

How to Argue with an Umpire

Advice for Managers, Coaches and Players

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You really, really didn't like that last call, and you think it's time to go out and see if you can get the umpire to change his or her mind. Here are some tips on how to "argue" with an umpire. You may win, you may not. But if you keep some of these items in mind, your chances are better.

1. Recognize that you have a sales job in front of you. The umpire has made his call, now you're trying to get him to change his mind. Any salesperson will tell you that this takes tact and persuasiveness. Remember that you DON'T really want to argue with the umpire – you want him to consider your alternative view.
2. Go to the right umpire. Not to the oldest one, or to the plate umpire. Go to the one who made the call. No umpire is allowed to overrule another, so if you've gone to the wrong umpire, the conversation you've earned should sound like:
 "I thought he missed that swipe tag at 2B on the batter-runner."
 "Yep, the runner from second touched 3B on his way through to score"
 "Huh?"
 "You're talking to the wrong umpire. He made that call, not me."
 "Oh."
3. Don't show up the umpire or grandstand. You're there to make your point, not put on a performance for the crowd. Control your anger, no matter how ticked-off you are. Most umpires will listen to arguments - none should listen to you yell at them.
4. Don't blame an ump for your player's mistake(s). Yes, you're ticked because Johnny threw the ball out of play. Then the award to runners raises your blood pressure another notch. Flailing away at the ump won't win you any style points, and might win you an early trip to the parking lot.
5. If you are of the "great pitch, Jason" school of trying to get under the ump's skin, be careful. If this ploy gets noticed, please don't give the old "but I wasn't talking to you, ump" palaver. Some of us did, in fact, fall off the turnip truck right after Woodstock.
6. Recognize when it is futile. Sometimes the umpire is not willing to discuss his call. When this happens, resist the urge to get the parting shot in.
7. If you paint an umpire into a corner, or try to intimidate him, you've likely either shut him up or gotten him defensive. Either way he's not listening to you, and you're not going to persuade him to change his mind, which is why you're out there, right?
8. The word that should get you ejected immediately is not the dreaded "f-word." It's the "Y-word." "You." As in "You made a terrible call" or "You are a terrible umpire." Talk about the call, not the individual who made it. "I think that call is wrong" is factual. "You got the call wrong" is personal.

9. When you are about to personally berate an ump, imagine an arbiter who, the whole game, said to you stuff like: "Can't you find a kid who can reach the plate?" "What were you thinking of when you bunted that power hitter?" or something even more insulting. An umpire who behaved this way would be sent packing in a New York second. Should a manager or coach be able to say things the umpire can't?
10. Allow for the fact that the umpire is probably viewing the play from a different angle than you are. In some cases, your angle may be better. In other cases, his will be. Unfortunately, he's stuck with his.
11. When a call doesn't go your way, remember you're stuck with the umpire for the rest of the game. Don't moan, bitch and gripe for the next two hours. Don't play mind games with the umpire. That call is history, what you're really interested in are the calls for the rest of the game.
12. Set a positive role model for your players. Hustle your butt out there, but don't charge the umpire like a raging bull. Make your case crisply, but calmly. When it's done, hustle back. And don't moan to your players about the umpire all game - all it does is teach the players that they can blame their lack of success on anything and/or everything external.
13. Good things to say:
 After the play is complete and before you leave the dugout: "Time, please?"
 [Umpire grants you time, and you jog out to the proper umpire.]
 "Blue, I have a question about that call. Why did blah-blah get called out?"
 [Listen, without interrupting, until umpire is finished.]
 "OK, I thought that yadda-yadda should have been called."
 [Umpire should have a reason why this wasn't true.]
 Shut mouth. Think. If it makes sense, say "Thanks." Turn, and go to dugout.
14. If it doesn't make sense, say so in a nice way, and make an argument which is better than the mechanical game of "Did so" "Did not." For example, having heard that your runner was sent back on a catcher's interference play, come up with something better than "But the runner on second was stealing, so you can't let the catcher take it away just by putting his glove up." The answer you get could be: "Sure can, that's what the book says." You're toast, even though you have the rule right and the umpire has the rule wrong. But you have nowhere left to argue.

Try: "I know runners are sent back if a runner gets nailed by a batted ball or the batter is hit by a pitch. But a catcher can cause interference on any swing of the bat and so that's the one exception in the book where a stealing runner gets to keep his stolen base." You may not get your ruling, but you will have an umpire reading his rulebook after the game. At least, I hope so.

Which brings up:

15. Know the rules to a reasonable level. If you've been chirping "1+1" after every overthrow, don't expect to be taken seriously when you come out to discuss a rule interpretation. One of the weakest arguments (after a hairy play/call) is "But that's gotta be somethin', blue!" Be specific: "Isn't that obstruction?" On the other hand, coming out between innings with "Ump, I have a question on a rule, please," will almost always win you a chance to haul your soapbox out. Knowing the right rule reference will get you even farther.

16. If you're absolutely darn certain that you have the rule right, and they don't, consider the game situation. If it's a blowout, or in the first inning of a 7-inning game, is this worthy of a protest? Even if you're right, perhaps not. In an important contest, don't be afraid to do it. We all hate protests, but if it's the only way to get obstinate umpires to confer or read a rulebook, then I very reluctantly suggest that it might be the right thing to do.
17. Never come out of the dugout waving a rulebook, but don't be afraid to reference the book in the dugout, come out, and simply say "The rule that applies here is 5.09(f)."
18. If you manage to get the umpires to confer with each other (judgment, missed call or rules situation), you've achieved your objective so retreat to near your dugout (stay on the field). Let them confer. They'll beckon you over when they've figured it out. Then hustle. Don't make them chase you down.
19. The correct ratio in a discussion is one-on-one. Get your players and coaches out of there, then make your case.
20. Control your parents and players. Tell your players "You swing the bat, it's my job to deal with the umpires."
21. Before you complain that the other dugout is intimidating the umpire into making a call, remember that umpires are trained to delay making calls in many circumstances. In some cases, the rules require the call to be delayed. In others, they have simply learned that pausing an extra second or so helps them be sure what they saw, and that they are about to apply the correct rule. Interference and obstruction calls, in particular, may require the umpire to make several judgments. If the call is correct, when all is said and done, it doesn't matter how it got made.

Remember that, at the end of the day, the umpire is in control of the game. Leave it that way. If the guy cannot call a curve ball, or won't give the outside corner, then his reality differs from yours. Unfortunately, his is the only one that counts. Deal with it. Adapt to it. And if you and your team can adapt to this faster than the other coach can, then you have an advantage, right?