

AUSTRALIAN FRIENDSHIP SERIES JULY 2010

I umpired at the Australian International Friendship Series and the follow-on Jr Black Sox test matches against Australia from 4 – 11 July in Blacktown, Sydney. I thank Softball New Zealand for the opportunity to represent New Zealand umpires.

Softball Australia kindly paid for 7 nights of my accommodation at the Novotel Rooty Hill in Blacktown and I have thanked them separately for their support and generosity.

The Friendship Series had 10 women's U-19 teams, including Australian Green and Gold national teams, a Papua New Guinea team, and a pick-up college team from the USA.

Australia Gold won the grand final, beating the USA team. There were 9 men's U-19 teams in the Friendship Series, including Australian Green and Gold national teams, a Papua New Guinea team, and 3 teams from New Zealand – the Jr Black Sox, the International Softball Academy team, and the Western Magpies team. The Jr Black Sox won the Grand final, beating the NZ ISA team.

I umpired 16 games in the Series over the 5 days of the tournament. I was able to work games with both junior and senior Australian umpires from several states, and umpires from PNG. In the women's playoffs, I had the plate in the No.1 vs No. 2 semi final. In the men's playoffs, I had the plate in the preliminary final (loser of No.1 vs No.2 semi final vs winner of the No. 3 vs No. 4 semi final). I also had 1st base in the grand final.

At least 25 umpires were rostered for the Series and all games except two were 3-man umpire crews.

In the Jr Black Sox vs Australia test matches, I umpired in 5 of the 7 games – 3 plates and 2 bases. The umpire crew consisted of Australian ISF umpires Scott Rindfleisch, Andrew Rindfleisch, and Daryl Shepherd, plus Level 6 umpires Ron Houison and Amanda Houison.

We worked in 3 or 4 man crews. I really enjoyed working with these senior umpires and think I held up NZ's honour.

A few other points:

- I was able to attend a training session on illegal pitching, given by Leigh Evans, a member of the Australian umpires' executive. He has done a stunning job, putting together videos of live games supplemented by videos of "staged" pitchers. Lots of examples of legal and illegal moves. I asked Leigh if I could get a copy of his work so far, but he is reluctant to do so until Wayne (in his role as Oceania chief) first reviews the material. When all this happens, I recommend that we acquire a copy of Leigh's work – it will be very useful here.
- Umpire Amanda Houison demonstrated to me how NSW umpires use technology to train umpires. They video an umpire, using a local network at the ballpark to send the video to a laptop, and now to an iPad. This allows instant replays right at the diamond. Umpires can review their mechanics immediately after a game. [Doing so between innings would be possible, but probably too disruptive to the umpire.]
- I learned a lot in particular about the NSW training program for junior umpires. I would say their junior umpire training is much more comprehensive than ours in NZ, for the most part. They focus a LOT on rules knowledge at their lower grades and are much stricter on mechanics.

- I was impressed that the NSW umpire program has a high number of high school students in umpiring. Mostly, they are good umpires – not in relative terms, but absolutely. In part, high school umpires are attracted to umpiring because the Aussies have a zero-tolerance policy against chipping of umpires. But it was clear to me that the high school peer group – that is, the players on the state and national teams – do NOT look down on high school umpires as being inferior to players. Many of the high school umpires in fact are active players.
- I think I have interest from a couple of Aussie senior umpires in coming to one of Auckland's "ISC-like" club tournaments. Although we usually host an American exchange umpire at these tournaments, it would add another international dimension to include some Aussies too.

For those of you who have been to Blacktown, the facilities are outstanding and still being improved – lights have just been added to diamond 4, giving all four diamonds ability to play games at night.

The Series itself is a terrific opportunity for NZ umpires to step into international umpiring; the combination of the Series and a test match makes it even better. I encourage Softball NZ to continue to send umpires – if the Aussies are willing.

I learned a lot, umpired some great games, and had a lot of fun. Thanks again for the opportunity.

Jeff Weber