



## Iowa high-school baseball snafu has locals asking: Can you eject an entire crowd ?

Umpires can throw out players. Umpires can throw out coaches. But can umpires throw out fans?

In mid-June, umpire Don Briggs ejected not just a fan — he tossed out the entire crowd at a high-school baseball game between Winfield-Mount Union and West Burlington.

That was a first in the state's history, according to the Iowa High School Athletics Association.

West Burlington Superintendent James Sleister was called to the scene at the field about 75 miles southeast of Iowa City after the ejection. He arrived, saw the entire crowd standing in the streets outside the baseball diamond, and heard with the reason for ejection: fan unruliness.

Everyone seemed calm then, he said.

"They went behind the fence but refused to leave the area because they wanted to know why they were being kicked out," he said. "They weren't standing there screaming or anything like that. After I talked to people, there was no unruliness."

The excitement started in the bottom of the fifth inning, when a perceived foul ball was ruled fair by the umpiring crew. The coach of Winfield-Mount Union (the fielding team) came out to argue the call. As the confrontation took place, the West Burlington coach sent his runner home from third because he didn't see the umpire signal time-out.

Briggs instructed the runner to return to third base because he had called time-out. He then handed out ejection warnings to both of the team's head coaches. Afterwards, he turned around, facing the stands and handed out a warning of a possible ejection to the entire crowd. Sleister said the umpire handed the crowd a warning because he had heard repeated negative comments.

Following the warning, a fan responded by yelling, "You've got to be

kidding.”

Immediately after the comment, Briggs informed the audience members, around 100 people, that they had to leave.

The school superintendent believes that the umpire lost control of the situation when he refused to admit an initial mistake. That led to greater problems.

“He just started digging himself a hole and couldn’t get out of it; he kept compounding it,” Sleister said. “It’s a tough job being an official — you’ve got to command the respect of the position and not make one error after another.”

The state athletics association and the Southeast Iowa Officials Association declined further comment. Briggs’ phone number is not listed, and officials refused to provide contact information to The Daily Iowan.

JoBerka, the Iowa City Athletics Officials Association’s executive secretary, declined to comment on the specifics of that particular high-school game because he didn’t witness the events and his organization was not affiliated with that game. However, he was willing to provide perspective of the proper conduct in removing an unruly fan at such an event.

Generally, he said, officials need to work through the home team’s management if they have trouble with fans. If an administrator is not present, then the home team’s head coach assumes responsibility.

Because Sleister was not in attendance, Briggs went to the West Burlington head coach to seek approval for removing the audience. The coach declined to eject the entire crowd, so Briggs made the decision to empty the stands.

Sleister was able to resolve the issue by talking with the police officers at the scene and the umpire. They reached an agreement that the crowd could watch the game only if they agreed to refrain from trash talk. If they broke the rule, they could face arrest.

Comments from the crowd are hard to avoid, especially in baseball, where nearly every play relies on an official’s judgment. Jason Norman, a local umpire and a member of the Iowa City officials’ organization, said all high-school games have questionable calls because only two umpires officiate the games. When a call is made and incurs with resentment, he said, it’s the officials’ job to end the negativity.

"A lot of times, when that happens, you just kind of got to squash it at the beginning," he said. "You can't let them get at you and let them keep badgering you. You just try to get the next one right."

Ejecting a fan is rare, and Norman said he has never done it.

West High Athletics Director Marv Reiland, who has dealt with removing fans at sporting events, doesn't think an umpire should ever have to throw out a fan. Instead, he believes the event manager or an administrative official should be relied upon to perform those duties.

"If people are unruly, vocal, or profane, [and] it's disrupting the flow of the game, they need to be asked to stop whatever they are doing," he said. "If they can't do that, then they need to be asked to leave the premises."

Joe Ewing, a fan at the June 24 West High baseball game against Muscatine, said he understands that officiating any sporting event is tough. It's one thing for an major-league umpire to make a mistake, he said, but everyone attending a high-school game should maintain a positive atmosphere.

The fans in attendance at that West High game mostly behaved that way, encouraging players on the diamond, praising good plays, and demonstrating good sportsmanship.

"The behavior when they come to a high-school sporting event is that they remain positive regardless whether their comments pertain to their own team, the opposing team ... or the other fans in the stands," Ewing said. "If they can't make positive comments, they can attend but should remain quiet."

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