out of their way to make us welcome.

Rick Havercroft is the ISC exchange programme representative who will be in NZ for 6 weeks in January/February. His experience will be invaluable to us, and he comes with impressive credentials. Although a lot of his umpiring has been done in the ISC side of the game, he is also ISF certified and will fit into the way we do things very easily. As I have said he is very experienced.

Cost-wise the trip was expensive although being paid for most umpiring services certainly helped. However I would recommend this trip to any others that might be in a position to be able or who can afford, to go. It is important though, that it is not seen as a training exercise as the pressures to perform at the high level need to be each handled individually, and in some cases the manner in which these pressures can be handled, can only be eased with experience. There is no training other than experience that I know, which can prepare the umpire for the North American/USA environment.

Once again I want to thank all those that made this trip possible for me, and the SNZ for sanctioning it.