

UMPIRE TALES

Men in blue respond to all crises

By EDDIE DWYER
STAFF WRITER

Moments that last a lifetime. Tales that become more dramatic each time they are told.

The men in blue, Cleveland's amateur umpires, have stories that rival those of managers and players.

"I remember one night at Tremont Field when I made a call that decided a game and a guy followed me in his car with a .38 (caliber revolver)," said Don Schirmer, who has been umpiring in this area since 1953. "Luckily, I was able to duck down the freeway and get away from him."

Despite the close call, Schirmer, a member of the North Coast Umpires Association, looks back fondly on his experiences behind the plate.

"It's been great to be able to stay with the game," said Schirmer, who is retired from the Maple Heights Fire Department. "I've seen high school kids like the Bando brothers (Sal and Chris) develop into pros and I've even done some bird-dogging (scouting) for the Indians and the Cincinnati Reds."

"As for other crazy moments, I'll never forget the night of the big storm in 1969. I was at Tremont again and fans were running everywhere for shelter. Guys were in the gals' restroom and gals were in the guys' john. Let's just say it was wild."

Schirmer, 62, put his rescue training to use one night.

"We were working Morgana Park when a young player slid into second base and broke his ankle," said Schirmer, who also officiates football and basketball. "I busted a wooden bat and tore up some towels and shirts. The kid's leg was already splinted when the ambulance arrived. He still thanks me whenever he sees me at a game."

Although he has umpired six world softball tournaments, Schirmer's biggest challenge came the night he worked a major-league game at the Stadium during the umpires' walkout in 1979.

"Last month, I was umpiring third base for the high school state semifinal game between Mentor and Cincinnati Moeller," said Schirmer. "And there was Buddy Bell's kid (David) playing for Moeller. I told him to say hello to his dad. Buddy was a class act that night."

For John Lucchese, Cleveland's umpire-in-chief, there are the memories of umpiring an Old-Timers game at the Stadium and meeting Pete Rose during an Amateur Day in Cleveland in the 1970's. Lucchese recalls that Rose, now

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embroiled in a gambling controversy, was a "heck of a nice guy."

Lucchese's favorite story dates back 25 years to his first hardball game.

"It was the Fourth of July and I was working a Class A game with Pinky Prebil at a packed Edgewater Park," said Lucchese, who tips his hat to his wife, Angela, for supporting his career on the diamond. "There was a runner on second base when a ground ball

was hit. I anticipated the throw was going to first and moved that way. But the infielder threw to third and I was totally out of position."

"Pinky, who is a member of the Greater Cleveland Softball Hall of Fame, came from behind home plate and bailed me out by making the call. He told me not to be nervous and to always wait to see where the ball is going. I apply that even today."

Joe Vulich, who has umpired in Cleveland for 41 years, has had his share of challenges along the way.

"Oh yeah, I remember the night I had to break up a big fight at Morgana Park," said Vulich. "Punches were flying everywhere. I had to go down to City Hall the next day to report on it."

"And then there was that afternoon at Brookside Park. It was over 90 degrees and during those days we had to wear a tie and coat. The players were getting on me because they wanted to wrap it up in a hurry and go drink beer. But I just smiled and told them they were 'staying with me for the afternoon.'"

"When you're a man in blue, you've got to take it as it comes."



Umpire Don Schirmer closely watches the action at an Elder Field game.

PD photos/RICHARD KENDZERSKI

Umpires

FROM/1-D

softball (\$14 to \$16 if only one umpire works) and anywhere from \$20 to \$31 for Class A baseball. High schools, which play the majority of their games at 4 p.m. during the week, usually pay a little more because of what Schirmer refers to as the "convenience factor."

"I always dreamed of being a big-league umpire," said John Lucchese, the umpire-in-chief for the Cleveland Association. "But I was too old (35) when I got started. I've been umpiring the amateurs for 25 years and I can honestly say that I'm not in it for the money."

