



# STRIVING FOR PERFECTION

By Steve Horgan, USA Field Hockey's Director of Umpiring

**F**ield hockey is not immune to the premise that umpires are expected to be perfect throughout the entire match and held to a standard of quality well above the other participants. The perception of a call being missed in the early stages of a game is not the same as the same call being perceived as missed in the latter stages. If a call is missed early, it is mostly forgotten and everyone moves on, but when the same type of call is missed near the end of the game, the perception is that "the umpire" cost a team the game or won the game for the other team.

Imagine the following want ad:

"If you like having every close decision you make criticized, if you like doing your job surrounded by thousands of people ready to blame you for mistakes other people make, every one of them believing they can do your job better than you can and if you don't mind the only response you get for a job done perfectly being silence, then maybe you would like to be an umpire."

This is the job description written by Ken Kaiser, a major-league baseball umpire for more than twenty years in his autobiography *Planet of the Umps*. Who in their right mind would apply for any job with this type of description and put themselves under the stress of perfection? Umpires are just human and perceived mistakes are based on the perspective of the person watching the match.



Craig Pamham, Director of Coach Education and Learning, calls it the "Swiss Cheese Theory". Where you have a room with four walls, a mouse hole on each wall and one triangular piece of Swiss cheese in the center of the room. The piece of cheese has two holes on one side, one hole on the other and no holes on one side and of course a point of the triangle. When four mice come out of each hole at the same time, they each have a different perspective of the same piece of cheese. In a world where perception is reality, in many cases the umpire is criticized for "making a mistake" only because of the perception of the person making the criticism.



Even though there is no magic spell to make umpires perfect, there are a number of things umpires can do to strive for the perfection that will never happen. First and foremost is for umpires to have the "reality check" that they are not always right. Decisions are made as part of the job in split seconds. Further, that decision must be conveyed with confidence and absolute certainty, or the credibility of the umpire is in doubt. Therefore, the only recourse if a decision is perceived as a mistake is to move on. Umpires should not worry as much about the perceived mistake, but more about how they react and respond to that perceived mistake for the benefit of the remainder of the match. There are a number of indicators to a possible mistake, the most important of which is the player reaction to a decision. The players are the only participants closer to the play than the umpire. In some cases players try to "buy a call" and it is up to the umpire to decide what is a "real" reaction and what might qualify for an Academy Award. The difficult part of this is that when an umpire does react to a player's question of a call, they run the risk of it happening more and more once the players realize that the umpire is "rational". It is incumbent on the umpire to balance this and not be afraid to talk to their partner and get another perspective when and where appropriate to prevent the game deteriorating as players question of every call. Umpires must be "open-minded" when they do make mistakes and there is a possibility to "get it right" before the game progresses too far.

Secondly, the job of an umpire is one of professionalism, athleticism and continual education. Umpires must be prepared to change as the game changes to keep themselves on top of the latest skills, processes and protocols. Now that we are in a world of television, video replay and competitiveness, the pressure on umpires to be perfect becomes more intense. In today's world where everyone has a camera at hand around the pitch, umpires are on video more and more. Therefore, the responsibility to be professional in their appearance, demeanor and action is something umpires must accept. Just like the old saying, "if you can't take the heat... get out of the kitchen", though it may not be fair umpires must understand that their level of professionalism must be much higher than any other participant of the game. We live in a sport culture that seems to accept that it is okay for anyone to "yell" at an umpire, but once the umpires defend themselves and responds back, they are labeled as unprofessional. A true appreciation and understanding of perception on the part of all participants, but particularly in the emotion of the game, could and should in turn lead to greater levels of mutual respect.

As for athleticism, the game as we all know is increasing in speed every year. Umpires are athletes and must treat themselves as such. No one can even get close to being a perfect umpire by just umpiring three months of the year during the scholastic seasons (NCAA & NFHS). The players work way too hard and put in countless hours of practice to perfect their game for umpires to not do the same to have the best physical capabilities and give the players the best umpired game possible. Umpires cannot just go out and do a game thinking that they are doing their best if they are not physically fit. It is understood that umpiring is a part-time job and the time that umpires can dedicate to being physically fit may be limited, but the only way to be in the best possible position to make a good decision is to be physically fit and not rely on your level of experience to get you through the game. As a standard, if an umpire can consistently run an 8-8:30-minute mile they will be ready for any game at any time. This is not hard to achieve, but it will take a commitment to continually train to stay fit for the game.

Just like any job, continual education must be ongoing to keep up with the standards of whatever industry is chosen. This is the same for umpires. Continual education is mandatory in today's world. Continual education is not just the "book work" or "classroom sessions". Getting out on the pitch and putting yourself into the different situations that occur in the game is the best education of all. There is a saying... "practice does not make perfect, but perfect practice makes perfect". Umpires cannot fall into the trap that they can do a couple of scrimmage games before a season and think that they are capable of being on top of their game when the season begins. Umpiring field hockey is now a year-round profession and must be treated as such. The education is in the doing. Once you have read the books and been in seminars about positioning, signaling and rules, the rest is on you and your ability to be as perfect as possible based on your desire and commitment to the game and the athletes served.

Think of the players as clients in business. If you want to be called back for more business, you must provide a service that meets the standard of the industry. That does not mean umpiring to the liking of a coach or player but umpiring to the standard of the industry. The umpire's commitment to the game and its participants is a never-ending journey toward the elusive perfection that we all desire. ■■■

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