

Umpiring the Blowout Game

By Bruce Hulion and Brad Hadley on March 26, 2015

officials

At some time in a softball umpire's career, he or she will have to call a game between teams that are not evenly matched in talent; one in which a team's pitcher is having difficulty throwing the ball across the plate with any sort of consistency, and when a ball happens to enter the strike zone, it is hammered into play where the defense cannot come close to fielding and throwing out the runner. Games like this tend to end with a high score for the better team and zero runs - or at least, very few - by the opponent. Scores like 17-0, 31-0, 35-0 are posted before the minimum required number of innings is played.

Umpiring the close, exciting games keeps softball umpires alert and "in the game." There is no time or opportunity to let the mind wander or stray from the task at hand. Every call could be the difference in the outcome. But, what about the "blowout game" in which the outcome is settled early?

Coaches, players, fans and umpires realize that once the score gets out of hand, the game is basically over. All involved must wait until the required number of innings are completed before the game officially ends. In the meantime, how do the umpires work the game? Does the strike zone remain the same or does it get bigger; are the "out calls" made the same or more loosely (close enough)? Does the umpiring crew communicate more or less? All of these concerns - and others - contribute to how umpires call the game and move it along to conclusion.

Is it fair to the participants and morally and professionally right to loosen up the calls in order to complete the game before one team gets embarrassed and frustrated in a lopsided game? Is the integrity of the umpires compromised and does the change in the way calls are made hurt the game? Is it improper to "adjust" the umpiring of the game to the level of play of the game in order to finish it as quickly as possible? These are questions that umpires must consider as they umpire games that become one-sided early.

From an umpire's perspective, getting this type of game over is in the best interests of all involved. The better team does not change its well-practiced approach and execution to hitting, running and fielding - thus avoiding picking up bad habits that might carry over into the next game. These players should not be forced into swinging at bad pitches, to batting opposite-handed or to making poor or halfhearted fielding decisions just to make the game competitive. The losing team isn't forced to endure more runs being piled on and further embarrassment.

Perhaps the opportunity for player injury is reduced and the chance for ill will between coaches and players is also lessened when the game ends quickly. Surely, no coach wants to embarrass an opponent by continuing to pile on runs. However, the coach does not want to embarrass his own players either by asking them to leave bases early in order to help the opponent get outs.

You must have a team effort to be able to successfully umpire the blowout game. Umpires, coaches and players need be on the same page in order to make decisions of how to proceed through this potentially long game. Taking into consideration the embarrassment of the players, the integrity of the umpires and the frustration of everyone involved, the umpires must create an environment that allows all parties to work together for the betterment of the student-athlete.

Once a game gets out of hand, everyone in the ballpark knows it and many of the emotions begin to set in with each individual. The key is to work those emotions and perceptions as a group. Check out the perceptions with the coaches and the players. Between innings or during breaks within the inning, take a stroll toward the head coach and be blunt in your conversation with him or her. Ask the coach what he or she thinks about the progress of the game, and get a feel for how the coach wants the game called. Let the coach know that you want what is best for the players, and mention that you will talk with the other coach when you have more spare time. Checking out coaches' perceptions will give you a better understanding of how to call the game. If the coaches' perceptions match up, adjust your calling accordingly.

Perceptions or coaching philosophies, however, do not always match up. This creates a difficult position for the umpires to control. If coaches want the game to end quickly, open up the strike zone and call outs on close plays. This often takes out the anxiety of the blowout game. When it comes to a lopsided game and both coaches do not see eye-to-eye, umpires need to take a more aggressive stand on how they call that game. Is there a middle ground? Is there somewhere in the game that can change to speed up the long game that is not viewed as "hurrying the game up"?

There are possible solutions and techniques to speeding up the game when both coaches have differing opinions about conducting the game. First, understand that coaches are in the dugouts and in the coaches' boxes. They do not have the best angle to see inside and outside corners of the plate. For this reason, widening the strike zone can "disguise" your expansion of the strike zone. Keep your zone within reason; however, stretch it far enough so you can add an extra strike call here and there to move the game along. Be aware that coaches are able to see you expanding your strike call up and down because they can see where the pitch crosses the batter. You will be questioned more by coaches if you adjust up and down.

Another technique that can be used to speed up the lopsided game is managing the non-playing time of the game. Making sure you are encouraging the players to hustle in and out from the field, abide to the warm-up pitch count. Getting players ready to play quickly can also help in moving the game along. If the play of the game is slow, you still have the opportunity to dictate the speed around the slow game.

Close calls need to always favor in the direction of "outs" in games that are slow to end. The quicker you can get outs, the faster the game will go, so calling a player "out" on the bang-bang play will help in officiating that longwinded game. Be cautious not to lose your integrity as an official during these times of the game. However, there are three or four plays each game that could be called either way. We want to be sure to

call these close plays as “outs.” Do not think of all plays as “outs”; that will get you in trouble with the coach who does not want the game to end. Yet, “outs” on all close calls are viable to moving the game along.

The blowout softball game can be frustrating and embarrassing, and also trying for umpires, players and coaches. Those high-scoring games that seem to never end can be the most difficult to officiate. Working with coaches and players to assist in handling these types of games is essential for survival. As we all may know, we cannot please everyone all the time, but during a blowout game, it is important to alter the way we work the game, manage our time and communicate with coaches. No one wants to be involved with a 31-0 softball game, but understanding the importance of working through the long game as best as we can, speeding up the game at specific times, and keeping the integrity of the game intact will help you and everyone else make it through a game that needs to be played and must be finished.