

How to manage a game through people skills and correct rules articulation

By Scott Kennedy

College umpires that want to make it to the 'next level' and advance to and through the ranks of the NAIA or NCAA must have what is often referred to as the "It Factor." Every collegiate umpire can call "outs," "safes," "ball" & "strikes." If we couldn't, we wouldn't be here. The difference being assigned the top games and series, regardless of your level, depends on how well you MANAGE your game when you're the plate umpire OR, if you're the designated Crew Chief and a situation on/off the field needs your expertise. You're in control and all eyes are on you no matter what level you're umpiring. By having great game management skills using your professionalism, personality and directives from the NCAA & NAIA, how you articulate knotty rule problems or give rulebook terminology in defusing situations, is VITAL to your success. This HAS to happen and it STARTS before the very first pitch of the game.

Your preparation and communication starts when schedules come out & again, no later than 3-4 days before the first game of the series or mid-week game. Contact Head Coach or designated Administrator to confirm game location, times, hotel and travel arrangements, and preferred communication (email, text or call). Contact your crew mates to confirm weekend travel and hotel assignments, as well as time and location to meet prior to the first game of the series. Stay in touch with them as things change (weather, game site, start times) and confirm before leaving that all is as communicated. If a problem arises, COMMUNICATION is the key.

You know your schedule and you know your crew. You may even be the Crew Chief. Regardless, if you're unfamiliar with the first names of the coaching staffs, look them up BEFORE your game.

When you're having your pregame meeting in the locker room, make sure your crew knows the Head Coach by first name. Also, let them know if you've had a prior relationship with this person from another conference, team or perhaps through professional baseball, but stay away from "war stories" and focus on providing just the needed information to help your Crew better understand the coaching staff and be prepared to handle situations as they arise.

Have a very thorough pre-game meeting addressing new rules, points of emphasis, 2, 3 or 4-Man mechanics, and any unique ground rules you may know about from working at the ballpark in the past or what's been posted in the locker room. Ensure you engage your Crew and ask them to participate, ask questions, provide good information, as necessary.

Take charge and lead by example to the less experienced crew members. Unannounced, you're leading by example. The routine you're using has afforded the conference to put you in charge of the game or series. Your leadership is going to be an element that teaches our future

Crew Chiefs and postseason umpires. Friends we are, baseball is business. Managing your game requires your crew to know the "Do's & Don'ts" out on the field when we go umpire the game.

Get out to the field on time. Keep your crew focused on the time it takes to be walking about a minute or two beforehand. We do NOT want to be late to the plate meeting due to our lack of attention.

Be the first person that initiates the introduction at the plate meeting and call the coach by his first name. Most likely, he appreciates this and it tells him that you've taken the time to break the ice instead of awkward silence. As the same in the business world, the first impression you make will be the first thought this person will remember you by in this professional relationship. Lineup card exchanges, ground rules, acknowledging and articulating the new rule changes; perhaps, weather situations, curfew or any other event (i.e. "God Bless America" in the 7th inning) etc Now, you've set the tone. You've done everything you're supposed to do in order to start the game off on the right foot. This is all a HUGE part in how you're going to run the game. You have shown you have done your homework, you are prepared, you are taking this seriously, and you are going about your business in a professional manner.

Replay, injuries, regular conferences, substitutions & even administrating/documenting the new 6 conference trips this season will be a great opportunity for umpires to take control of the game and could require more dialogue between umpires and coaches.

Know the difference when to communicate to clarify something that's obviously out of the ordinary and when to move on about your business. We are not advocating for umpires to talk just for the sake of talking or to talk and promote we're engaging in unnecessary dialogue because we want to be perceived as the "good guy" that will talk to anyone.

The plate umpire is in control. It's their game to run. Know your situations out on the field or potentially what's happening between both dugouts. Solicit help from your crew between innings IF it's a time to make your crew aware of a situation that could be forthcoming, but be careful not to make a habit of bringing everyone together or talking in between innings too much or unnecessarily. It sends the message you are bored, not focused, and, if you don't time your visits properly, appears you are discussing a controversial call and you could bring on some comments/jeers from the dugout, thereby inviting trouble. Do not, however, leave your crew blindsided or try to tackle everything by yourself. You're a crew. Utilize your Crew Chief. His expertise is why he's there. We are NOT advocating for crews to get together just to pass the time.

Hustle. Lead by example. Umpires who know how to manage a game practice great habits by running on every play. There is NO play to take off. Even on the routine grounder to the 2nd

baseman as the plate umpire, you get it in gear and run down to the 45ft line. Who's in charge? You are! Your body actions, demeanor & athleticism will tell the rest of the story to the coaches, teams, coordinators and most important, evaluators. This is college baseball. If you're too tired or you're injured, you need to be replaced. The coordinators and Crew Chiefs cannot afford to have this discussion.

As plate umpires, start your innings on time. Do not be late. Keep enough baseballs in your ball bag(s) where you do not run out. This can't happen. If you're not experienced, wear two ball bags instead of one. There's nothing more frustrating to teams and coaches when their pitcher is on a roll and we stop the game to have 6 baseballs brought out to us. You've killed the flow and you've smashed the momentum. Stay on top of this. If there's a problem with getting someone's attention to getting baseballs, address it. Say something when the inning is over and be direct in getting the problem solved. Do your job in between innings. This is no time to fall asleep and be socializing as it takes your focus away. Be aware of what's happening in the dugouts and stay alert to your timekeeper in event you need to nudge the guys along. Use a loud voice and let everyone know we're about to start back up. It's perfectly fine to use hand gestures to show how many warm up pitches are left and make that announcement. Motion for the offensive team to "Be Ready, Here we go!" Be out around the home plate area so everyone can see you and everyone hears you. If you don't, you seem passive. This isn't an authoritative presence of someone that's in charge. You're not demonstrative. You're assertive in a forceful tone of encouragement. You are doing your job in "managing" this game.

