



## 2006 ISC World Tournament Kitchener/Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

Umpire's Report – by Wayne Saunders

*May the flame lit in Olympia ever be alive in our hearts*

### Executive Summary

The ISC World's stands out as the most competitive Men's Club that I have attended. The top teams are as professional as softball gets with most teams signing the best players they can recruit and afford whilst still complying with governing policies. It would not be hard to visualize softball returning to a seasonal amateur sport should this type of championship disappear. The decline in pitching numbers in the USA, if not arrested, will most likely be the cause of this disappearance. A much more user-friendly environment needs to be developed for fastpitch pitchers with a universal pitching rule to match the way the players want to play the game. This is an International issued.

Most games were played very competitively but a nine-day tournament sees teams without quality in their pitching depth systematically eliminated. There is very little difference in the style of play between teams with a heavy reliance on power pitching and batting. The average age of players is much older than the average age of those playing in New Zealand; most are less physically fit also. With less activity on the bases this makes the workload for base umpires less strenuous and this may be an influencing reason why only three umpire crews are preferred. It was observed that there were times when a four-umpire crew would have provided much better coverage. NZ should continue to use a minimum four-umpire crew on major games.

It was hard to understand the wider disinterest with USA national team softball. There was little appreciation that International softball between passionate national teams is of much more interest to a larger number of people worldwide than the best club competition can ever offer. Full International games are played with much more passion regardless of gender and a loss has a greater significance.

The status of insurance cover for umpires attending any ISC, ISF or any out of country competition needs to be made clear to all concerned. The ISC *“will not assume responsibility for personal injury to personnel or any of its members”*. ISC competition is played under ASA rules with some published exceptions, however much of the ASA safety related rules are not strictly applied in ISC competition. The ASA umpire insurance provides cover for registered ASA umpires and Umpire Associations but only for ASA sanctioned competition. This subject was discussed with Merle Butler at the recent ISF Oceania certification clinic, insurance cover for ISF competition has been a long-standing issue. It is clear a gap analysis should be undertaken and member associations should be officially informed of any short fall in protection.

The ISC World Tournament is an ideal tournament along with ISF World Championships and Olympic Competitions for New Zealand to send its' experienced umpires to. Our top New Zealand umpires compare very favourably with our current day counterparts in North America. The rules knowledge and game management gap has been closed. Increased International competition, annual rules refreshers and a much improved working climate between umpires within New Zealand are the main reasons for this very positive progress.

Observations and rule recommendations are listed in the text of this report and have not been repeated in the Executive Summary.

### Appreciation

My thanks to Softball New Zealand, National Director of Umpiring Bill Smith and the International Softball Congress (ISC) for the opportunity to represent Softball New Zealand at the ISC World Tournament. Further thanks to those concerned for the research undertaken with officials on their return from the Athens Olympics. It is my understanding that this research led in part to the

establishment of the inaugural Prime Minister's scholarship. To SPARC for their support in awarding me a Prime Minister's scholarship to assist with the costs involved in maintaining my International umpiring career at a competitive level and for the opportunity to report on umpiring. Thanks also to Mike Walsh and the White Sox for providing the opportunity for pre-tournament training.

I would also like to record my thanks to my employer Sinclair Knight Merz who has continued to assist me throughout my umpiring career. Without their support I would not be able to commit the time required. It has and continues to be an honour to represent Softball New Zealand at the International level and I acknowledge their continuing support.

### **Pre-tournament**

My wife Kath and I arrived in the USA with time to acclimatize before my first umpiring assignment at the two day Farm Tavern Invitational at Madison, Wisconsin. A two section round robin format with a four-team play-off series involved mainly top ISC teams. The grand final between County Materials and Pueblo Bandits was not played due mainly to logistic issues. Saturday's programme had six game time slots. The first and last games of the day I worked on base with three back-to-back plate games in the heat of the day. This was followed by three games on the Sunday. I was pleased that I had well prepared physically for the hot temperatures. It was unfortunate that the management of umpires for this tournament was under going change. The very poor behavior shown by some of the teams towards a few of my umpiring colleagues should have been more firmly addressed by tournament management and indeed by the umpires concerned. A code of conduct, if adhered to, would do wonders for men's softball in North America. The arranged accommodation was substandard for more than an overnight stay; this necessitated a move to more suitable accommodation.

