

SNZ would like to acknowledge and thank Merle Butler for allowing this article to be reprinted. This subject Fans and the Umpire will help you better understand one of the biggest challenges any umpire faces. Merle's words of advice will give you a wider understanding and guide you how to best handle yourself in the heat of the battle.

◆ FANS AND THE UMPIRE

We've all heard the cliché that umpires have to start perfect and then get better. Whether you buy that or not, here's a similar line that I'm convinced you'd better accept: When it comes to fans, umpires should start deaf and then get thick skinned. No matter what a fan might say before, during or after a game, if an umpire responds or reacts the fan gains control.

When you think about softball fans (or fans of any sport), they tend to share three characteristics.

- **They are ignorant of the rules.** Whether a particular fan has played the game or not, he generally "knows" only those "rules" that evolve from sandlot play or television - two sources that are questionable, at best. Fans make great parrots, repeating what they've heard, but they make terrible clinicians.
- **They are highly emotional.** They identify with certain teams. No matter what is happening on the field; if the fan believes his team benefits, all is right with the world; his team is on the short side of the ledger, someone must be cheating the books.
- **They love to antagonize officials.**

I don't care who the official is, whether he's wearing a blue shirt or a red shirt or stripes, the fans just like to antagonize him and they work hard at it. In addition, if the official is (or appears to be) new at his job, those fans are convinced that riding the rookie will mean "**better calls**" for "**their**" team.

The cumulative impact of those three generalities is simply this: Fans will "**ride**" umpires; as long as those fans stay on their side of the fence, the umpire should ignore them. Of course, that can be a tall order.

Concentration on a pitch headed toward the plate or a runner sliding into a base would be tough enough in a vacuum. It's downright dreary duty when a bunch of leather-lung lunkhead's are discussing everything from your haircut to your heritage. But, at the risk of offering a second cliché in the same column, no one ever told you umpiring would be easy.

Turning a deaf ear. How can you learn to ignore the fans? The best method I've found is to focus more of your attention on your game duties. For example, a veteran umpire often reacts automatically, moving to cover a fly ball or a runner's advance with hardly a thought about the play.

If you realize the fans have "gotten in your head," try dissecting each situation: If the batter hits a ground ball, I go here; if it's a fly ball in my area, I go there; if it's a fly ball in my partner's area, I watch this.

Each lull between pitches is another opportunity to anticipate the coming play. "Hey, that third baseman is playing way back," you might realize, meaning that a ground ball in the hole probably won't go through and probably will lead to a close play at first.

Each fielder presents similar information, as does each runner and each pitch count. If you really focus your mind on the various game situations, it will be easier to ignore the unruly fans.

At the same time, you do have some responsibility to hear what should be heard. Fans are part of the game and it's clear that part of an umpire's job is to ignore the fans; it's also clear that players and managers are not as good at ignoring hecklers as we are.

Maintaining control. While I occasionally find an element of satisfaction when a fanatic fool is focused on a shortstop's error (especially if that shortstop is among the biggest whiners in the state), I also realize that if the fan goes too far, I might lose control of that shortstop - and the game.

If you sense that a fan or a group of fans is creating a problem that will affect the game, you'll need some help controlling the situation. That *might* be the case if they are heckling a player or a team; it *is* the case if they are throwing things on the field or, in a worst-case scenario, if they physically enter the diamond.

If you realize that the fans are partial to one of the teams, discuss the problem with that team's manager. "We're getting into a real problem situation," you might say to him, using "we" to include him in the problem solving. "I know that guy is with one of your players, so please do what you can to settle him down, coach."

In my experience, there is about a 60-40 chance that the manager will take care of the problem and you'll continue the game without further interruption. If he doesn't, you'll have to find someone who is in charge of the park - possibly a police officer - to deal with the problem.

I've seen umpires toss people in the crowd - actually throw them out of the game and have them leave. I don't know what "rule" the umpires figured allowed that, but if they can get away with it, more power to them. The problem is, if the fan refuses to leave, the umpire has no real option. I feel the last thing an umpire should do is become involved with a fan. Leave those problems to the teams and the leagues.

A danger area. Now that we've addressed the importance of ignoring the fans, let's focus momentarily on that third characteristic. Specifically, fans are convinced that riding the umpire will lead to better calls for their team.

When you are umpiring, do the job you're being paid to do. Go out and call the balls and strikes, safes and outs, and everything else that needs to be called - regardless of which team the fans favour. Your judgment should not be swayed by what the fans want. If it is, it's time for drastic action.

Let's be clear here. I'm saying that no umpire can ever make a decision based on pressure from the fans. If he does, he should not be umpiring.

That's not to say that the fans will never influence an umpire. All the commotion and disruption fans create can adversely affect your concentration, and you have to fight that problem. It's something that happens to almost every umpire at one time or another.

Many umpires are particularly susceptible to concentration problems after work eight or 10 consecutive nights; others when they are about two-thirds of the way through a long season. If that sounds familiar, learn to recognize the warning signs; low motivation, fatigue and irritability. Talk to your assignor and take a few nights off before problems occur.

There is a tremendous difference between a lapse in concentration and a lapse in honesty. Kicking a call because your concentration wavered is not good, but it is understandable. Making a call because you know the fans want it that way is inexcusable. **You cannot allow the fans to affect your integrity.**