

HANDS OFF! PERIOD

No Reason to Touch Players, Coaches, Other Umpires

By Todd Korth

About 70 umpires gathered in a room of the athletic facility at the conclusion of a preseason softball clinic. In the span of about four hours, those in attendance had a chance to review updated rules and mechanics in a classroom setting. Umpires also had an opportunity to call pitches in a batting cage as well as work the bases in three-person mechanics.

It was a good day to be a softball umpire. A chance to start thinking softball in the dead of winter. A chance to meet with some old friends or make some new ones. A chance to be seen for a bit by assigners and to meet them. All was well until the coach of the softball team met with the umpires afterward in a question-and-answer period. The coach was generally pleased with how the day proceeded but had one concern: Some of the umpires were putting their hands on the catchers. There was no further explanation nor was one needed. Placing your hands on a player or coach is simply a no-no. Don't do it. Don't even think about it. Still, some umpires did just that.

The clinicians quickly made it clear to everyone in the room that umpires should not be touching players or coaches. To be fair, a number of plate umpires were practicing "measuring" the distance of their stance behind a catcher. It's ideal to be about 18 inches, or the length of your elbow to your knuckles in a closed fist, behind the catcher. It is possible that some umpires were placing their hands on the catchers in those cases while trying to adjust their spacing. That could have been the problem noted by the coach. Or simply, for whatever reason, some umpires felt it was



Umpires, such as Mark Sawyer, Northridge, Calif., have no control when a coach places his or her hands on them, but umpires should never be touching coaches, players or their partner(s).

necessary to let the catchers know that they were right behind them.

It's important to realize that most catchers don't like being touched. Some umpires have been known to grab a catcher's belt to keep the catcher from popping up. Why? If the catcher is a "jumper" who bounces up and blocks your vision, encourage her to stay down. A good position in the slot between the catcher and the batter helps you track the pitch without obstruction to the catcher's glove.

Handshakes prior to a game with coaches are very much accepted, but any other kind of touching is very unprofessional. If perception is reality, and in officiating that's often the case, it destroys an umpire's credibility and image to place his or her hands on a catcher, an infielder, an outfielder, a coach, anyone. Yet it happens, even when you may least expect it, like in a clinic setting. And it's not just catchers. Sometimes you see umpires touching players or coaches or another umpire. Or you might hear about it through the grapevine. Maybe that's part of the personality of an umpire. That's warm and fuzzy, but check that personality at the gate to the diamond. More often than not that's not the way others view the gesture. Favoritism comes to mind and so does perversion in some cases.

There are other situations where physical touching between an umpire and player or coach is not appropriate:

Hugging. Is it really necessary for an umpire to hug a coach or player on a diamond? No! It's a perception problem and a potential legal problem. That gentle hug can end up being a kick in the stomach for that umpire and his or her crew.

Wraparound. For whatever reason, umpires will place their arm around the shoulders of a coach or player or lightly place their hand on that coach's or player's lower back while trying to explain a situation. That explanation will have the same effect, and probably a greater effect, without an arm around the coach's or player's shoulders or back. It's better to stand to the side of a coach or player to provide an explanation. It

is much less confrontational and more effective.

Some umpires choose to place their arms around each other while conferring. That should be avoided as well. It gives the appearance that the umpires are conspiring or are trying to convince each other of what should be called.

Helping hand. It may be a little cold-hearted, but an umpire has no business helping a player to his or her feet. Allow that player's teammates or opponent the opportunity to show good sportsmanship. If you help one player off the ground, you better be ready to help every player on both teams off the ground.

Also, what if that player is injured? If you help her off the ground and, in the process, worsen the athlete's condition, you could find yourself in court defending your actions. Umpires do not have the responsibility of acting as an emergency medical technician and moving an injured player.

Fighting. Though it's rare in softball for a fight to break out, it happens. If players go after each other and start to swing away at one another, it's a natural instinct for the umpires to step in between the players and push them away from each other. It is recommended by some legal experts that officials not touch the players because they also do not have the responsibility to play sheriff and manhandle players.

An umpire's job is to quickly stop play to protect injured players and keep the game under control. If a fight breaks out, you are at a much greater legal risk if you decide to intervene. It might not be a problem; but if it is, you'll be left at the mercy of the courts and witnesses who may be uncertain or perhaps dishonest.

Other legal experts contend that intervening in a fight situation is the right thing for an umpire to do. Check with your conference or league on their expectations in that kind of situation.

In the meantime, keep your hands off players, coaches and other umpires.

Todd Korth is a Referee associate editor. □

THEY SAID IT

"I usually talk about whatever. If something funny happens, then I make a joke about it and get them smiling. It's always a plus when the umpire is friendly! It makes the game flow better."

— *Lindsey Ziegenhirt, University of California catcher on how much, if any, dialogue she has with the plate umpire.*

QUICKTIP

Observing players at all times is an important part of an umpire's job during a game. One way to keep an eye on the players and reset your indicator without looking at it in between batters is to **create notches with a file at each of the zero marks**. That will enable you to not only feel when the indicator is reset but improve your presence on the field as well.

SIDELINE



New Umpire Locker Room

Hall of Fame Stadium in Oklahoma City now has locker rooms. A 10,000-square-foot facility located behind the scoreboard was completed earlier this spring and will provide public bathrooms, umpire changing rooms and locker room and meeting space for as many as four teams.

Lack of permanent space for teams has long been an issue during the weeklong Women's College World Series. In recent years, teams met before and after games in temporary tents behind the outfield wall, but the setup was less than ideal.

"It is a proud moment for ASA to enhance our already outstanding complex with the addition of the Field House," ASA Executive Director Ron Radigonda said.

SOURCE: THE OKLAHOMAN