

PEI

Safe at the plate: How P.E.I. is changing the 'culture' of abuse toward umpires

New policy sets ground rules for how coaches interact with officials

[Shane Ross](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 25, 2023 6:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: June 26, 2023



Coaches will no longer be able to dispute judgment calls, but they can question an umpire's interpretation of a rule. (Shane Ross/CBC)

Rhonda Pauls remembers the thrill of being a young umpire and making that close call at home plate: "You're out!"

She also remembers that shrinking feeling of seeing an enraged coach charge out of the dugout to tell her, among other things, that she's wrong.

"It was terrifying for me," Pauls said.

"Especially as a female on the field with, you know, large men and you have someone bearing down on you, red in the face, spitting sunflower seeds in your face, waving their arms, telling you that you're terrible and you made the wrong call and you've ruined the game for everybody.

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"It doesn't make you feel very good."

Pauls stuck with it, however, and is now an accomplished umpire who officiates high level games in Canada and the U.S.



Rhonda Pauls, executive director of Baseball P.E.I., says umpires are the target of abuse that would not be tolerated in any other workplace setting. (Shane Ross/CBC)

But she doesn't want other umpires, especially young ones, to experience the kind of abuse she says wouldn't be tolerated in the grocery store, workplace or any other environment without repercussions.

As the new executive director of Baseball P.E.I., Pauls has introduced a new "no confrontation" policy that forbids coaches from U-18 teams and below from entering an umpire's space to dispute calls.

Up to the ump to engage

Here's how it works:

Coaches are not permitted to argue "judgment calls," such as balls and strikes, or safe and out calls on the bases.



'Everybody's making mistakes on the field, but the umpires seem to be held to a different standard than everyone else,' says Rhonda Pauls. (Shane Ross/CBC)

Coaches can, however, approach an umpire to question an interpretation of a rule, provided they remain off the field of play. Even then, it is up to the umpires to decide if they want to engage. Pauls said.

"We're hoping that the coaches, by virtue of the fact that they have to stop there and have that moment to wait for the umpire to approach, that they'll be able to collect themselves and keep the conversations respectful, which is really all we're looking for."

The coaches and team officials are responsible for keeping their fans from heckling the umpires.



Safe and out calls are among the most contentious decisions umpires have to make. (Racheal Grazias/Shutterstock)

"You can usually tell by the direction of the comments, which side of the field the spectator is supporting," Pauls said.

"So the umpire will now be going to the coach and saying, 'You know, grandpa in the blue jacket back there is commenting on every ball and strike in disagreement with me. I can't focus. I need that to stop.'"

A breach of the rule could result in an automatic ejection.

“It takes a certain comfort level to expect a teenager to be able to deal with... the misbehaviour of an adult.”

— Mike Richards

Mike Richards, the supervisor of umpires for Baseball P.E.I., says the new policy will help make it easier to recruit and retain umpires, about 75 per cent of whom are in their teens and making about \$35 a game.

He said there were times, following a confrontation with a coach, when he wanted to "crawl into a hole" and get the game over as soon as possible. Over the years, the abuse of officials has become normalized, he said, leaving many to reconsider their decision to become an umpire.

"It takes a certain comfort level to expect a teenager to be able to deal with or, you know, handle the misbehaviour of an adult," Richards said.

"So we wanted to essentially look at these situations and try to find and focus on a solution to prevent it or eliminate it from the game altogether."

'It shouldn't be a thing'

The rule is working "pretty smooth" so far this season, said 13-year-old Xavier Power, a second-year umpire on P.E.I. — though he wishes it wasn't needed in the first place.

"Coaches should not be yelling at umpires anyway. It shouldn't be a thing."



Xavier Power, 13 and in his second year of umping, says coaches should never be yelling at umpires.
(Submitted by Jillian Power)

Power said he became an umpire because he loves to watch baseball. He said the experience has been positive. Sometimes he might hear a "snort" from a hitter who thought a strike was a ball, but everyone has been on their best behaviour.

Power said there are times when umpires will make mistakes, but the new rule makes him more confident about how to address it.

"You have to say, 'I messed up'... Yeah, you do feel embarrassed."

All right to be wrong

Pauls said it should be OK for umpires to get a call wrong sometimes.

"Everybody's making mistakes on the field, but the umpires seem to be held to a different standard than everyone else.

“If a player lets the ground ball through their legs because they didn't get their glove down on the ground out in front, nobody yells at them for it.”

— Rhonda Pauls

"When the coach makes a mistake, you don't usually see the players or parents berating them for it. If a player lets the ground ball through their legs because they didn't get their glove down on the ground out in front, nobody yells at them for it. They say, 'Hey, that's OK, we'll get it next time.'"

But when an umpire makes a mistake?

"'Boy, that was terrible. You're terrible. You shouldn't be here.' Well, if they weren't here, we wouldn't have a game. So that's kind of what we're trying to change the culture of."

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