

A Resolution for any New Year (or Season): "Continuous Improvement"

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to hear Bart Starr, the Hall of Fame quarterback, speak at a business meeting. In discussing the Packers' preparation for the season during that Vince Lombardi-led era, he made a comment that has stuck with me for a long time. He said their goal was to "relentlessly chase perfection in order to capture excellence". So in other words, we may never be perfect, but striving towards that goal can lead to outstanding performance. That seems to sum up perfectly how we can approach the start of the season and keep improving as the year goes on.

So what are the keys to continuous improvement? Here are some that are worthy of consideration:

Attitude and Enthusiasm:

Your attitude and the enthusiasm you bring to all you do is more evident to those around you than you may realize. It affects how others view you and also impacts the effort that you put into the hard work it takes to do a great job. How do you feel about the upcoming season? Do you have the same great attitude throughout the season?

Preparation:

Many things go into the preparation for a new season. Off-season camps or umpiring, rules review, mechanics study, physical fitness, proper equipment and uniforms to improve personal appearance are all part of preparation for a successful season.

Evaluations:

There are several sources of evaluations that form the basis for continuous improvement. Certainly those formal evaluations received from league supervisors and camp instructors should be taken seriously. You can also receive great feedback and suggestions from partners during postgame discussions. A mentor or other experienced umpire may be willing to come watch you work and offer assistance. Self-evaluation is also a must, using video review and just taking an honest look in the mirror.

Responsibility and Courage:

One of my classmates at professional umpire school years ago told one of the instructors that he was ready to work third base in the major leagues. Of course the instructor informed the student that they were looking for umpires with a wider range of skills and experiences to work that level of baseball. If you are looking to improve your schedule, are you volunteering to work the plate in non-conference games or scrimmages to show your level of experience? Are you showing that you have the courage to make the tough calls at your current levels? Are those responsible for the post-season assignments in your current leagues or divisions showing confidence in you to assign you to top series or tournaments? If so, you may just need some additional experience or exposure to get that break. You should be showing that you are learning with each year of experience. We all know umpires who have 10 years of experience and those that have one year of experience 10 times.

Handling situations:

People skills are critical in someone being judged as an accomplished umpire. Properly handling situations can be learned both by personal experience and by learning from others' experiences. Are you a good listener first? A competent umpire will constantly be learning "what" to say, "how" to say it, and "when" (or "if") to say it. Do coaches, players, and other umpires view you as being a good communicator?

Priorities:

Passion for an avocation such as umpiring is admirable, but life still needs balance. We can all improve on how we keep our priorities in the proper sequence. Often those that are the most successful in their family and business life, who also give of themselves unselfishly to others in some way, are also the best umpires.

Partnership:

At the beginning of the season, umpires look at their schedule to see who their partners are. We all look forward to working with some more than others. Our goal of constant improvement should include how our partners look forward to working with us and how they view the time spent with us before, during and after the games. Are we organized? Do we celebrate someone else's success or just focus only on ourselves? Do we maintain an appropriate sense of humor? Do we look for ways to give back to the game? All are ways that will affect how our partners perceive us.

Conclusion:

According to Bart Starr, Vince Lombard's follow up to the comment about "relentlessly chasing perfection in order to capture excellence" was "I'm not remotely interested in just being *good*." That seems like a great summary to our theme of "continuous improvement". If you settle for just being as good as you are right now, or just being pretty good, you may miss out on many great umpiring experiences and the satisfaction that you gave your best effort to continue to learn throughout the season.

Good luck on a great season!

Randy Bruns

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