



ILLINOIS STATE BAR ASSOCIATION

# BENCH & BAR

*The newsletter of the Illinois State Bar Association's Bench & Bar Section*

## Black and blue

*By Doug Glanville*

When I first started playing professional baseball, I was told by my head coach in single-A, Bill Hayes, that I was being too formal in how I addressed the officials of the game. I called him (and others) "Coach," and on the field I referred to all umpires as "Blue."

No one seemed to like those names, so eventually I accepted that I would have to use their first names. I treaded lightly because I knew my southern-raised mom would cringe at the idea. But with my 1992 season in Winston-Salem, I began my journey in dropping "Mr." and "Mrs." from my conversation — ironically, in my mom's home state of North Carolina.

The formality came from a place of respect. Umpires were the judges on the field; their job was to uphold the law. Sure, it was more like "uphold the rules," but during a game, in the midst of the exploding sliders, 34-inch bats and high-octane fastballs, it was law to me. Every pitch was in the hands of these arbiters, so I hardly saw it as any different from addressing a police officer, or an elder in church.

Unfortunately, I learned very quickly that umpires and cafeteria food share a common problem. No matter how good they are, we will always find something to complain about.

It must be tough to be measured constantly against perfection. If you get every call right, you are just part of the landscape, but if you miss a call, you have littered on the grounds of that beautiful sierra with the sunset. There is no in-between. It is either/or in its rawest form. You are doing what you are supposed to be doing, or you are flat-out wrong and ruining everyone's dream.

My one attempt at umpiring happened

when I was in high school. I somehow got roped into officiating a game and, thankfully, I had the bases, not balls and strikes. Still, I had no idea where to stand. My instincts kept telling me that I should be in a good place to catch the ball, not where I would be invisible. I worried about blocking the second baseman's view, and getting hit by a line drive the pitcher had stabbed at, never mind making the right call on a close play.

At one point, a ground ball was hit to short, culminating in a "bang-bang," whisker-close play at first, where the runner's foot hit the base just as the first baseman caught the ball. I was still a solid 90 feet away, acting more like a spectator than anything else. I called the runner out only to learn between innings from the first base coach that the first baseman didn't have his foot on the bag. There was no way I could tell because I didn't know how to get into the right position to make the call. Then again, it takes a lot of training to move around like a ninja, always be in position and then go back to stealth.

By the time I became a major league player, I knew (at least by name) a few umpires from my minor league days. Andy Fletcher, C.B. Bucknor and Bruce Dreckman had matured and learned their craft right alongside us in the farm levels. Long travel, bad motels, getting yelled at by upset booster club members. They paid their dues.

Despite my warm conversations with a few umpires in the Carolina League, I knew hardly any of the umpires who oversaw major league games once I made it up. My first week in the big leagues, I was greeted by the famously edgy Joe West. I got to second base and Joe came up to me and asked, "Who the heck are you?" I told him, "I don't know, but I guess we will find out." No one knew the

rule book better than Joe, so even when he was checking you with that poker face, you understood that he just loved messing with you.

But umpires don't have a lot of latitude to be warm and fuzzy, anyway. They have to maintain objectivity; they can't really shake your hand on the field or make any connection that appears partial. So, for years, you learn their names, you chit-chat a little on your way to center field, or maybe you see them in the hotel lobby, but it is hard to get close. I was able to brush past that line in the sand for a moment with Jim Wolf, whose brother Randy was my teammate in Philadelphia. I sat with Jim once in the hotel in San Juan, P.R., briefly, on a day off. It was the longest conversation I would ever have with an umpire. And I almost felt like I was cheating.

I imagine that makes for a lonely road at times. They're part of a game they love, but they can't share that sentiment with the players. Someone like Jerry Crawford, who has seen generations of great players, must find himself impressed by what Albert Pujols just did, or by the way Tom Glavine hit yet another outside corner—but he certainly can't cheer. And while they might seem like a mystery, it's not reciprocal: they know you. One day during spring training with the Rangers in Arizona in 2003, I went to a Phoenix Suns game. I was sitting courtside when a ball bounced into my lap. The referee came over, got the ball from me and then paused for 10 seconds to say hello and tell me how much he enjoyed watching me play. It turned out he was Jerry Crawford's brother, Joe. How did he even recognize me? But Jerry apparently shared with his brother stories he couldn't

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share with others—stories that showed a connection he may have made with a player or two.

I can claim that I never got ejected from a major league game in my career. The most I ever argued a call was on a close play at first base during a game in Florida against the Marlins, when I was with the Phillies. Brian Gorman was umpiring, and I was frustrated—with my playing time, with the team's poor record and with my batting average. So "bang-bang" plays needed to go my way. Gorman called me out, I argued, and to this day I feel bad about it, especially after I looked at the replay later on and realized he was right. Sorry, Brian.

Umpires are measured against a standard only a machine could approach for accuracy. Super slo-mo replays might show what happened on a given play, but in real time, it is a roadrunner blur. I wish I'd had the luxury of slowing a few pitchers' fastballs to super slo-mo; I would have waltzed into the Hall of Fame.

Sometimes you hear talk about how umpires are getting more confrontational, but I am amazed at how calm they stay over the course of a season. For the most part, they keep on an even keel, even when coaches are in their face and players are yapping at them and fans are booing them out of the stadium. I'm surprised they don't snap more often, because they take a beating all year

long. The Braves manager Bobby Cox ranks first in ejections year in and year out, as he tries to win a battle of attrition with the home plate umpire every single night. Hearing him all game long would drive anyone to the brink.

There was an incident recently when Paul Schrieber ushered the Tigers' Magglio Ordoñez along by nudging him in the back towards the dugout after a called third strike. Since there is sort of a "no-contact" rule, Detroit manager Jim Leyland came out heated and in Paul's face.

I knew Paul over many years and he was always pleasant, always cool. He just wanted Magglio to get off the field. (Balls and strikes get debated even though the rule book says you can't. Players and coaches do it mostly to try to get an edge for that next borderline call.) Schrieber conceded his mistake and apologized for putting his hand on Ordoñez; Leyland and Ordoñez conceded that Schrieber meant no malice; and everyone moved on.

Once, I took the time before a game in Philadelphia to tell the home plate umpire from the night before, Greg Gibson, that he had called the best game I'd ever seen. He didn't miss a pitch; no one argued anything the entire night. It was like he bowled a 300 and no one had a clue, it wasn't on "Sports Center," it just fell into that bucket of how it is supposed to be every night. The exchange

clearly was important to Greg—he thanked me, with a surprised look on his face. I just thought, everyone always voices their displeasure, what's wrong with voicing a compliment?

So next time you go to a game, take a few innings and watch the men in black move on the field. On a fly ball deep into the outfield, you will see the choreography of base umpires moving into position. It is like some sort of judges ballet. One is sprinting towards the play to see whether the catch was good, one is moving towards third base to anticipate the runner tagging up; masks are off, and the catcher's is being moved out of the way by the home plate umpire. I certainly wouldn't want to run in their special protective shoes. Do they get a Nike contract?

These guys are the best in the world, hands down, and like us all, they make mistakes—which, unfortunately, is the only time they ever get noticed. But I saw them every single day and there is no other group of professionals in the world I would want to uphold the rules. Even if, once in a while, it tastes like cafeteria food going down.

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*Doug Glanville is a former major league baseball player who played for the Chicago Cubs and several other teams. This article was first published on June 6, 2009, on the Op-Ed page of the New York Times. It is reprinted here with permission of the author. ■*

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