

Handling Situations and Ejections

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By Greg Howard

Greg Howard is a veteran umpire who has worked all levels of baseball up to small colleges. He was a Gerry Davis Golden Mask winner at the Harry Wendelstedt Umpire School in 2002. He has trained beginning and intermediate umpires for more than a decade. He also has worked at youth regional playoffs and "World Series" going back to 1977.

Many times has the question been asked of me, "How do I move up as an umpire?" Well, I'm still very much in the process of "moving up" and consider myself to be very much in development. So, I can only impart what I have learned to reach my current level. Hopefully, my hard-earned lessons will be helpful to developing umpires. Mistakes are our best teacher, and I've made at least my fair share.

Many umpires, far more experienced and wiser than I have said things to the effect of, "Anyone can call a game; it's how you manage the game that will set you apart." Nothing could be more true. This article could never cover all situations and ejection causes; that could fill a set of encyclopedias. Hopefully, however, you will find some general guidelines and methods to control unwanted behavior on the field.

Setting the Tone

From the moment you enter the field, you (and your partner) set the tone of how you will be perceived and how players and coaches will react to you. If you are slovenly in your appearance and grooming, you show that you do not take the game seriously, and neither will you be taken seriously. Let's face it, if your uniform is rumpled, dirty, and looks like you threw it in the trunk of the car the last game and put it on again for this one, what possible images does that convey? Nothing good, to be sure.

Also, remember that not all communications between people are verbal. From the moment the participants catch sight of you, they will be picking up conscious and unconscious cues from your body language and manner. You are being probed for any signs of weakness and indecision, or possibly worse, any sign of arrogance and officiousness. Do you adopt a "neutral" body posture and convey confidence in yourself? Or, do you saunter casually around? Are you joking and laughing with players and coaches before the game? If you are attempting to ingratiate yourself with the participants before the game, you will often find yourself achieving the exact opposite effect of what you had hoped. Handle all *necessary* pregame communications in a courteous, confident, and efficient manner.

Once the Game Begins

From the moment you take your position on the field, be ever vigilant about your body language, positioning, and demeanor. Hands in pockets, not coming to a proper set position, poor positioning (plate and bases), sloppy and casual mechanics, all will work again to convey the image that you are not to be taken seriously.

Instead, hustle from one position to another, whether you are on bases or plate. Get into a proper set position before each pitch or play. Make your mechanics and your use of voice clear and confident. Do everything you can to actually "work" the game. Remember, the players might or might not be giving their all, but there is absolutely no room on the field for an umpire who is not. We are expected to be perfect and only get better.

Warnings

Try to never eject someone from a game without a warning. There are some obvious exceptions, of course. If you have malicious contact or acts against opposing players of any kind, there is no room for warning. This is a safety issue and can lead to serious problems later in the game if not addressed immediately and firmly.

Some "old school umpires" will say that it is best to let the players take care of it themselves. I strongly disagree. What happens when the retaliation against a player takes place at his next at-bat? Depending on the level of pitching, you could have a career- or life-ending injury. Another example would be a malicious slide to retaliate for an earlier malicious slide. Very serious injuries can and do result in these situations. Make a firm and decisive ejection against the first player to initiate malicious contacts or acts, and you

should put an end to it for the rest of the game.

(If you are ejecting a player for malicious acts, depending on your level of baseball, you might want to consider quietly going to the coach and asking him to remove the player from the game before you have to. Usually, faced with this option, the coach can comply, and you don't have to show the kid up. Let the other coach quietly know what you have done, and let him know you expect there to be no retaliation. This is a clear, implied warning that you will not tolerate this activity.)

What exactly constitutes a warning? That varies from umpire to umpire and from situation to situation. A simple, "knock it off," can be a warning. Sometimes, your warning might be more formal, along the lines of, "Coach, this is your warning for arguing balls and strikes." Another way of giving a warning is to simply say, "Coach, I think we've been over this enough. Let's play ball."

If the warning is a prescribed warning under the rules, such as arguing balls and strikes or failing to keep helmets on, step away from the action, and write the warning down. Don't be overly dramatic about it. "Coach, that is your warning for arguing balls and strikes," turn the lineup card over and record the warning. Give yourself specific information on your card about the batter, count, and inning in case you need it for a formal report if an ejection later ensues.

Once you have given a warning, stick to it. Warning after warning, after warning, will only make you look weak. Trust me on this one. My first game in a JuCo conference in Alabama went this way. I let myself get run over, time and time again. I didn't want to look like a "red-ass" with an ejection in my first game. This was a colossal mistake. The only thing I accomplished was make myself look weak and incapable of managing the coach.

Head Coach Only

Never let yourself get sucked into a discussion with anyone other than the head coach. If an assistant coach or player wants to argue, let them know right away that you will be glad to communicate with the head coach only. (Warning.) A smart head coach will know this and will come out and take up the cause for his team.

