



BLUE

BY
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With old man winter slowing down and spring showing signs of busting out of it's sleep soon, you can almost smell the fresh grass, the popcorn, hotdogs, peanuts and cotton candy. You can almost hear the sound of cracking bats, the snapping mits and the man in blue yelling, "PLAY BALL!!".

America's favorite way to spend a summer's evening is just around the corner and as I scramble to read up on the winter activities of my favorite team, I remember how much I wanted to be a baseball player when I was a boy. Even though I am content with the life that has come my way, I would sell this old typewriter in a minute for a chance to work in the greatest game ever invented.

Oh I know the playing days are far behind me, but... say, maybe it's not too late to be an umpire? Why not? To be right there in the middle of all the action. To be able to go to so many games and get paid for doing so! To have the power to throw the bum out of the game whenever he gives me a bad time.

Yea, that's the ticket! I could be a major league umpire!

So I set out early so I can be on the field by spring training. As luck would have it, I'm introduced to a local gentleman who just happens to be a professional umpire.

"Great," I think, "He can tell me where I can pick up an application."

Well we got together and I must say that it only took two cups of coffee to realize that I was way out in left field in my desire to becoming a major league umpire.

For those of you who share the same limitations, let me introduce you to Mr. Larry Vanover.

Larry is a triple AAA umpire - one step away from the big leagues. The good news is that

making it to AAA is no small achievement. The bad news is that making that final step to the big ballparks is a major step, indeed.

Larry, a native of Owensboro, Kentucky who now lives here in Nashville, has been a professional umpire for the past nine years. He was promoted to the AAA level last year and worked out west in the Pacific Coast League.

This year Larry will be calling the balls and strikes here at home with the American Association.

I was excited about meeting him and anxious to get my own umping career started. I could almost smell the grass beneath my feet and hear the roar of the crowd from the stands.

"So tell me Larry," I asked, as we began to travel through our first cup of coffee, "Where's the employment office for umps?"

The look on his face was not encouraging.

"Well," he began, "There's a couple of schools down in Florida that you'll have to start with if you want to be a professional umpire."

Okay, I thought, that doesn't sound too bad. A couple of weeks at the school learning all the rules should be no big thing. Heck, I already know all that stuff... 3 strikes and you're out... 4 balls and the guy goes to first... tie goes to the runner... piece of cake! I can breeze through that and maybe work on a tan at the beach while I'm there.

As my cup of coffee began to cool down, so did my enthusiasm as Larry, 32, began to paint the big picture for me. By the second refill, I not only was reduced to being a paying customer at the games, but I began to feel guilty for all those years I spent screaming at the boys in blue at baseball games.

If you want to be a baseball umpire, you start by going to one of the two umpire schools in Florida run by the legends of the profession, Harry Wendelstedt and Joe Brinkman. These schools only last for six weeks, but at 12 hours a day, and 6 days a week, you certainly get your \$1600 worth.

And the margin for error is zero if one wants to move on to the next step. The rule book alone is more than 100 pages long with over 1000 rules that a budding umpire must be able to recall without fail.

"When an instructor comes to you and gives you a situation, you'd better be able to tell

him exactly what rule applies without hesitation." says Larry, who serves as an instructor at the Wendelstedt school during the off season.

The school is the oldest running school for umpires available. In addition to producing major league umpires since 1930, the school also serves a number of students who just want to brush up on their skills before they hit the high school and college circuit.

The school spends a few hours every morning going over the rule book in a classroom situation, but the major part of the school takes place out on the field where the students are grilled over every situation imaginable that an umpire will face in a season.

"It's a grueling six weeks, but when the student comes out of the school, they will have a full understanding of the game from the intricate mechanics of pitching to catching a flyball in center." Vanover tells me. "The umpire is responsible for keeping the flow of the game, and the only way they can do that is if they have an intense understanding of the game."

Each class has from 150 to 200 students. Out of those, about 30 will drop out before the end (hell, I dropped out before my 2nd cup of coffee!). The best 25 to 30 students will move on to an evaluation course with the remaining students sent on to work in the high school and college ranks with an understanding of what they need to work on in order to move into the professional ranks, if that is their desire.

Those lucky enough to move on to the evaluation course will find another grueling schedule of working seven days for fourteen hours a day. Again, they are run through every situation possible at this program, run by Ed Lawrence and Mike Fitzpatrick, but this course is a lot more intense than the six week course.

The aim at this school is to prepare the umpires for their work on the field.

"So after you get through these schools, you're off to Fenway Park, right?" I asked him, somewhat hesitant of the response.