Brush off the plate without killing the ball or having the batter move out of the box because you're tardy getting to it in time. Keep the plate clean but keep the game moving.

Lineup cards and substitutions are an essential part in staying organized and focused. Write legibly and take your time to stay on track. Do not write abbreviations on the folded part and think, "I'll get it after this inning," and the inning goes another: 45 minutes with 3 other changes. You will be backpedaling and confused in the 9th inning when there's a question. If you know you're having a substitution, be proactive and get it confirmed before waiting on everyone to tell you; before you get all the way back behind the plate. Let the other dugout know as well when you're motioning to the press box. Call the coaches, again, by first name and as a courtesy, give them a chance to get the change.

It's your game to manage; it's your time to show both dugouts and your evaluators you're in control of this. Be vocal, be loud and get people's attention in a manner that's not obnoxious, overbearing or rude. You can be loud without being annoying. There are a lot of things going on in each dugout with 25+ players and staff. Use your voice to communicate and relay information. You're not yelling at anyone, it's OK to be loud and assertive.

On the other side of the spectrum to that point, be loud when something happens on the field. Teams and coaches watch the play first and then, they look at you. That's the time you may need to yell and also, use the proper mechanics you've been trained to use, in some cases, you may have to repeat yourself in yelling and doing your mechanics over and over. That's fine and that's what you NEED to do to separate yourself from being average to being better. "SAFE, SAFE, SAFE, HE'S OFF THE BAG! HE'S OFF THE BAG!" as you demonstrate the safe mechanic in the same direction the infielder came off the bag. Even behind the plate, for instance a hit by pitch in the shoulder (not adjudged to be batter's interference on the pitched ball), I like to come out front immediately and get between the batter and the pitcher. As I'm doing this, I'm yelling and demonstrating by using my mechanics, "TIME! That hit him in the shoulders!" as I'm smacking my shoulder 2-3 times. Everyone is watching. That's your time to shine and take control of the situation. It's OK to point on swipe tags WHERE the player tagged the runner. "HE'S OUT, HE'S OUT, HE'S OUT! He got him on the helmet!" as I'm pointing with my left hand and tapping my head 2-3 times with my right. I finish the call by making the "out" mechanic.

When it comes to establishing that you're in control of the game from the first pitch or even if you're the base umpire, we've GOT to do a better job in handling situations and using rulebook terminology when coaches are coming out to question our call. As we know, the coach is more than likely coming out because this is a big play and a big call. They all are or we wouldn't be playing the game. However, we want to take a deep breath, stand our ground (let the coach come to you in the position you should be for the next pitch) and be prepared to instantly use phrases from the rulebook that articulate the justification of our call. We cannot stutter, improvise, swear, try to be humorous in defending a missed call or use sarcasm in defense we're 110% sure we got this call correct.

We have to know and enforce the rules even when unpopular or misunderstood. We have to know that with runners on base and an overthrow on the first play by an infielder is a two base award at the time of PITCH. If it's the 2nd attempted play by an infielder or a throw from the outfield, we have to give the proper rulebook terminology to the questioning coach, "It's a two base award at the time of the THROW. In my judgment, the runner from 1st was not yet to 2nd at the time the right fielder released the ball on the overthrow and the ball went out of play. Therefore, its 2 bases at the time of throw and your runner gets 3rd, he does not score." A coach can't argue that rule. You're using "Rulebook Terminology" and you're winning. When he goes back to the dugout and they're looking up the rule and see the video, they will then understand what you just told him, is what's in the rulebook.

Defusing situations that keep players and coaches in the game and talking them out of doing something from the ordinary is an art. You want to be assertive but you don't want to be arrogant and give them the ultimatum in the short five seconds they've come out to simply ask

a question. If you're the plate umpire, TAKE OFF YOUR MASK and have a conversation. Using rule book terminology bails you out of having to cover your mouth as well. We have nothing to hide but we do want to be conscientious of the situation. Try to calm the person down as we all know is easier said than done. However, talking too much and saying something that was misinterpreted could lead to trouble. Umpires can be their own worst enemy and have a coach spin around a comment or an untruth by talking too much. As we've all said, "You can't quote silence." However, to take it one step further, how we handle our verbal dialect in using, again, rulebook terminology enhances the coach's opinions.

When the game has ended and you are in the locker room with your crew, this is a great time to learn from each other with the intent on becoming better umpires. Discuss peculiar situations or rules, talk about how you might have done things better (we can always do things better), and be sure to be positive and compliment your crewmates on a job well done, citing particular situations that occurred so they know you were paying attention. Don't be patronizing or give false praise, but always lead with the positive and an appreciation for each other's hard work.

The umpires that can manage the game AND articulate rule interpretations without disrupting the flow will be the umpires that are labeled to have "IT" on bigger assignments and fulfill post season aspirations. Everything that you just did for this one game or this one weekend is influential to the rest of the crew that the NAIA or NCAA have entrusted you to teach and mentor our successful umpires.

SAFE TRAVELS & HEALTH!