The next point of call was Minneapolis where we had a very pleasant stay with assistant ISC Umpire-in Chief (UIC) Les Novak and Vicky. Les could be said to be one of the most immersed of the World's umpires. His collection of tournament memorabilia is a must to see. His understanding of the practical application of the pitching rule in men's softball today makes for good listening. Les has undertaken to research and provide a list of the umpires who attended the first two of the three ISF Men's World Series he officiated at.

We then traveled to Brantford, Ontario where we home stayed pre-tournament with Level 5 umpire Joel Balberman. We were jointly hosted by Joel and ISC II UIC Bruce Brierman and Cheryl. I umpired an additional four warm-up games and had a bonus visit to the Peewee Girls Canadian Nationals. Nancy Morrison, with whom I had umpired with at the Olympic Qualifier in Italy, was the UIC at the Peewee's.

### **World Tournament**

Umpires were housed in very suitable student accommodation at the Conestoga Residence, a short van drive away from the ballpark. The traditional umpire's field inspection was followed by a pre-tournament clinic for umpires and umpiring administrators. A number of ISC officials were also in attendance. ISC use the ASA rulebook with exceptions printed in the ISC World Championship Guide. Following are additional points discussed that were relevant to this tournament.

- In play/out of play ruling – If one foot is on the ground in playable territory the ball is alive and a legal catch given even if the other foot is out of play. *(This is different to the ISF and is not recommended).*
- On a foul ball call use the foul ball signal with no pointing to where first touched.
- The use of either on-deck circle is acceptable. *(Recommended as an ISF rule change)*
- Obstruction called only if the fielder is not in procession of the ball when the obstruction occurs. Fielder may set-up in position to receive without being penalized for obstruction. *(This is the practical application of the rule for the men's game)*
- The preferred set-up mechanic for the 3<sup>rd</sup> base umpire with a runner on 1<sup>st</sup> base is beyond 2<sup>nd</sup> base on the extension of the baseline between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> bases. This location is preferred for the swipe tag and is a better position for the checked swing on a LH batter. *(This was trailed by me)*

*and is personally not recommended. My observation were that most umpires were forced to rotate towards the more accepted position on the 1<sup>st</sup> base side to see the tag when the fielder was more often than not able to receive the ball in a position between the advancing runner and the base. The more accepted position was also far better for re-positioning and observing the return throw from ground balls hit through the infield)*

- If a hit-pitch is judged by the umpire to be deliberate, the pitcher is to be warned that if this happens again he may be ejected. *(Was not seen in use)*
- Catchers do not need to wear a helmet. A mask is not required to receive warm-up pitches. *(This was not a written except and maybe an insurance issue if contrary to the ASA rule)*
- No safety base at first. *(New ASA double-base rule recommended as an ISF rule change)*
- Equipment checks were recommended but were difficult to complete *(Another possible insurance issue)*
- Base umpires to stay in the outfield between half innings.
- Option with two down to replace the catcher if on base with the last batter out. *(Recommended as an ISF rule change but this option should be available with one down as recommended by many coaches)*
- The ISC pitching rule differs in part to the ASA rule. These differences are documented in the 2006 World Championship guide and should be read when considering rule changes. The following field application was advised by the UIC. *“It is permissible and not considered a step for the pitcher to lift his pivot just clear of the pitchers plate to “clear his cleats” when sliding forward as part of the delivery action”.*

## **The Umpires**

Ten umpires were selected by the ISC, a mix of seasoned ISC regulars and locals from Ontario. Rick Havercroft, Leon Watson, Peter Kluszczynski, Joe Squires, Scott Mair, Ginger Rendon, Paul Baier, Ed Otterman, Rob Deakin and Jay Hart. Aaron Poulin (CSA) and Billy Norton (ASA) were the annual representatives from their associations, giving a total of thirteen umpires. Aaron, Billy and I “the tokens” were invited to speak to the assembly of commissioners. Greetings from SNZ were extend, the value to New Zealand umpires of the exchange programme, the benefits of the use of the optic ball and the importance of and responsibility for the development of US pitchers were matters raised and spoken too.

