

Words & ideas by Mark Morelli

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Umpires only as good as their last game

by Mark Morelli, *Balls & Strikes*, 1998

Editor's note: William Sferra was recently appointed commissioner of the Mahoning County Amateur Softball Association in Youngstown, Ohio.

William Sferra assigns umpires. If he didn't do that, he might have been a show business agent. There are similarities, he says. "To bring along your talent, you must be sure they are prepared for challenging performances, and most of all, you must keep their egos in check."

Games aren't equal, he says, and neither are umpires. Assigning games is more than just matching names to ball fields. There is a psychology in juggling the umpires' egos and talents.

Sferra, an umpire for twenty years and an assigner for four, says assigning is difficult but delightful. He loves sports and assigning keeps him involved in both scholastic and community leagues. An assigner must keep league directors, coaches and players satisfied with qualified officials.

37 Messages on the Machine

During the school year, Sferra assigns for 12 high schools. Each has varsity and junior varsity baseball and softball squads for both boys and girls. This totals 48 individual schedules. During the summer, he schedules for more than 30 leagues ranging from Little League, 12-under, to the high-powered 18-under boys class B league, which is regarded as one of the most talented in the region, a league so competitive it has produced national champions or runners-up three times in the past decade.

This keeps Sferra on his toes. (Once he left his home for a few hours and, upon his return, he found 37 messages on his answering machine, all concerning that afternoon's games.)

He thrives on this schedule. And he pays close attention to his ever-changing pool of talent. He tries to bring along promising

young umpires and at the same time keep reliable veterans satisfied.

"Everybody needs an opportunity," he said. "Umpire organizations should be based on individual ability, not seniority."

Keeping Egos in Check

It takes a year or so for him to judge the abilities of a new umpire. Sferra calls it a constant trial and error. He experiments with human ability. Sferra says his young umpires often feel anxious and restrained, but he tells them, "Judge me at the end of the season." In four years, no one has ever called him unfair. "Yet," he laughs.

The young ones want to move up faster than they should. "They get impatient with me, but I have to keep egos in check." Sferra tells of one young umpire he had to hold back because he was cocky. Sferra believes that this fine young talent might have been undermined by a big ego that wanted to take on big, important games. So Sferra brought him along slowly. Now the young umpire has reached his goals -- at Sferra's pace. Sferra now considers the young man ready for a long, well-paced career as an umpire.

An assigner must not only hold back promising but brash umpires, but push ahead some of the promising but timid ones.

A Shove into the Arena

"You can't wait until an umpire is more than ready. Timing is crucial and one shy kid I know needed a shove into the arena."

This young umpire performed extremely well in high school games, so Sferra moved him up to class B. the umpire was unprepared, not for the games, but for the rough reactions from players, coaches and fans. He wasn't ready for the catcalls. He didn't know how to take control. Trembling, he asked Sferra not to schedule him in Class B, but Sferra saw beyond the jitters. Firmly, courteously, and with a few strategic tips, he pushed the young umpire back into Class B.

"A year later he was one of the most respected umpires in the league," Sferra notes.

Coach, Diplomat

While working with younger umpires, Sferra is like a coach. With older ones, he's a diplomat.

"Some of the vets who I've been working with for years push me hard for more challenging assignments. It's tough to say no, especially after they've been so reliable over the years, helping me out, taking games in a pinch. But they're not all ready for challenging games. They've reached their plateau. I don't want the ump to get into a game that's over his head, but sometimes that's the best way for them to learn."

Sometimes there are fickle personality conflicts. An umpire might have made a bad call years before that a coach will still hold a grudge and request that this umpire never again officiate for his team. To satisfy all parties, Sferra might honor the coach's wish and explain it to the umpire in a way that doesn't deflate the umpire's confidence.

"I'll say he's needed elsewhere, that the coaches are tough someplace else, that they eat up umps. I say that I need someone who's tough and reassign this veteran umpire."

Once Sferra received a call from an irate coach complaining about a longtime umpire. Sferra knew the complaint was valid, but he also knew why.

"The umpire was going through some messy personal problems. That's no excuse for a bad performance, but it's a reason, and it's better to know the clear picture than to judge blindly."

Sferra never told the umpire about the complaint. He gave him new assignments and said, "I don't want you to get too complacent officiating the same teams over and over." Sferra rechanneled the troubled umpire's energy to a new playing area. His performance improved.

"If anyone is thrown out, I want to know."

But complaints aren't just manipulated or swept under the rug. Sferra keeps a logbook of all official complaints.

"If anyone is thrown out, I want to know. If a coach complains too much, then I know the coach is the problem. If everyone is crying about the ump, then I've got a problem umpire on my hands. Any umpire can be a dictator. That's easy. But it's an art to control games and keep everyone playing and satisfied. If an ump throws out too many players, the ump is the problem."

Call him a Talent Manager. Or a Coach. Or a Choir Director or Symphony Conductor. Call him at the risk of being put on hold, for Sferra is in charge of 80 umpires, all with different goals, egos and abilities. And he wants to keep them satisfied, confident and performing well.

Sferra has a heart, but his standards are high. "Just like a player doesn't like to make an error, an ump doesn't like to miss a call. But an umpire is only as good as his last game."