Lucchese, who works in maintenance when not on the field, got involved in umpiring following an injury in 1964.

"I was playing fast-pitch softball at Woodhill Park for the old Standard Tool Company when I hurt my knee," said Lucchese, the father of three. "I wanted to stay with the game, so I went to St. Clair Recreation Center and took the umpire's courses."

"I've put my heart and soul into the Cleveland Umpires Association. It has been a thrill to work with local Hall of Famers such as Frank Dillon and Pinky Prebil. They taught me a great deal about the integrity of the game."

A no-nonsense guy, Lucchese has experienced several changes in amateur hardball and softball. Not all of them have been pleasant.

"The trend has changed," said Lucchese, whose son, Leonard, also umpires. "Players and umpires are not as dedicated as they used to be. It's a shame to have to say that."

"There is little respect for the umpire anymore. I've had dirt kicked on me so you know I must love it to have stayed with it this long."

In assigning umpires for the past 12 years, Schirmer, 55, has heard complaints from both sides. But the 21-year veteran takes it in stride.

"I'm sure we all consider the money," said Schirmer, who has worked several national softball tournaments as well as regional and state high school games. "And I'm sure we have some guys who do it just for the money. My biggest aggravation is having umpires arrive late for games. There is no excuse for that."

"But fortunately, the majority of us enjoy the game and take pride in our profession."

A bus driver in the Warrensville Heights school system, Schirmer's interest in umpiring was nurtured by his neighbor's son.

"He was umping at the time and convinced me to get involved," Schirmer said. "With four kids, the extra money came in handy. I attended umpire's school in January and started working CYO in April."

"It's the people you meet that make this job fun. In umpiring the national tournaments, I've made friends all over the country. Teams



Schirmer yells, "Play ball!"

never forget the umpires."

If Schirmer resided in a warm-weather climate, you would be hard-pressed to get him off the diamond. It's his home-away-from-home seven months out of the year.

"Sure, we take some abuse," he said. "But it comes with the terri-

tory. Fans can tell us we're blind, but we can never respond or we lose the class associated with our position."

"I'll keep calling them as long as I know in my heart that I'm doing justice to the game."

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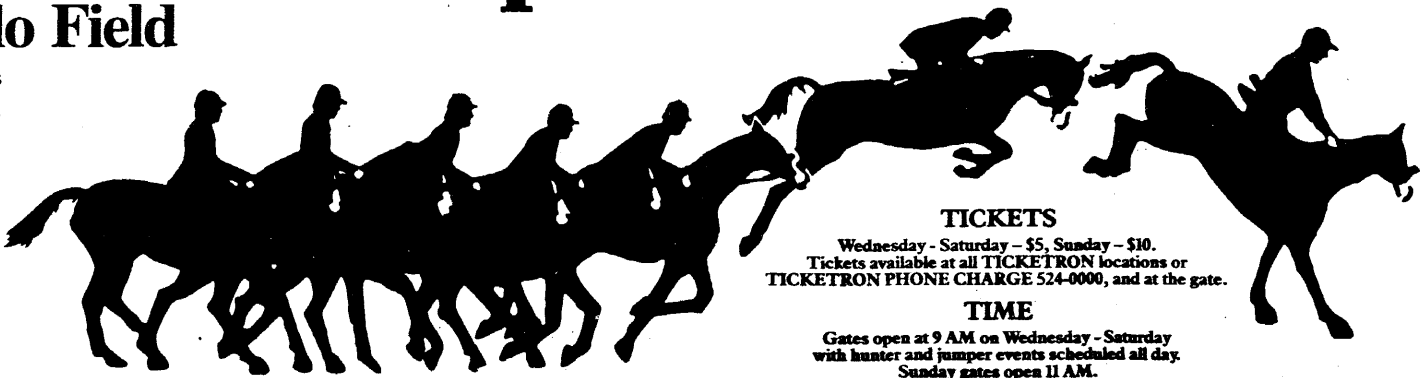
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