

THE WORST UMPIRE IN THE WORLD

Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice. (Proverbs 13:10)

Although I have witnessed as many as a thousand little league baseball games, I have actually only coached about a dozen, all in one season. Jeremy was about six years old and we organized a t-ball league in the small community of Morse. I hesitate to call it a league because we only had enough kids for two teams.

In spite of the lack of teams, there was no shortage of enthusiasm for the games. After all, there was not much happening in Morse and a good t-ball game always drew a sizable crowd. Because of my temperament and inability to lose well, the games probably were more important to me than most folks.

Alan Leach served as coach of the other team. After league sign-ups, he and I worked hard at dividing the teams into equal ability. We did a good job because as the season progressed, both teams won an equal amount of games. I worked hard at trying to teach the kids to understand the great game of baseball. I even recruited a high school student to serve as an assistant.

The defining moment of the season occurred during the final game. It was played in conjunction with a community-wide celebration of some anniversary or event. There always seemed to be some reason to have a celebration each summer we lived at Morse. Looking back on the experience, it is hard to imagine appreciating such a rural custom but they were fun.

Everyone gathered at the ball field for an early afternoon game of t-ball. Because of the importance of the contest, Kenton Johnson, the school coach, was recruited to serve as umpire. Normally we used a father or drafted some other eligible warm body. This was the big game and we wanted to go first-class.

As I recall, the game began in controversy. Alan was one player short (a common malady in little league) so we sought help among kids in the community. The closest we could find was a boy who was a few years older than our age limit. He also had experience in a real baseball league. I was not comfortable with giving Alan this distinct advantage but there was no other solution. My best strategy was to give my team a fiery pep talk and then try to coach the game of my life.

The game lived up to all expectations. It was a close score and both teams were showing the benefit of several weeks worth of practice and games. The event that caused this game to stick in my memory occurred in the later innings.

My team had the bases loaded with Jeremy, my best hitter at the plate. We were hopeful of scoring several runs and perhaps putting the game out of reach. Just as I had hoped, Jeremy hit a solid line drive into right field. The runners began to circle the bases and the fielder scampered for the ball.

From the first base coaching box, I shouted to my assistant, coaching at third base, to keep sending the runners home. The first two runners scored with ease but it was going to be close for the runner from first. The throw came to the plate prior to the runner. The catcher fielded the ball and stepped on the plate but failed to tag the runner.

The umpire, remember, he was the school coach, immediately signaled that the runner was out. From my position down the first base line I shouted my disagreement. The umpire was also very strong-willed and shouted that the catcher tagged the plate and it was a force out.

To anyone who has the slightest understanding of baseball this is a ridiculous statement. It is impossible to have a force out on a runner going from first base into home plate. We argued with enthusiasm for several minutes but he was not about to be corrected by me. After all, he was the coach.

It must have been quite a sight. The preacher, short and slight of build, shouting into the face of the oversized umpire with the typical coach's pot belly. I am sure the little farm community had not seen such a display in quite some time.

Finally, in frustration and having no other recourse, I turned to the crowd in order to seek their opinion. I do not know what possessed me, but I asked, "How many say the runner was safe?" To my pleasant surprise, there were many cheers from the crowd.

One thing I have learned over the years is not to expect an umpire to ever change a call. He refused to change his initial call and our turn at bat was over. I do not remember who won the game. All I can recall is that I lost the argument. That was probably more painful than losing a game.