

WANTED: MORE UMPIRES

If you're willing to be yelled at a lot,
there are plenty of part-time
positions available



Are umpires for youth sports a dying breed?

By John Reid Daily News Staff Writer

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Are umpires for youth sports a dying breed?

You want to be a baseball umpire? Come on down. There is plenty of room at the inn.

Charlie Adams, a retired United Airlines pilot and a Portola Valley resident since 1972, has umpired at almost every level -- high school, Pony League Baseball, American Legion Baseball, Joe DiMaggio, men's adult baseball, Little League and the college wood bat league. There is a need, Adams said, but there is a catch.

"We could use more umpires," said Adams, president of the Peninsula Baseball Umpires Association (PBUA). "The problem is that it takes three or four years to get the hang of it. Guys get discouraged. It takes a certain ability to be yelled at and go beyond that. A lot of guys decide they aren't going to do it anymore. I've had a couple of instances this year where guys have said, 'It's just not worth it.' I've had to call them and tell them, 'You know, you just had a bad game.' Or, 'That coach is always like that.'"

Michael L. Wraa founded the Youth Umpiring Association (YUA) when he was a 16-year-old student at Aragon High in San Mateo. The YUA services over 1,000 games every year in Northern California.

"Who wants to take on a part-time job where you're guaranteed to get yelled at and harassed at just about every game?" asked Wraa, a 2013 alum of Aragon. "Everyone sees the verbal abuse umpires receive on television, so very few people are willing to, not only take that, but attempt to learn an entire trade craft."

Bob Hayes, who graduated from Sequoia High in Redwood City in 1990, is vice-president of the PBUA and has umpired baseball since 1988.

"We are short of umpires," Hayes said. "I can't put my finger on the reason why. If people would give themselves the opportunity to do it, they would enjoy it. The shortage of umpires hurts the kids more than it hurts anything else."

"In the past four years, we average two new umpires per year," Wraa said. "That isn't enough. There are never enough officials to cover all the games we are asked to cover. We turn down three to four leagues each year, totaling 600 games, due to lack of manpower."

Part of the problem is the verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse umpires take. Wraa, for one, feels it is a major factor for the low flow of new umpires into the game.

"A major reason behind the umpire shortage is the lack of respect for the officials and the game, which is displayed by coaches," Wraa said. "While there are still some good coaches in the world, we live in a society where yelling is considered coaching. Coaches who yell across the field at umpires, coaches who charge umpires aggressively, etc. I've been swung at by a Catholic middle school parent. The disrespect for officials as human beings is what keeps people away. Coaches, however, fail to remember that if they could do our job, we wouldn't be here."

Adams got involved in umpiring while coaching his sons, Bren and Deegan, in the Alpine Little League organization.

"I thought the quality of umpires wasn't very good, so I shot my mouth off," Adams said. "Someone asked

me, "Why don't you do it then?" I went to a seminar and got hooked on it."

Adams listed some qualifications on what makes a good umpire.

"You have to understand the game of baseball and have an interest in it," Adams said. "Baseball is an extremely complicated game. If you ever doubt that, try to explain it to some foreign exchange student. When I did clinics, I told kids I've never known an umpire, player, coach or fan who knew all the rules. There are too many rules, plus there are a lot of obscure rules. A lot of the game is mental. You know what to expect out on the field at a certain time. Then it's a matter of being able to train yourself to see a given play and know what to do in a short period of time. You have to be in position."

High school umpires are required to put in 18 hours of training every year to stay sharp, taking seminars, along with attending twice-monthly meetings for review.

"To be a good umpire, you have to have a desire to learn and improve," Wraa said. "When you've stopped asking questions, it's probably time to retire. I can teach you where to stand, what to say and do, but I cannot teach you good judgement. An umpire who possesses good judgement will go far and will be an asset to any association."

Another factor for lack of umpires is the initial cost to become an umpire. Cost for a uniform, umpire's gear, etc., can run \$300 to \$400. And if one isn't going to stick it out, the money spent can be wasted.

Pay varies, depending on the level. For varsity high school games, pay is \$65 for either the home plate or base umpire. Junior varsity games net \$55. Adult baseball games are nine-inning games with a 3-hour time limit that pay \$90 per game.

Wraa umpires a lot of out-of-state games, which means pay can be relative to the cost of living.

"Each state has a subsequent value of a dollar," Wraa said. "For a six-inning game, officials should be making at minimum \$45. It should be \$55 for a seven-inning game."

Often, the economy dictates supply and demand for umpires.

"When the economy goes down, you see a lot of guys coming out of the woodwork," Adams said. "It is a good part-time job. Guys scramble to work every single day if they could to make ends meet. As the economy gets better, guys tend to drop out. Or, they elect to not make themselves available as often."

A raise in umpire's pay would help, Wraa said.

"Most people get into umpiring for the enjoyment, but the money doesn't hurt," Wraa said. "Raising pay to a more reasonable level across the Peninsula would be a huge step in the right direction."

The PBUA's territory is from South San Francisco High to Menlo-Atherton High, and it is also contracted to work games at Serra High in San Mateo. Hayes said there are simply too many games and not enough umpires.

"Now that spring and summer is here, you have Pony, Colt, Babe Ruth League and Joe DiMaggio," Hayes said. "Five days a week, two games on Saturday. That's a lot of umpires needed. We could use 20 or 25 new umpires. If you can get more, you want to expand. You always want to get better. Bringing in a new guy, you can get something from his game."

"We are living in a state that has a climate great for baseball and we play the sport year round," Wraa said. "That requires a large mass of umpires."

Adams said it's harder to get umpires to work certain days.

"During high school season, Wednesdays and Fridays are tough because you have a lot of schools playing those days," Adams said. "This year, we've had a lot of problems on weekends. If umpires work during the week, they don't want to spend their whole weekend working. We've had to scramble to get guys then."

Jeff Landucci, umpire assigner for the PBUA, attempts to recruit players who are done with baseball after playing two years at a junior college.

"I talk to a lot of JC coaches about having their players become umpires," Landucci said. "It's a good way for them to stay involved in the game and a way to have fun."

"A lot of young guys who might go into umpiring have other interests," Adams said. "They're officiating other sports or have their own sports they want to play. Most young guys want to go to professional umpiring schools and try to get to the bigs."

The journey for umpires to get to the big leagues can be perilous. Once graduated from umpire school, the next step is a job in the low minor leagues.

"It's grim business the first couple of years," Adams said. "You're not making much, you're driving every night and you're in front of some rough crowds. It weeds out people. There are cases when you dedicate all those years and you're in AAA baseball. Then some guy tells you you're not going any higher. Your career as a pro umpire is pretty much over. The pyramid is narrow near the top."

As for the youthful-looking Adams, he'll keep on keeping on calling balls and strikes, despite the occasional abuse.

"It keeps me in touch with young people," Adams said "I enjoy contact with kids and the younger adults. Ninety-five percent of them are great. It's the 4 or 5 percent who make it a pain in the neck. It's a good second job for someone who is retired. You can pick and choose what days you want to work."

Email John Reid at jreid@dailynewsgroup.com; follow him at twitter.com/dailynewsjohn.