With ASA, CSA and SNZ working closer with the ISC umpiring programme it maybe timely to address some of the points of difference or better points of exclusion. Listening to umpires here at the ISC World’s the time it takes to meet the minimum requirements to attend an ISF certification clinic is a major turn-off for a continuing interest in obtaining ISF certification. It would be in my opinion beneficial to all programmes if approved attendance at the ISC World Tournament by ASA or CSA umpires counted towards the minimum requirements to attend an ISF certification clinic. The same courtesy to attend should be extended to ISC umpires who have attended three or more ISC World Tournaments. Much was also said that attending an ISF certification clinic was a very costly personal exercise and that the standard of games used for the practical examination of umpires was of insufficient quality and has brought into question the true standard of today’s ISF certification. Similar views were expressed when talking with umpiring colleagues in Hawaii.

## **The Championship**

Umpiring assignments were issued for the first seven days of round-robin play with the final two days of appointments issued separately. The competition was double elimination with umpire appointments based on scheduled start times and diamond allocation. The day's game schedule was completed unless rained out. On one occasion my assignment finished around 2.30am with another game still to follow. This approach is understood and necessary for double elimination competition. Three-umpire crews were used throughout the round robin and five-umpire crew on the grand final.

The pitching rule worked very well with nobody except the odd New Zealander interested in what the pitcher was doing. I was not aware of any illegal pitches being called but instructions to change were given to one pitcher who would have been legal under ISF regulations. There was no issue with his subsequent compliance. It was good to be part of an international umpiring crew who was together as

one with the pitching regulation. With the ISC pitching rule widely used in North American tournaments it is not unreasonable to assume that pitchers and umpires will become accustomed to this rule. At ISF World Series it is the USA umpires that set the tone for the level of enforcement. History has shown that what prevails in the USA more often than not prevails at the ISF Worlds and if the umpires and the players are accustomed to the ISC pitching rule this will prevail in the main. The only exception is the token enforcement of the back foot toeing up. The CSA has compliance with toeing up (static compliance) but dynamic compliance was not seen to be enforced. This is similar to the level of enforcement in New Zealand.

There was difficulty, mainly in night games, in tracking the off-white ball in-flight off the bat. This was noticed also in pre-tournament night games with a contributing factor at these games being the poor standard of lighting. It is my experience that the optic ball is far superior under all conditions.

Games were played without the need to consider time infringement penalties and this type of rule enforcement would be out of place in this tournament environment. The removal of the batters box lines is an endemic culture and will be an issue at the next ISF World's as is the batting out of the back of the batters box. With batters mainly set-up at the back of the batter box there is an increase in the incidence of pitching rise balls with these pitches being called correctly on high at the front of the plate. The calling of hittable pitches within a half-ball width of the outside of the plate was consistent and not expanded. Much of the culture of baseball is consciously included with many umpires working both sports. It was not uncommon for most softball umpires to predominately work girl's college softball. The preference to work these games is principally driven by the decline in the number of fastpitch men's games available and the very much better game fee and code of conduct/management within the women's game.

### **General Observations and Recommendations**

#### Observations from the Peewee Girls Canadian Nationals.

- Teams displayed their provincial flag at the dugout
- Teams wanted to use the on-deck circle on either side for safety reasons. Local leagues had approved this rule change for safety reasons but it was not allowed at Canadian Nationals.
- Most pitchers wore a helmet with a face guard. Similarly batters used a cricket type helmet with face mask.

#### ASA rules that should be considered

- Modifications to the use of the double base at first
- A glove or a mitt may be worn by any player.

#### Observations from the Worlds.

- Basic positional setup when first calling tag plays is the major cause and effect that leads to controversy in judgment calls. Many umpires still make these calls from oblique angles looking through fielders or runners. The simple principle of having the four essential elements clearly visible appears to not be driving field applied mechanics. Four-umpire coverage does help alleviate this issue.
- Professional obstruction and interference was again evident by the top-level players. Fielders not in the act of fielding a batted ball are at times initiating contact with a runner by actions not associated directly with fielding the batted ball. These plays are becoming more frequent particularly by short-stops on runners advancing to third. Just because there is contact it does not mean there is interference. Much of this play is perpetrated by the very skilled defensive player and is only used when certain situations exist in a game. More training of umpires working at this level of the game is required if we are to keep pace with the developing skills of the players.
- I have included for a second time in a report that in my opinion it is timely to revisit the current ISF/SNZ fastpitch pitching regulations as written in the rulebook. The gap in rule compliance with the written rules and the field rule enforcement in the men's game is the widest it has been at anytime in my umpiring career. There can be no doubt that the ISC approach does work. It is field proven and very widely accepted by at least three of the four influential sectors of our sport. The managers and players, and umpires are happy as it provides a level playing field and

