

Hey, Ump, Just Make the Call

by PHIL TAYLOR

You know what I've always wanted to know about referees and umpires? Absolutely nothing. They do not move the needle a millimeter on my curiosity scale. It's nothing personal—in fact, it is extremely impersonal, which is just the approach I prefer from officials. Other than accuracy, the most desirable quality in refs and umps is the absence of personality. They should be charisma-free, as bland as baby food.

But officials keep inserting themselves into the middle of the action, often because of glaring errors—like NBA ref Mark Wunderlich's missing a crucial intentional foul call in a Mavericks-Nuggets playoff game last spring—or, even worse, with ridiculous power trips. On Sunday home plate umpire Ed Rapuano ejected Phillies centerfielder Shane Victorino, who was about 350 feet away, for arguing balls and strikes. Officials have become so intrusive that, against my will, they have crept into my consciousness as distinct characters.

I wish I couldn't immediately recognize NBA ref Dick Bavetta, who resembles the farmer with the pitchfork in *American Gothic*, or easily picture the sweat dripping from Joey Crawford's shaved dome. I'm trying to forget that I know the nicknames of umpires like Cowboy Joe West and Balkin' Bob Davidson, and that Tim McClelland takes longer to signal a strike than I take to make a sandwich. But basketball and baseball arbiters now draw so much attention as individuals, whether intentionally or not, that they're impossible to ignore.

That's why the opening of NFL training camps last week was a welcome event—it means that the return of refreshingly anonymous officials is almost upon us. Ed Hochuli and his Bunyanesque biceps are familiar, but 99% of NFL refs and umpires and judges would be unrecognizable even if they walked into your kitchen and flagged you for illegal use of the pans. Do the names Michael Banks, Derick Bowers, Roy Ellison, Keith Ferguson and Mark Perlman mean anything to you? They were members of the Super Bowl crew last February, and I'm happy to report that I've never heard of any of them.

NFL officials are no more competent than their counterparts in other sports, but they do their jobs without making themselves nearly as noticeable. They toss their flags, pick them up and return quickly to the background, hardly ever giving the impression that they consider themselves part of the show. While big league umpires take the time to go jaw-to-jaw in arguments with players and managers, NFL officials rarely even take their eyes off the field when coaches blast them from the sidelines. While certain NBA referees develop reputations for



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quick triggers or slow fuses, NFL officials seem as interchangeable as AA batteries.

There was a time when more officials strove for that kind of anonymity. "The greatest compliment I could be paid," Tom Gorman, an umpire from 1951 to '76, once said, "was when somebody asked, 'Who umped that game?'" But for too many of Gorman's successors, keeping a low profile is harder than deciding whether a batter checked his swing or went around.

It's not entirely their fault: Minor league umps and refs often feel the need to develop a distinctive style in order to get noticed and promoted. Beyond that, increased media interest has officials believing that they are part of the entertainment. Television networks put tiny microphones on them and play back their in-game conversations. Broadcasters discuss the variation in individual umps' strike zones or how tightly some refs call touch fouls, and they clue viewers in on their personal stories.

As a result, I am now Rain Man when it comes to officials. *Hunter Wendelstedt*. *Son of Harry*, former umpire. *Harry* worked with *Shag Crawford*, father of umpire *Jerry* and referee *Joey*. *More family connections: The late Darell Garretson*, onetime chief of NBA officials, had a refereeing son *Ron*, who sometimes works with *Leon Wood*, a member of the 1984 U.S. Olympic team. *Other former players: Ref Bernie Fryer* was once a *Trail Blazer*. . .

I'm not the only one who has soaked this up, of course. When Bavetta challenged Charles Barkley to a race during All-Star weekend in 2007, reporters were as interested in the 67-year-old ref as in Sir Charles. What could possibly be next? Referees with entourages, rolling up to the nightclubs? Umpires dating Kardashian sisters?

Once officials get a whiff of fame, it raises the possibility that they'll play to the crowd or the cameras, even if subconsciously. A ref or ump who is concerned with his image will also be less likely to risk looking weak or intimidated. Maybe that's what happened to home plate umpire Bill Hohn in Miami last month. After he got an earful from Braves catcher Brian McCann over a strike call, the play-by-play went like this: Bill Hohn stopped the game. Bill Hohn went over to Atlanta's dugout and confronted the team. Bill Hohn ejected manager Bobby Cox. Bill Hohn tossed McCann at the start of the next half inning. Bill Hohn fist-bumped Marlins catcher John Baker after Florida's win. Bill Hohn was a topic of discussion among TV sports talking heads the next day. I'm betting that fans didn't go home that night asking, "Who umped that game?"

Here's a question for Hohn and other umpires and referees: Do you still want them to ask? □

Talk Back

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