

The Tension Convention

Arguments, Ejections and Other Unpleasantness in Youth Baseball

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Foreword: This is a handy little document that may serve to help you in dealing with the inevitable differences of opinion that happen during 99.6785% of Little League and youth games. It's simply a culling of input I've had over the years. The goal here is not to avoid arguments, but to make them shorter, sweeter - and ultimately result in fewer ejections. I am dealing with complaining adults here; I brook less babbling from players.

1. Usually, you can tell when there's going to be a brouhaha. Stand your ground, do NOT approach either dugout (or the moaner), and wait for your honored guest. If it's between innings, and you're down the right-field line, let him come to you. Most folks won't want to walk that far, so your mission is accomplished.
2. Let the coach get the first words in. This tells you: a) what he is so flipping mad about and b) his demeanor and vocal tone.
3. Most of the time, your first step is to calm down the plaintiff. If you need to gesture, use a flat hand, do not point. Some sample retorts:
 - "Take it easy."
 - "Relax."
 - "When you calm down, I will explain the call."
4. Once again, stand your ground. Do NOT back up or move toward a complainer. Freeze. If there's any bumping or other such nastiness to be done, make sure it is initiated by the other guy.
5. After a few words from the coach, take the floor. Keep it short and sweet.
 - "The call's not going to change."
 - "He's still out."
 - "Book rule."
6. I hate this new-agey word, but try to achieve closure.
 - "We're all done on this call."
 - "Let's turn the page."
 - "Lotta baseball left."
 - "Let's get a batter up here."
7. If this doesn't end the conversation, now the coach is venturing into the uncharted waters of Camryville. Meaning: He's going to be in his car soon. Particularly, beware the six P's:
 - **Profane:** For me, a potty mouth is an immediate ticket out of the park.
 - **Personal:** When the conversation veers from "Bad call" to "You stink." As Kevin Hunter says, beware of any sentences that begin with the second-person pronoun.
 - **Prolonged:** How much time is being wasted here?

- **Partisan:** "You don't call 'em that way for the other team." Any intimation of bias is a flat no-no.
 - **Performing:** Do not allow gestures or other behavior that could incite the fans. The offender is just trying to show you up, not argue a call.
 - **Physicality:** The slightest bump or touch here is a ticket home.
8. Remember that an ejection is the umpire's last resort, and generally can't be undone. Make a firm gesture that all can see and then walk away. At this point, your partner becomes the "rodeo clown." It is his job to get rid of the bad guy. If the ejectee keeps after you, mentally note all the transgressions, and be prepared to go the league, tourney director or other poohbahs.
 9. An ejected adult **MUST** leave eyeshot and earshot of the field, immediately. Enlist an assistant coach to help you here.
 10. Try to return to the game and turn the page as quickly as possible.

A bunch of don't's

DON'T:

- Ever reference poor play or lousy coaching decisions. You are not there to "get back" at a plaintiff.
- Deal with fans unless they are interfering in the game or acting inappropriately toward players or coaches.
- Ever use the word "forfeit."
- "Prove" a rule to a coach. You are not there to give a rules clinic. State the rule succinctly (or give a number). Done.
- Say "You're wrong"; "Shut up"; "Find a seat" or any such nonsense. Leave insults to the diz-brain who's yelling at you. Alternatives: "That's not the rule."; "That is incorrect."
- Ask questions. "Whatsamatter? Don't like my zone?"; "You got a problem?" You're now inviting a beef.
- Start arguments. End them.
- Bring a rulebook anywhere within 2.5 miles of your game.
- Soft-soap your palaver with stuff like: "Well, in my opinion..." or "I made the best judgment I could." What need is there to explain a judgment call?
- EVER, EVER, EVER think you are wrong just because someone is upset with you.
- Allow coaches to beef at your partner so only you can hear it.
- Threaten. "If I hear one more word ..." and the like. What if the coach then turns to you and says "Word"?
- Warn. Act.
- Work in a league that does not back its umpires to the hilt. Life's too short to exist without backup.

And some do's

DO:

- Very little before the game begins. Have as few conversations as possible. The goal is not to get anyone ticked off before a pitch is thrown.
- Treat opposing coaches in the same fashion.
- Learn to ignore little chirps like "Good pitch, Johnny."
- Jump into a partner's beef if a second complainant joins the fray.
- Stop the game if all else fails. This particularly helps with misbehaving fans. Go to the coach of the team whom the fan is supporting (it's easy to tell). Let HIM get rid of the jerk. Telling a coach you will suspend play usually works wonders.
- Get out of Dodge after the game. No handshakes, chats or socializing. If you want a tepid wiener that badly, go get changed, or send a gofer.
- Put this into your hard drive: As an argument is beginning, remind yourself that the coach is wrong. Never lose this mindset.
- Use your partner's opinion if you feel you need it.
- Use vocal tones and delivery to match those of the offender.
- A little rules explanation BETWEEN INNINGS, if a coach is acting civilly.
- See how few words you can actually use in defusing a beef.
- Give a reasonable coach a short length of rope before you start fashioning a noose.
- Learn to celebrate your innate unpopularity as an arbiter. ILOOOVE getting booed.

In general

By using these techniques, among others I've learned along the way, I have had very few ejections in my years as an umpire. I find that if you become a good "de-fuser," then the conversation doesn't get into that "6P" area. For beginning umpires, so much of this avocation is about game management, not just getting the calls right.

Here's hoping that you get into a good tension convention in your next game (it does keep you alert!), and that you handle it with aplomb. Did I just type aplomb?