

## The Law of Perception by Adam Dowdy

Dating back to when I was a student at umpire school in 1995, a comment that continues to resonate with me is, "We need to be athletic umpires on an athletic field." I initially took this literally until I realized I didn't need to train to be an Olympic sprinter or power lifter, as the statement refers to the *perceptions* people have of us umpires. When asked by fellow crewmembers, "What do you think I need to do to [insert conference and post-season goal here]?" my stock answer is generally to strive for continuous improvement and to look the part by eliminating the checkmarks against you in the perception categories. Most perception categories for umpires refer to our hustle, appearance, professionalism, and consistency - not necessarily in that order. The great news is we have the ability to control many aspects of all 4.

### **Hustle**

Hustle directly refers to the physical effort to put you in the proper position to get the best perspective of every play. You don't have to be a teenager to hustle. In my years of teaching umpire school, I will attest some of the best examples of hustle came from the efforts of men in their 50's and 60's - well beyond their prime. It wasn't a matter of speed, but rather it was a matter of pride for these men to get set in the best position possible to see the play. We can all control our level of physical effort, which can positively impact the perception others have of our hustle.

### **Appearance**

For umpires, appearance refers to our physical stature and, more importantly, the magnitude we are perceived as being physically fit. This doesn't mean we need to strive to attain 6% body fat and have the latest gear and uniforms in order to get the call for post-season assignments, but rather it should be a way of life in which we properly take care of ourselves and look the part. There are countless reasons why we should take our health and nutrition seriously, with my top 3 being: 1. Maintaining a high quality of life; 2. Being around to have an impact on the lives of my future great-grandchildren; and 3. Being able to umpire at a high level for many years. I would encourage you to take your annual physicals seriously, as this is an opportunity to make adjustments based on the results of your blood work. Diets don't work, but constant focus on fueling our bodies with proper nutrition will ensure we are moving towards being healthy, fit and, when it comes to umpiring, hopefully reflecting in a positive perception of our appearance. Keep in mind your image not only impacts you, but the entire crew. There are ways we can control the perception of our appearance; if you're not sure what to do, just ask!

### **Professionalism**

Professionalism encompasses many aspects of our collective body of work: on and off-field demeanor, field presence, handling of non-routine situations, effective communication, as well as the confidence and competence to perform the many tasks required of our job as umpires. One of my mentors told me, "Being professional means you have the guts to make the unpopular call and handle the aftermath with calm confidence." We are expected to be levelheaded representatives of the conferences and the NCAA on the field, yet some coaches act as if every pitch will dictate the outcome of the 7th game of the World Series. Whether we agree or not, as long as we embrace the mindset that every pitch, every play, and every game is important, we will be making strides toward impacting others' perception of our professionalism.

## **Consistency**

Merriam-Webster defines consistent as "showing steady conformity..." For our practical purposes, being consistent refers to how exact we are from one pitch to the next, from the first to the last. When it comes to plate umpires, there are 3 separators of good versus great: 1. Setting the tone early, which entails being mentally prepared well in advance of the first pitch of the game and knowing the next pitch could be that borderline difference maker that dictates whether your job is easier or more difficult for the rest of the game, depending on how you call it; 2. Working hard to get the best view possible on every pitch. Even when both the batter and catcher crowd our view, it is still our job to render a decision; and 3. Attempting to minimize the number of pitches we call incorrectly. We are all human, so the common denominator across these 3 is continued focus. When you break a game down, outside of the obvious "balls" and "strikes," most plate umpires have fewer than 40 pitches that require a decision. Based on the perceptions, the fewer we miss, the better we are. We may have 3 different plate stances for left-handed pitchers throwing to left-handed batters, but they are all for naught if our calls are incorrect. Some would say its due to a lack of judgment, but I believe we all can be strong behind the plate, so I would argue it is more likely attributed to a lack of focus. Watch your crew chief on the first game of a series and take mental note of how he is calling the pitch just below the knee, at the top of the belt, and on the corners. If he is doing his job well, he is setting the tone for his crew to follow his lead for the series, which is a deeper dive into consistency as a crew. If any part of your post-game feedback revolves around a lack of consistency, you can improve this perception by reverting back to the fundamentals and doing everything possible to improve your mental focus throughout the game.

While there is much that goes into becoming an improved overall umpire, this article should allow you to laser-focus on some points of emphasis our respective conference supervisors and NCAA executives consider when deciding how many games we receive each year and whether we are ready for the next level. Umpiring can be a thankless job, but it has been one of my overwhelming passions, as there are countless similarities between baseball and life. Whether we like it or not, we live and work under a theme that perception is reality. My advice: either spend your time wishing the job to be easier, or embrace the opportunities to make yourself better. It is my sincere hope that everyone finds renewed health this off-season... At least the *perception* of improved health! I wish you all the best this holiday season.