

Four Stages of Umpiring

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The *first stage* is **confusion**. The new umpire finds the complexity of the rules daunting. There are so many details, so many special cases. How is anyone supposed to remember all this stuff? And why did they make the rule book so confusing? Why do you have to look in several places to find everything that applies to a given situation? What's the POINT of some of this stuff anyway -- I mean all those words just to describe a catch? He may even have heard of interpretations but he can't fathom how an interpretation might be different from a rule. It just looks like someone is re-writing the rules on the fly or trying to make the confusing even more complex by drawing in all sorts of strange extraneous stuff. Some umpires never get beyond this stage and simply work games (poorly) by instinct or just give up. This is where you find people who "umpire" as if they were a "player" or a "fan" -- looking at the wrong stuff and ruling more by emotion than reason.

The *second stage* is **overconfidence**. This umpire KNOWS his rule book. He can find the right rule for every situation. There's nothing that can come up that he can't pull out the right rule or rules. Of course he enforces the rules as written because what else are they there for? This is where the "rule book" umpires come from. Some umpires never get beyond this stage, and wonder why people look at them funny when they enforce rules so literally. To this umpire, interpretations are something cited by umpires who simply haven't spent enough time studying the REAL rules. The constant complaints often cause such umpires to give up. But worse is yet to come.

The *third stage* is **disillusionment**. This umpire realizes, to his growing horror, that the rule book DOESN'T cover everything that comes up in real games. That sometimes, even when the rule book covers stuff, the literal result is patently unfair. He's been burned time and again by situations that force him to go beyond the text of the rules, but he has no game instincts or understanding of precedents to carry him through. This really is the last straw for some umpires. Some just throw up their hands and decide they are going to do whatever strikes their fancy because the rule book is clearly nuts, and by this point they've learned to BS their way past most common problems. Many "experienced" umpires fall into this category. Others are lucky enough to stumble across the "secret" rules -- the precedents and approved rulings that guide them past many knotty problems. They view the rule book as a flawed document, only salvaged by what they NOW know are the "real" rules -- the authoritative approved rulings. Some use these as a crutch to support what is still basically a fundamental lack of understanding of what the rules are trying to accomplish.

The *final stage* is **respect**. Umpires who keep working to learn inevitably end up here. It is impossible to study this material in depth without ending up with an abiding respect for a set of rules that has been honed by over a century of competitive professional play. These rules work. They are definitive enough to keep the game within traditional bounds while still being flexible enough to cover unusual circumstances. The rules support the role of the umpire without constraining him to a simplified set of solutions that might not really produce a fair and pleasing game. It is this very flexibility, which makes the rules so tough for new umpires to comprehend, but it is the essential factor in keeping the game ever alive and ever fascinating. Such umpires view the rules much like a constitution -- codifying certain basic principles, which underlie all game discipline and enforcement. The interpretations flesh out this constitution, providing a more concrete framework for handling specific plays, but with a distinct degree of sensitivity to what's currently in vogue as regards such details. The traditions of the game are constantly at odds with modern trickery as players and managers try novel stuff. Umpires who reach this stage are keenly aware of the checkered history of the game, and that things like stealing a base or throwing a curve ball were once considered unsportsmanlike, while grabbing a runner by the belt was perfectly OK as long as you did it while the one umpire working the game was looking elsewhere. The rules do not exist in isolation. They have to work -- in real games where tradition meets new tricks daily -- where umpires not only have to make calls, they have to sell them -- and then they have to come back and work the next game with the same two teams. Understanding how to apply the rules effectively to this degree is a religious experience -- satisfying, awe inspiring, and fear inducing all at the same time.