Give the head coach a moment to get out to talk to you and take his personnel away. Your partner should immediately move in to make sure that the conversation is "one-on-one" with the calling umpire and the head coach. If the player or assistant coach refuses to leave the conversation and you or your partner has asked them to leave (Warning), this is the time for an ejection. Cover this situation in your pre-game conference with your partner, and make it clear that your roles are to keep the conversation limited to two people. Your partner should stick around, back from the conversation but within earshot, in case they are needed as a witness to what ensued.

If your partner is in a discussion, do not enter the discussion at all, unless asked to by your partner. This should almost never happen. There's an old adage about "throwing your partner under the bus." Don't be this most despicable of umpires. If your partner kicked the call, let him deal with the coach. Don't chime in and say, "I had him safe," if your partner called an out. There is plenty of stuff for you to be watching on the field to not have to make your partner's calls for him. Only if your partner asks for help do you give any information, and this should always be done "one-on-one" with your partner, with no one else listening.

Here Comes the Coach

You have just called a "whacker" of a play and made a strong, confident call. Nevertheless, here comes the coach out of the dugout to question you or possibly to just vent. Your demeanor and what you say will either lead to an ejection or a situation will be defused in a professional manner.

If he is walking toward you, take a step or two towards him when he gets about 10 to 15 feet away. Do this unconfessionally, but in such a way as to show him you are going to not back down. However, be very careful to be completely stopped before he reaches you. Under no circumstances is it justified for an umpire to initiate or return contact. Just stand your ground, and do not back peddle.

If the coach is charging at you like a mad bull, do not move toward him at all. You may misjudge his speed and actually step into him. Simply hold your hand out in front of you like a traffic cop, and say, "Coach, slow down. Don't charge out here." (Warning.) He should get the message. Whatever ensues, get your hand down so that you do not touch the coach.

Remain calm at all times and stand absolutely still. Try to put your hands and arms into a neutral posture,

neither defiant or authoritative (hands on hips) nor submissive (hands behind your back). Some umpires say to fold your arms across your chest and keep them there. I can't argue with what works for others. I prefer to keep my hands down at my sides. Whatever you do, try to avoid hand gestures. And absolutely never, wave your finger at or point directly at the coach.

The coach, however, is waving, pointing, and yelling. Never, ever, yell back. In a low, calm voice, ask the coach to calm down, and just talk to you. "Coach, if you calm down a moment, I'll tell you what I had on that play." If necessary, repeat yourself. People tend to match the tone of the person with whom they are in a conversation. If you keep your voice low and calm, you should be able to calm most people down, even if they initiate the conversation in a very loud manner.

Give the coach a little bit of rope. That play could have resulted in a serious turnaround for his team. He might be more angry at his player than you, and he just wants to vent a bit. He knows you are not going to change your call without a very good reason. (His argument *is not* a good reason.) When you can get a word in edgewise, you can give him an explanation if he really wants one. If he obviously doesn't want an explanation and you've given him a few seconds to say what he has to say, simply tell him, "Coach, I heard your point. Now, let's play ball." (Warning.) At that point, turn and walk away. If he follows you, he just ejected himself.

Explaining Your Call

Never use rule numbers to cite your authority on a play. Give a direct, courteous, rulebook explanation of the play, such as, "Coach, I had the ball foul when it bounded past the bag in foul territory." Another example would be, "Coach, I had a balk when the pitcher, in my judgment, failed to step directly toward the base before his throw." "Coach, I had him safe when the fielder failed to have secure possession of the ball, touching the bag before the runner got there."

You hopefully will notice several things about these explanations. First, the use of the words "I had" is very important. This tells the coach what you saw on the play and made an interpretation and judgment of what you just saw. Second, you should notice that the words used are good paraphrases of the appropriate rules. Don't quote the rules verbatim. Just cover the pertinent points of the rules. Third, there is a clear statement of how the rules apply to the play in question. And finally, there is sometimes a need for the use of "in my judgment." Although this is implied in all examples above, it sometimes doesn't hurt to throw in this subtle reminder to the coach that he is questioning a judgment call.

When you use the words, "in my judgment," you will occasionally have a retort to the effect of, "Well, your judgment sucks." At this point, he just ejected himself. Be prepared for this, and try to limit the use of "in my judgment" to only those situations that really need it, thus, avoiding stupid ejections.

Showing an Umpire Up

If the coach insists on pointing and waving, he might be considered to be "showing you up." One example would be that he is pointing to a spot on the field from which he thinks you should have made the call. Immediately, tell the coach in a calm voice, "Coach, don't show me up out here." (Warning.) If he has been around baseball for more than a couple of years, he knows what you mean. This also is a clear and unmistakable warning. If he does not get the message, let him know clearly, "Coach, if you continue to show me up, I'm going to ask you to leave." (Second Warning.) If he continues, he's done. Don't let a coach come out and show you up. But always get in a warning or two before ejecting for this cause. Now, he's being ejected for *failure to heed your warning(s), not just for showing you up.*

Other examples of showing an umpire up would include gestures to indicate where a coach thought the pitch was. Don't permit this. This is showing an umpire up, and it constitutes arguing balls and strikes. Give a quick and direct warning on both counts to let the coach know you will not allow either.

