



Watching Tony Randazzo work during the Yankees/Indians series, and call one of the worst games I've seen in a while, (and that's saying something), it dawned on me how inept most Major League umpires are. I always knew there were some that were bad and some that were good, but the gap between good and bad is both growing larger and growing disproportionately in the wrong direction. I used to be sympathetic to those who want to keep the "human element" in Major League Baseball, but I'm over it. There are far too many blown calls, too much inconsistency, and entirely too many guys who are too comfortable in their role as a Major League Baseball umpire.

On a nightly basis, Twitter erupts with the hashtag "#umpshow". An umpshow is exactly what it sounds like. A power hungry man (or group of men) who makes significantly less than most of the players on the field dictating the outcome of a play or a game by making it all about himself. Far too often, these guys exhibit laziness, apathy, or outright stupidity to negatively affect a game. Apparently, I missed an #umpshow from Andy Fletcher on Saturday on my way back from Detroit.

Umpire incompetence isn't a new thing. But, in the age social media and instant reaction, every call is magnified and scrutinized. Every bad call has a .gif image taken from MLB.tv or somebody's DVR within seconds that winds up on Twitter or any number of blogs dedicated to MLB franchises. Some may consider this unfair, as all humans fail from time to time at their jobs, but it's magnified when millions of people are watching.

Here's the thing. Major League Baseball is constantly evolving. With the Moneyball craze in the early 2000s, methods of player evaluation grew exponentially. Scouts still do their thing with the eye test, but MLB teams have entire analytics departments dedicated to extrapolating numbers,

finding trends, creating a cost-benefit analysis for every player and trying to find value for pennies on the dollar.

Major League Baseball took steps towards improving home plate umpire accuracy with the application of QuesTec, a four-camera system that records the location of pitches and provides the data necessary to evaluate the strike zone called by the plate umpire, in 2001. Unfortunately, QuesTec was only put in 11 of Major League Baseball's 30 ballparks. As is to be expected, the umpires didn't take kindly to Big Brother's oversight.

While the game and player evaluation have evolved, umpires have not. In fact, they seem to be getting worse. Again, that may just be because we're hearing more about blown calls, but these guys are entirely too comfortable in their jobs. The umpires' union is one of the most powerful in sports, which results in most of these guys being locked in their jobs until retirement.

It's not necessarily the mistakes that drive fans to anger, it's the inconsistency. Every strike zone is different, sometimes from inning to inning. Umpires are blowing calls because they aren't in the proper position. Ultimately, their success rate on calls is pretty damn good for the immediacy required from every call.

I believe that umpires feel that they are under attack and, like anyone else, they have become defensive. Randazzo's antics following the blown call on the first pitch of Mike Aviles's at bat on Monday night in New York were embarrassing. He missed the call, plain and simple. He exacerbated the problem by baiting Aviles and later, after he ejected Aviles when the game was over, by baiting Terry Francona.

This is where accountability comes into play. Players aren't going to react like that if they did, in fact, foul off the pitch that hit the catcher's glove and went to the backstop. Players aren't going to fly off the handle if they know that they were tagged out at second before they hit the bag. Players aren't going to say anything if a bang-bang play at first doesn't go their way. But when they know you're wrong, that's when they say something.

Umpires seem programmed to use the fight or flight method. Some umpires will stand there and bait a player. They want to argue. They want to be the star of the show. They want to take their manhood out and wave it around so the players and fans know who is in charge. Other umpires

will just walk away or outright ignore a player. Neither method is right. Major League Baseball needs to make it a point to instruct umpires to accept responsibility for a bad call and apologize or calmly explain the situation.

If somebody screws up and they take the blame, apologizing as they go, what more can you say? If Randazzo looks back at Aviles and says, "I swear I thought it hit the bat, I'm sorry", what more can Aviles say? He's already made his point that the umpire made the incorrect call and the umpire acknowledged that and apologized. It's done and over with. Instead, Randazzo probably told Aviles to shut the [expletive] up and get back in the box. Of course Aviles is going to be pissed. Wouldn't you be?

Isn't it incredibly frustrating when somebody screws up and crawls into a shell? They don't have the balls to acknowledge that they f'd up and hope to make it all go away by hiding. Of course players get pissed off about that. That's when fireworks happen. The umpire will laugh or dismiss them and it's the PLAYER that gets punished, not the umpire.

Baseball is about the players. The fans come to watch the players. They don't come to watch the umpires. The best umpires are the ones that fans don't notice. They go about their business. They communicate with the players. Respect is a two-way street in every walk of life and the player-umpire relationship is no different.

Jim Joyce has one of the most egregious blown calls in recent memory. When he called Jason Donald safe as the final hitter of Armando Galarraga's perfect game, he became public enemy number one, despite the fact that the players had recently voted him one of the five best umpires in the game. Joyce calmly stood by his call on the field, holding his composure while the Tigers and Jim Leyland expressed their displeasure in a very demonstrative manner. After the game, Joyce was genuinely pained by his missed call, apologizing to Galarraga and accepting accountability for his mistake.

Humans will make mistakes. What matters is how they react to them. Too many umpires react in a way that creates problems.

One way to help umpires would be to increase the use of instant replay. There will be less pressure on them and less scrutiny. Obviously there have to be plenty of restrictions to the use

of instant replay, otherwise we're one step away from robot umpires (which I'd be in favor of). Have a fifth umpire sitting in the press box or somewhere else in the ballpark with the ability to replay things. Limit managers to one "challenge" per game and continue with the review of home runs when a manager asks. The challenge can be anything from a call at a base to a fair/foul call down the line. The replay challenge cannot include balls and strikes or things like infield fly calls or if an attempted bunt hits the batter before he leaves the batter's box. Stuff like that.

It's rare that we have a giant misinterpretation of the rules like Fieldin Culbreth and his crew in Houston this season. The Astros made a pitching change and the Angels countered with a pinch hitter. As we all know, or should all know, once a pitcher is announced, he must face at least one batter. The team at bat can change hitters after the batter has been announced even if he doesn't hit, but the team loses him for the rest of the game. Well, the Astros and manager Bo Porter tried to change pitchers and the umpires let them. Mike Scioscia played the game under protest, which was dropped because the Angels won the game anyway. This is a very basic rule and something a group of umpires should not let happen.

But, calls that could require replay are different. Football has it. Hockey has it on goals. Basketball has it on flagrant foul calls, questionable three-point shots, and scenarios involving time winding down on either the game clock or the shot clock. Baseball has to evolve.

It's a shame to see how baseball has evolved in game theory and statistical analysis, with managers playing matchups and platoons, in part, because of sabermetric thought, yet the game remains archaic in its enforcement of the rules. It's gotten to a point where it's dragging the game down and is going to inevitably cost a team dearly in a very big game.

Until Major League Baseball takes a harder stance on lazy, apathetic, and aggressive umpires, they're going to continue to have these problems that get far more press and airtime than the great things going on in the game.