

Think Like a Crew Chief... Even if You Are Not

by Adam Dowdy

Aside from positioning questions for various plays, "What is expected of a crew chief?" is a common question I hear at camps. The simple question requires a complex answer.

There are those who are called the crew chief because they happen to be working the plate in a 2-umpire system, designated by default. Let's focus on the other side of the coin: those who understand the black, white, and gray areas of all aspects of the game and how to properly run the game.

Contrary to the perspective of laymen, umpires at the higher levels of baseball clock multiple hours of planning and preparation prior to stepping foot on the field before the first game of every series, and even more so for crew chiefs. Effective communication is an all-important part of being a crew chief. Whether communicating with the Conference, with the coordinator, with the crew, or with the home team's point of contact, there is a lot of time spent communicating behind the scenes to ensure a smooth, seamless start to the series. Crew chiefs spend time aligning schedules to facilitate efficient transportation to/from airports, to/from hotels, and to/from the ballpark.

Something often overlooked until it's too late is identifying who is in charge of taking care of the field and repairing it during inclement weather. In the event of potential wet weather, the crew chief should always ask and know the following to make educated decisions:

- Who is the groundskeeper or the person in charge of the field?
- How much water can the field typically take-on before becoming unsafe?
- How many people are available to assist covering and/or repairing the field?
- If there is an infield tarp available, how long will it take to cover the field?

While communication with the home team's point of contact is essential in determining weather-related stoppages, the crew chief decides when to repair the field and when to halt play. With safety at the forefront of every decision made by the crew chief, the ultimate goal is to complete every game, if possible. Thinking through weather situations is more of an art than a science, as even the most prudent Weather Channel aficionado can be duped by delayed radar forecasts. Working with the groundskeeper, the institution, local weather professionals, and viewing real-time radar data makes all the difference between being viewed as an effective crew chief versus someone making a knee-jerk decision.

In the locker room and on the field, all the small things add up fast such as leading the pre-game mechanics meeting, conducting the plate meeting, starting on time, supporting your crew, working with television and replay personnel, and keeping the pace of play moving along as expected. Some of the more important aspects to aspire

to are not only knowing your individual responsibilities and ensuring you are rotating and moving per the mechanics guidelines, but also keeping your head on a swivel and watching closely to see that your crew is moving in unison, as well. Mentally, envision yourself working a 1-umpire system by trying to see everything happen on the field, but having the trust and faith that your fellow partners will handle their respective roles and responsibilities accordingly. Mistakes are part of the game and are expected; verbal communication may help guide some in the right direction and, if necessary, be prepared to fill the gap when able.

Many umpire errors are caused by player errors, yet we cannot state that as excuse. In handling non-routine situations, the crew chief must be an excellent listener, as most coaches just want to know their voices are heard. While there are times when it is necessary to eject, and even suspend, often times it is the crew chief with a calm demeanor that prevails in diffusing an irate coach. Having and showing mutual respect for everyone on the field is paramount to maximizing your crew chief potential. As you develop confidence in your role, being "fair yet firm" is the greatest compliment an umpire crew chief can receive.

When it comes to developing your crew members, the postgame conversations are of utmost importance. Honesty is the best policy when answering questions about positioning, judgment calls, and handling of situations. There are subtle ways of being honest where the crew chief does not have to belittle a fellow umpire or make more out of a situation than needs be; the best advice would be to ask the umpire open-ended questions such as:

- "What did you see?"
- "Why did you move that direction?"
- "How might you do it differently if you could do it over?"

Often these types of questions allow the umpire to mentally replay and walk through the situation again, step-by-step, often providing the necessary answers to his/her own questions.

As a brotherhood of umpires, not only do we need to support each other, but we need to help each other improve. As a crew chief, your crew is only as strong as its weakest link. Being an umpire is a difficult job and some are able to make it look easy, but that only comes through years of experience and watching others perform at a high level. I have often stated you can either spend your time wishing the job to be easier or embrace the opportunities to make yourself better. It's so much more fun to umpire when you have confidence and know exactly what your crew members are doing on the field, and vice versa. I challenge everyone to always strive to better your best, as the game deserves it, and think like a crew chief... even if you are not.