"You"

When a coach in a discussion about a call or at any other time uses the word "you," directed at you as an umpire, perk up your ears and listen carefully. Hopefully, the next words out of his mouth will be, "...are the finest umpire I've ever seen." Unfortunately, this does not occur in real life. The next words are directed at you personally, and will possibly result in an ejection.

Never tolerate a personal, verbal attack. "You are a crappy umpire," means the person saying it is gone. That's it, no two ways about it.

Never tolerate a question of your integrity. "You are giving them the game." If that is said, I will immediately clear the air with a quick response along these lines, "Coach, are you accusing me of cheating?" (Warning.) If he doesn't get it and continues, dump him.

Judgment and Experience

Don't be a quick trigger on all comments by coaches. For example, if a coach says, "That's terrible," I will normally let that slide, a little. If he continues, tell him you've heard enough (Warning), turn and walk away. If he persists, then send him to the locker room or parking lot. If you are too quick to eject on this comment, you could find yourself trying to explain how you read the coach's mind about what was "terrible." You should be ejecting for *continuing to argue after a warning, not for saying, "that's terrible."*

Not all comments are ejectable offenses, and not every technical infraction of a rule or customary treatment of umpires requires an ejection. Use your judgment and experience to determine whether or not the situation warrants a good explanation of what is not allowed or if an ejection should follow right away. Sometimes, you might be dealing with a coach who simply does not know any better. If it is a college coach, he most certainly should know what is not allowed, but not always. As you move down in the ranks of baseball, you find more inexperienced coaches. Use your judgment and experience to make the right decision on how to handle them. If you make a wrong decision, chalk it up to experience, and learn from it.

If you don't have a lot of experience, just get out there and work as many games as you can. Your judgment and experience will increase, giving you more control of situations. Talk to other good umpires who genuinely care about this avocation. Learn from them. A wise umpire learns from the experience and mistakes of other umpires so they do not have to learn it all "the hard way." Much of my own experience is from the school of hard knocks, but even more of it has been gleaned from listening to umpires that I would wish to become more like.

Walking Away

Many times in this article, the words "walk away" have been used. It means simply what it says; walk away from the discussion or situation. Do not insist on having the last word. Leave that to the coach. They'll normally insist on having it anyway. If you continue to respond to each retort, you probably will only escalate a situation that might have been dying down. If the coach walks away, saying, "I still think that's terrible," and keeps going, let him go! Be willing to let him have the last word. Who cares? Just tell yourself that you have agreed to disagree, and let it go at that.

If you have had to make an ejection, that is *your* last word on the subject. Immediately, turn, walk away, and let your partner take over. Your partner should know exactly what to do if you covered this as you should in your pre-game conference. Your partner can take responsibility for seeing to it that the ejected party leaves the field. You don't need to do anything else but get yourself calmed down and back in the game. Don't dwell on the situation; just bear down and give your very best for the rest of the game.

Never "carry it over." This is a tough one. We are all human and have feelings. However, we are umpires, and we are expected to be above all this. If you have to see the coach again for another game, don't let the prior situation creep into your mind. What's done is done. Let it go.

Reporting

Finally, just a few thoughts on reporting ejections are in order. Learn before you have a problem what form of reporting, if any, you must do in the case of an ejection. Familiarize yourself with the form or method in case you need it. Sitting down for the first time with an ejection form prescribed by your association and conference and realizing you don't have all the information for all the blanks on the form is a lousy time to try to recreate the missing data. Record all the information you are going to need for your report at the time of the ejection.

Be objective in your report. State only the facts, and leave your personal feelings out of it. If you have to quote foul language in your report, use the complete quote and don't edit by saying, "The coach used the 'F' word." Your assignors or supervisors are grown ups and have heard it all before. Only if you give them complete information can they back you up.

Be honest in your report. If you did or said anything that could have escalated the problem, you'd better tell it now. The other side is going to be told sometime, count on it. Don't forget that video cameras are everywhere, and you can bet Johnny's daddy who was there to tape his son's hitting caught the incident with the umpire on tape. If you bumped or "chicken-pecked" the coach, it's all going to be there, in living color. If the play was close, make sure you point that out, also.

Be complete in your reporting. Make sure all blanks are filled in, so that your assignor or supervisor has all the facts they need.

Never collude with your partner to cover your tracks. This falls under the category of "throwing your partner under the bus." If you screwed the pooch, be an adult about it. Don't take your partner down with you by asking him to lie to save your skin. Most mistakes can be used as training material and cause for further work with you by your supervisor. I have found them willing to help me learn from mistakes instead of taking me out and shooting me.

Finally...

Think back on the situation a few times throughout your career. Be honest with yourself. Did you do your very best, or was there something else you might have done to keep everything and everyone under control. If you can honestly say you did your best, accept that. If the experience pointed out a hole in your knowledge about any point, seek advice and improve yourself. Never stop trying to improve or get better at handling situations. You'll always be a better umpire for it.