



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

An Open Letter to Umpires and Parents

In an October 5, 2013 18u gold showcase tournament at Big League Dreams in West Covina, California, where the Minors Gold played the California Cruisers, many sports blog websites reported that a softball atrocity took place. The Minors Gold were up at bat and were winning the game. They had bases loaded, and the Cruiser's pitcher walked in another run. The Cruisers' coach then called for a conference in the pitcher's circle. On the very next pitch thrown by the Cruisers' high school junior, the catcher jumps out of the way and the pitch hits the bespectacled, grey-haired umpire square in the face. The coach, pitcher, and catcher were ejected from the game and the game was then declared over.

Video was taken by a high definition camera located above the umpire's head in the backstop, so the vantage point was quite good. The pitch that ultimately walked the batter, was questionable as a ball. If it was good (which it may have been) it was low in the zone. The pitch that hit the umpire looked high and would most likely have been called a ball. Since the pitcher was throwing at both ends of the vertical zone, she seemed to have reasonable control of her locations.

At the 18u gold level, catchers are expected to be able to catch most

reasonable pitches so, therefore, it appears that the catcher chose not to catch this particular pitch. The umpire's safety equipment was minimal. He relied on the skill of the catcher to keep himself safe and most teams are aware of this. I have heard many umpires remind catchers that they need to do all they can to block the pitch from hitting the umpire. Thankfully, the umpire was not injured as the ball ricocheted off his face mask, but it could have hit him in the throat or caught him in the shoulder, chest, or arm.

It looks like a lot of things went wrong in this game. Many Internet sites and blogs claim this was retaliation for the umpire making bad strike zone calls. There is no room in softball for any kind of retaliation. Retaliation is completely unacceptable and unsportsmanlike. With that said, if this was retaliation, did the umpire play a role in causing the Cruisers to come to the conclusion that they needed to retaliate? Yes, he did. Did he deserve what he got? Clearly not. The umpire's strike zone was quite small. He did not give anything on the outside corner to the Cruisers. He was also not giving any pitches that were at the bottom of the zone. This may have frustrated the coaches to the point that they were not thinking clearly in the heat of the game. The somewhat loud third base coach on the Cruisers made many comments in earshot of the umpire, further hurting his team's relationship with the umpire. The Cruisers' coach also did not control his team parents, who were making comments the umpire could hear.

You can watch a clip of this sequence on You Tube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM0HzMOT4nc> make sure you turn the volume up so you can hear all the chatter in the game. You can also Google to find a video of the full game. The following does not apply in particular to the Minors Gold vs. California Cruisers game, but to all games.

Dear Umpire,

You have a tough job. No, scratch that. You have a REALLY tough job. Umpires are held to a high standard where you are expected to get every call right. Surgeons, airline pilots, and nuclear engineers are held to this kind of standard. If you get one call wrong, the team receiving the bad call hates you and the other team loves you....that is unless you make a bad call for them too, and then everyone hates you.

A few things we as coaches and parents would appreciate you doing before games that would increase the level of respect we all have for you and show you:

Please look neat when you arrive at the field. Sloppy, unshaven umpires do not instill confidence in the teams and it also shows a lack of respect for the game.

If you are supposed to have game balls, please obtain them before the game and don't expect to play the game with our used practice balls or expect the coaches to run and pick them up instead of warming up our team.

Please check the field for unsafe playing conditions and alert the coaches and any league or tournament officials of any issues found.

Please don't buddy up with either team. We respect your tough job, but it causes parents, players, and coaches to think you will not be impartial in your judgments. Even if you know the other coaches, it isn't appropriate for you to be seen yucking it up and reminiscing about the good ole times.

There are also a few things we would like to bring to your attention about the play during the game:

It is NOT your job to keep the game fair. One team may be much better than the other. Call as accurate a game as possible for BOTH teams regardless of the outcome. You do a disservice to the players and the sport if you try to “adjust” the outcome – that is NOT your job.

If the coaches or a player aggravate you during the game, please DO NOT take it out on the team. They have been practicing their hearts out and don't deserve retribution from the umpire, just because of the coaches or one bonehead player.

Pitchers deserve an accurate sized strike zone. “Squeezing” a pitcher so none of her specialty pitches or corner pitches are called strikes is unfair to the pitcher. Making a pitcher throw down the middle goes against everything pitchers have been training thousands of hours to do.

Batters deserve an accurate strike zone. Calling balls at their helmets as strikes frustrates the batters and causes them to throw their good batting mechanics out the window to reach for these balls (even when their coaches are telling them to lay off any high pitches).

If you are working a game alone, when possible, please come out from behind the plate to make base calls.

If you get a call wrong, it helps diffuse tension if you let us know you made a mistake, even though the call still stands.

Dear Parents,

your coaching staff is in control of this team. We are responsible for the players, coaches, and you, the parents' actions. You need to trust in us and believe that we will handle ALL issues within the guidelines of the rules of the game and

good sportsmanship.

Umpires have a very difficult job. Most likely, they will not get every call right. This is part of the game of softball.

You are NOT permitted to harass the umpire in any way during the game. If you do so, you will be asked to leave the game.

We NEVER argue balls or strikes – those are judgment calls made by the umpire. We may ask the umpire to clarify why a pitch was called a ball so we know what he saw. Our pitchers will be asked to adjust to the umpire's judgment. Sometimes, we will not agree with an umpire's interpretation of the strike zone, but this is NOT cause for any of us to argue about it. It is simply a game condition we need to adjust to.

The coaching staff will ask for the umpire's interpretation of rules and their calls if there are any questions. Only official coaches will do this.

At the end of the day, please keep in mind that this is a GAME. The outcome of this game does not have life or death consequences. Therefore, you are asked to be supportive and calm and show good sportsmanship at all times, regardless of what the other team or officials say or do.

Please instruct your daughter that she is never to do something she believes is morally incorrect or in retribution. These types of acts tarnish the great sport of softball.

The Minors Gold vs. California Cruisers game was an 18u college showcase tournament. This means that the participants in the tournament were there in hopes of attracting college recruiters - at a minimum to get a closer look and at best case to obtain an athletic scholarship. The California Cruisers' coach (or

coaches) probably wasted the team parents' money by participating in this showcase event with game ejections and the game being suddenly ended by the officials, and most likely gave their organization a black eye for future player consideration. With no prior knowledge, I would guess that this is not the first time this coach has acted in an unsportsmanlike way. Parents beware – if your daughter's coach does not display near-perfect conduct and sportsmanship, you should really consider looking for a new team or this type of situation could be written about your daughter and/or her team.

Mitch Alexander is the CIO for a major electronics company and coaches both Little League and Travel softball teams and is currently completing his PhD. He is a certified SUNY, ASA, and Double Goal Coach. His wife, Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League Softball World Series. Over the years, both have managed teams together and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. In his spare time, Mitch designs websites for fastpitch teams and businesses and can be reached at fastpitch2001@optonline.net.

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