

CONFERENCE COORDINATOR – THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE

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One of the toughest parts of being a Coordinator after having been an umpire for 30 years is when you see another umpire struggling or doing something you cannot defend. While I will speak only for myself, I would surmise that my fellow Coordinators around the country share my concern in this area.

We are hired by the conferences—we work for the conferences. While I/we lobby on behalf of our umpires and represent our umpires in every way possible, we are not employed by our umpires—we work for the various conferences and those conferences represent their member institutions.

The expectation from my conference bosses is that I be direct and honest when dealing with their coaches and athletic administrators. When a rule is misinterpreted . . . when a judgement call is missed . . . etc., I am expected to respond with an honest answer and I wouldn't want it any other way.

In today's fast-paced college game, particularly at the D-I level, every day I receive video plays asking for my opinion and I answer directly and honestly every time. I always point out correct umpire positioning, sometimes I share my thoughts on the intent of a rule (as opposed to the letter of the rule) and, when a judgement call is missed, I say so. When the umpire is correct, I say so. When something is too close to determine from video, I say so.

Speaking of video . . . the scrutiny umpires are now held too can be overwhelming. You get one look, from one angle, at full speed, one time, to make your call. You are then judged in slow motion from numerous angles by coaches, players, administrators, sportscasters, media, etc. etc. etc. I'm not oblivious to the expectation that every umpire is expected "To start our perfect and get better as the game goes on." I also know how far that is from reality.

As I said, an expectation of my Coordinator position is that I review video and listen to complaints and concerns and then respond with an honest answer. Occasionally, I'm challenged with a comment or a question as to what I'm going to do about an umpire who made a game-deciding mistake.

We hear a lot about accountability in officiating . . . I'm sure you've heard of college football officials who have been removed from an assignment or basketball officials who lost a game or two as the result of poor performance. With increased visibility comes increased scrutiny and demands for accountability. Unfortunately, there are many in college sports who believe that accountability should translate into punishment.

In baseball, for example, the more focus there is on appropriate player and coach behavior, the more pressure there is on umpires to be better than the game. Think about this hypothetical situation . . . an umpire misses a game-ending call that costs a team a win, perhaps a championship, perhaps a post-season bid, etc. After the incorrect call, the umpire is berated by a player and the umpire correctly issues a post-game ejection. The player is suspended for two games and his team is now without their leading hitter. The coach and/or AD contacts the conference office with the video showing the umpire clearly kicked the call. AD asks the conference office and Coordinator that since his player is sitting two games for being upset about the missed call, is the umpire who missed the call sitting out any games for starting the problem in the first place? I will allow each of you reading this to insert your response/answer to this hypothetical question.

Hmmmm . . .

So, since we are human, and humans make mistakes, what can we do? Preparation, hustle, focus, intensity . . . we each need to do everything possible to minimize those situations where we make mistakes. Don't assume anything. Focus on each and every play from start to finish. You must give total effort on every game, every play, every pitch, etc.

Every pitch . . . perhaps that would be the best place for each of us to start since that is the concern I've been hearing most consistently this season, particularly from the high visibility conferences and teams. The number one complaint is about pitches clearly off the plate being called strikes.

I'm sorry to report I've watched several umpires call pitches strikes that were on the opposite batter's box line—seems particularly wide for left handed batters. I'm proud to say that I've seen many umpires calling the corners without expanding the zone to the point of concern. Thank you to those of you who understand that . . . just because on a 1-2 count with the catcher set up 6-8 inches outside and the pitcher sticking the glove and it looking good to everybody in the park . . . it is still 6-8 inches outside and it is a ball. Video, pitch tracker data, and the naked eye watching games on TV are making some of you look great and some of you look really bad.

Like I said, let's start with intense focus as plate umpires and, if we can't be better than the game, let's at least be as good as the game.