is easier to administrate without the continual controversy of the past. Spectators get a better quality product for their dollar and appear to be much more satisfied with today's game that is not punctuated with very technical calling of illegal pitches. I have previously commented on the future enforcement problems as I see them if we continue with the current rule. The required changes are not dramatic. The introduction of allowing the non-pivot foot to be on *or behind* the pitcher's plate (static compliance) and not being over particular about dynamic compliance are strongly recommended. Currently dynamic compliance interpretation and enforcement differs widely between nations and makes for inconsistencies at international events. I'm sure that a pitcher stopping his arm motion and giving away his grip for a change-up will not unduly concern managers and players. The non-awarding of a free base for each illegal pitch is also more in keeping with the eternal struggle within our game to earn a run to win.

Administrators have the obligation to administer the game for their "clients", those who play and watch the game. If a proven field rule works for the "clients" surely it must be in the administrators best interests also. SNZ over the years has trialed the use of a broader pitching plate and the front foot line. These trails did not go further as each was not widely accepted as a solution and neither were gender neutral.

Farm Tavern Invitational, Middletown Wisconsin, USA

29-Jul-06	Farm Tavern	Pueblo Bandits	Base
	Pueblo Bandits	Bloomington Stix	Plate
	Pueblo Bandits	Planggers Furniture	Plate
	Farm Tavern	Bloomington Stix	Plate
	Farm Tavern	Planggers Furniture	Base
30-Jul-06	Circle Tap	Planggers Furniture	Base
	Circle Tap	County Materials	Plate
Semi Final	County Materials	Farm Tavern	Base

Warm-up games Ontario, Canada

7-Aug-06	Elora Wellington Brewers	Denmark Dynamite	Base
	Elora Wellington Brewers	Denmark Dynamite	Plate
9-Aug-06	Hallman Twins	Czech Republic	Plate
	Hallman Twins	Czech Republic	Base

Schnieders 2006 ISC World Fastball Tournament, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

11-Aug-06	Pueblo Bandits 3	Jarvis Merchants 2	1 <sup>st</sup> base
12-Aug-06	Ashland MVD 2	Vancouver Grey Sox 3	Plate
	County Materials 5	Czech Republic 1	Plate
13-Aug-06	Aspen Interiors 5	Townline 3	3 <sup>rd</sup> base
	Orillia Riversharks 6	Minndak Millars 0	3 <sup>rd</sup> base
14-Aug-06	Denmark Dynamite 2	Planggers Furniture 0	1 <sup>st</sup> base
	Interkip Eagles 4	Houston Aces 1	1 <sup>st</sup> base
	Kegel Black Knights 6	Vandalia Freight 0	1 <sup>st</sup> base
	Houston Aces 1	Ohswéken Red Men 3	Plate
15-Aug-06	Interkip Eagles 4	Quad City Sox 3	1 <sup>st</sup> base
	Jarvis Merchants	Bahamas	Plate
	Denmark Dynamite 0	Bloomington Stix 5	Plate
	Dolan& Murphy 1	Kegel Black Knights 9	1 <sup>st</sup> base
16-Aug-06	Pueblo Bandits	Townline	3 <sup>rd</sup> base
	Minndak Millars 2	Heflin Gremlins 16	3 <sup>rd</sup> base
17-Aug-06	Hallman Twins 2	Jarvis Merchants 0	Plate
	Hallman Twins 2	Vancouver Grey Sox 1	3 <sup>rd</sup> base
	Orillia Riversharks 3	Farm Tavern 1	1 <sup>st</sup> base
18-Aug-06	Heflin Gremlins 3	Aspen Interiors 6	3 <sup>rd</sup> base
19-Aug-06			
Grand Final	Patsy's NY 1	County Materials 7	Left field