

First Person

Close calls keep a major-league umpire on the ball

'Instant replays got rid of the old myth that we're blind'

Baseball continues to strike home as one of America's favorite metaphors for life, and the requisite villain—complete with dark hat—remains the umpire. In 1888 poet E.L. Thayer expressed it in "Casey at the Bat": "Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand." And the fans are still shouting it in one way or another today.

National League umpire Charlie Williams, 41, takes the bad-guy role in stride. "When the crowd boos, I know I'm probably doing something right," says the veteran of major-league calls and catcalls. "To most fans, we're a necessary evil. I think of us as the impartial judges of the event."

Williams worked as an amateur official to help pay college expenses, but it wasn't until 1975, when he was working full time as a machine operator, that he attended the Bill Kinnamon Umpire School in California. First in his class in the five-week course, he spent three years in the minor leagues before reporting to Philadelphia for his first major-league game.

Off season Williams works in real estate or on finishing his college degree. In winter he also reviews videotapes (made by his dentist) of his games at home plate. He and his wife, Diana, live in Hyde Park. He has two children, Charles, 20, and Gabriel, 11.

At home plate, Williams makes an average of 350 decisions per game. Fans love to tell him, "Hey, from where I sit, it looked like..." He recently told writer Marya Smith what it's like from where he "sits," on the hot seat.



National League umpire Charlie Williams at Wrigley Field, his favorite ballpark.

corner, and I called another strike. He walked away from the plate muttering something about giving him the shaft all night. Next thing I knew he was heading for the dugout. I told him to come back to the box, and he just threw his head in the air. So I signaled to the pitcher and called an automatic strike on the next pitch, which is the rule.

When Madlock saw what I had done, he bolted from the dugout yelling at me. Somebody grabbed him, but he continued calling me filthy names, and I became furious. I didn't see him, but the third-base coach was moving towards me to calm me down, and when I swung around to make the big heave-ho motion that Madlock was not only out but ejected from the game, I swung square into the third-base coach's mouth and stretched him out on the ground. The crowd went nuts.

Naturally, I assumed my career was over just when it had begun, but the league stuck by me, although they did issue me a stiff warning to control my temper. Officials have to have self-control or they lose everything. It's one thing for the players to be excitable in the heat of the battle. But umpires have to render their decisions impartially.

Umpires have jurisdiction over everyone in the ballpark, from fans to players to sports photographers. In one game a guy kept coming to the rail and

yelling obscenities at me. There were women and children all around. I quietly had Security radio two police officers, and the next time he started in, I told him I had had enough. He yelled some more and I motioned to the officers, who escorted him out. That time the fans cheered for me.

Most of the time when I'm calling balls and strikes, I block out the fans. All my concentration is at the plate. I listen for the people in the dugout, but that's it. I don't ever look at the screens and only rarely at the scoreboard.

That kind of intensity can create some strange situations. Last year I was home-plate umpire in Los Angeles. Both pitchers were pitching extremely well, and I was totally in the groove, my timing and everything. I didn't hear the crowd, looking at the score. Orel Hershiser was pitching for the Dodgers, and at one point late in the game, the count was 0 and 2, and he threw a curve ball that I thought was high. The catcher said, "I thought you'd give us that one." I said, "Give it to you? I haven't called that pitch all day."

The next pitch was a fast ball on the outside of the plate, and the batter got a base hit. I didn't think anything of it until the catcher said, "You just ruined it!" That was the first moment I was aware that Hershiser had been pitching a perfect game. I do feel bad because

Hershiser would have been in the Hall of Fame. But I was doing my job, being as fair as I could be.

My favorite spot is home plate because you're in the middle of the action there. Each position is tough in its own way, though. Even at third base, for the very reason that the action is sporadic, you have to force yourself to concentrate so you don't miss anything when it does come your way.

If I'm the home-plate umpire, it's my job to rub up the 72 official balls to take the slickness off the cowhide. We use a mixture of Delaware River mud and water. If the ball is too dark, that gives the pitcher the advantage over the batter, especially at night.

The umpires are the only ones who never get to leave the field. The home-plate ump has the luxury of standing on dirt. The heat is bad enough on grass, but it can be almost unbearable on artificial turf. That stuff can raise the temperature 30 degrees, making that carpet 130 or 140 degrees. I fainted once in Pittsburgh from dehydration.

I love the game of baseball and I played in school, but I never dreamed of being a professional ballplayer. I do have a dream to umpire in the league championship series. I don't have the required number of years to be considered yet. I'd be proud to have the umpire ring [a gold one with a diamond] to leave to my children.

Another dream is to have my own umpire school. Umpire school is a lot like boot camp. I soon learned that there is a reason behind every rule. For instance, the pivot at first base allows the umpire to watch the runner and then continue to follow the ball with his eyes to complete the call.

I don't pull for any team. I do have a favorite ballpark, though. Wrigley Field is the way baseball ought to be. The ivy walls, the manual scoreboard, baseball in the sun.

Sure, I see a difference in the fans. New Yorkers are the rowdiest. When my wife occasionally travels with me, I don't encourage her to attend any of my games. All fans are potentially dangerous once they know a person is connected with the umpire.

Yes, I've been hit. I've been spun clear around by the force of the ball's contact. But I've never been hit by a player. Even in the tension of the moment, when the player would like to flatten me, there's always someone to hold him back.

Have I ever reversed a call? Not in the majors. One thing I think the instant replays have done is get rid of the old myth that we're blind. They show we're 85 to 90 percent correct. I'm not in favor of changing calls later because of the camera. First of all, it delays the game. But also, it would take away the human element of the game. Of course, we're not infallible, but we're a humanistic aspect of the sport. Human error is a vital part of the game.

Feature photo by Chelsea Osgood

Umpires don't draw anyone to the ballpark. People come to see their favorite players, to watch the game and to see the manager tell the umpire off. And it's part of my job to listen to him. I've learned more patience in recent years.

Of course there are limits, like personally abusive language. I'll never forget my first ejection. It was only my fourth major-league game and my first as home-plate umpire. Bill Madlock was with the San Francisco Giants at the time and was playing in St. Louis. I had called him out on strikes his first couple of times at bat. He came up again at the top of the eighth with a 2-1 score, and I called a strike on a pitch right down the heart of the plate. The next ball was a curve on the outside