"Wrong," he says with a smile, "Graduating from these schools only improves your chances of making it to the big leagues from zero to slim." he retorts.

With my enthusiasm dragging, he continues to tell me that an umpire fresh out of school will start out in the rookie leagues, where they will get paid about \$1800 per month. But from this hefty paycheck, the new umpire must find his/her own transportation, pay for their own bed, eat what they will, and polish their own shoes.

"When you first get started, the money isn't all that great and the conditions are horrible." Larry recalls. "There are many times when you have to call a night game in one town, then drive 10-14 hours to the next town to call a one o'clock game the next day. I've had to put my uniform on in sheds where they keep the lawnmowers, in gas station restrooms, and sometimes in the corner of the visiting team's dressing room - which can be a very unpleasant experience if you get on their bad side."

Larry says the conditions improve somewhat as an umpire moves from one league to another.

"By the time you get to AA league, conditions become a lot better for you. Those first few years in rookie and single A ball were pretty tough. There's not much money, there certainly is no glamor and the conditions you work in really separate those who are in it for the glamor and the money from those who are in it because they love the game."

Now we all know that a baseball player in the rookie leagues can move up when he hits .400 consistently and sparkles with his glove on the field. But what about an umpire? I asked Larry how an umpire moves up from one league to the next.

"The umpire Development Program has six supervisors who spend their time going from one game to another, watching the umpires and rating them. When a position opens in another league, these men will send a list of the umpires they feel are ready to move up." he tells me.

"But," I ask him, still a bit confused, "A player has the stats that help determine his readiness to move up. The ump has no batting average, so how do they know when an umpire has called a good game?"

Larry continues to explain that a lot of it has to do with weeding out the bad umpires early on and not so much of promoting the best ones.

"It's not all that difficult to recognize those who simply don't have the tools. It's one thing to have all the head knowledge and know the answer to every situation, but making those snap decisions with a crowd of people screaming around you on a consistent level is quite another story."

"By the time you get to AA ball, most of the bad umpires have been weeded out. Then it becomes more a matter of how you deal with situations, people and your overall style. Supervisors look for umpires who can consistently make calls with enough confidence to sell it

to the players and fans, especially on those close calls. Like I said earlier, the umpire is responsible for the flow of the game. On those extremely close calls, the umpire must call the play correctly, confidently and without hesitation. That's where the good umpires are found."

Well I certainly am having second thoughts about becoming an ump, but my curiosity compels me to move on.

"So tell me Larry, how long does it take before you get that final call to the big ballparks?" I ask.

Larry shakes his head and smiles. "If you want to be a major league umpire, it takes a totally dedicated effort on your part. You can't approach it with a time frame on your mind because there are no guarantees. I'm on my second year at the AAA level, which is really good, but there's no guarantees that I'm going to get that last call. There are 65 major league umpires, and most of them are not going anywhere in the near future. With all the umpires at the AA level, you can see that your chances are still pretty slim even at this level. It's the chance you take. You have to be able to live with the reality that you may not make it to the majors no matter how good you might be." he says.

Well by now I'm glad that I didn't sell my typewriter. Two cups of coffee with Larry Vanover has shown me that being a professional umpire is not only a lot of hard work, but certainly not worth my effort just so I can go to the games for free. The fact that Larry has made it to the lights of Greer Stadium this summer is a great achievement, and we here in Nashville will be rooting for that day when he hopefully will get that last call that will take him to the majors.

But he knows that the odds are still not in his favor. Even after all the time that he has spent preparing himself for a chance to be a major league umpire, Larry fully understands that his chances are still not very good that he will get that final call.

"Sure it's a rough road to travel, but I wouldn't trade being an umpire for anything. The pay has gotten better from those early days in rookie league. The benefits are pretty good, and of course working with baseball people is a great thrill. Generally speaking, the players and the fans have been just great. I'm always excited about getting back on the field every spring. If I get that final call, the dream will be complete. But if it never comes, I certainly can't say that it has been all for nothing." says Larry with a keen sense of sincerity.

As for me, the thought of spending a few bucks to go watch the games at Greer stadium this summer looks much better for me now. And when I settle in with my hot dogs and peanuts this summer, I certainly will take a different look at the boys in blue who keep my game flowing so smoothly.

As my coffee runs empty, I go over my notes and think to myself, "Why would anyone want to go through all this so that they could have a slim chance at getting to the big leagues so that bums like me can spend the summer yelling at you like a crazed maniac?"

I'm forced to ask Larry.

He smiles and shrugs his shoulders. "I'm proud to be an umpire. It's a great and honorable profession..."

He pauses in thought before he finishes.

"Besides, I love the game."