



6 Qualities That Gain You Respect

A Calm Demeanor

Having a calming influence may sound like an odd job description for an umpire. Maybe more for a psychologist or negotiator. But if you query enough knowledgeable individuals in touch with umpiring, you'll find that quality rising to the top. When it's explained, it makes sense. You need to have an inner calm yourself to project that onto the game. If you remain calm, your partners pick up on that. Your presence also affects the participants. The nature of sports is frequently emotional, and the ability to keep your calm ensures the game is maintained under control. With coaches, given the potential volatility in contests, your ability to remain calm ensures a better relationship with them when you need it to resolve tense situations.

Tom Eades, who has officiated NCAA Division I men's basketball for more than 25 years, always appreciates the partner who handles himself well.

A struggle for newer umpires working into the higher levels of their sport is knowing when to stay silent, according to Eades, who said that includes knowing when to avoid confrontations, and how to address a situation in a calming way.

"The really good umpires are virtually unflappable," said George Drouches, NCAA national coordinator of baseball umpiring and former Division III coordinator. "You can tell the guys who want to be there. They have fun, are calm and relaxed and exude a quiet leadership about them. They don't get unraveled."

The longer an official is evaluated in game situations, the greater your confidence in them, according to Craig Cress, ASA/USA Softball executive director. Unorthodox plays can prove to be a problem, but they can also help build confidence in the umpire, if handled properly

Cress combines that calmness with an "eagerness to learn and a feel for the game" as a combination that is extremely important. "You don't want uptight people who overapply the rules. It's how and why you apply them. Feel for the game is extremely important."

"If you are exceptional at the fundamentals, that calms everyone down," said Billy Van Raaphorst, who umpired professional baseball and worked his first College World Series last year. "Things might get goofy, but strong fundamentals help you prepare and address those situations. It's how coaches start to trust you.

Approachability

Along with having a calming presence, being approachable was another quality listed for umpires who get noticed in a positive way.

Think about those times when you are happy to see your partner. Part of that is because he is approachable — you "want" to go up and interact with that person.

Drouches phrases this quality a bit differently, using an "attraction vs. promotion" term. Basically, the umpires who are known and respected have that extra something. People are attracted to them. Rather than having to "promote" themselves, people want to come to them — they attract others because of who they are, their personalities, how they handle themselves on and off the field.

"It goes back even behind the scenes. Those are the guys who are the mentors — they understand they only get to keep what they give away. You want the attraction qualities — calm, selfless, unflappable, quietly in control and everyone just knows it," Drouches said.

"I like working with other umpires who are fun to be around and are good guys," Eades explained. "You have to be around them in the car, dressing room, the game and afterward, so it's important you are comfortable and get along. It takes me about five minutes to figure someone out the first time I meet him.



Greater Dallas Baseball Umpire Association

Do the work the right way and don't slack. Ego is the one thing that kills more umpires. You don't want to be the type of guy no one wants to hang around.

Danny Mascorro, a college baseball umpire whose priority conference is the Pac-12, said an umpire's natural personality often works into their approachability. "When you're approachable, you listen, respect others and their opinions," Mascorro said. "That brings you respect in return."

A Good Appearance

Appearances count. Show up on time. Dress appropriately. If you have the basics at the bottom, you're better at the top. Umpires rise on the roster by knowing the basic elements and mastering them.

Drouches said "perception" encompasses a lot of the important positive qualities: "Do you look the part? Do you have command of the game? Do you manage the game well and communicate? Do you run a smooth game? Do the coaches trust you?"

Those who shine, he said, are the umpires everyone wants on the game. "It's what separates the good from the really, really good," he said.

A smooth baseball game starts early, Drouches said, beginning with preparation — the business of umpiring. The crew chief sets the tone. How you come on the field and handle the lineup cards with the coaches and how you communicate immediately dictate others' perceptions of you. Little things, like maintaining control of the game, add to positive perceptions, he explained.

Your reactions and how you communicate back to players and coaches are critical to building positive impressions, positive relationships, and trust, according to Drouches.

Eades agreed that communication is key. "Communication is the most important issue," he said. "Bad communication can cause more problems than anything else, and you don't want that."

Gary Huber, director of assessment for the National Intercollegiate Soccer Umpires Association (NISOA), threw multiple variables into the perception/ appearance category. Senior umpires, for example, he said, "don't get overwhelmed. They don't make stupid mistakes and over-call a game. They are there for the game, not the money. They are physically and mentally awake. Their uniform is squared away. They take pride in how they look, and in the game."

Non-verbal communication is also part of how you are perceived, according to Huber. Most umpires have cues they use to communicate with their partners mentally, physically, and verbally. "You see the good crews doing this," he said. "When someone asks why he didn't get the big game, sometimes the response is as simple as 'you shrugged your shoulders when your partner made a call.'"

Confidence

It's a hard quality to define. It can be as simple as both umpires having confidence in their partners to take care of their respective areas without having to worry, but when there's a problem, working together to figure out the solution.

Confidence shows up during game situations and when dealing with coaches. If you are not confident, you are going to struggle.

Confidence takes work. To get better, you need to work on yourself and your fundamentals. For an umpire, if you are set, have great timing, and know the rules cold, the rest is easy. The better you are at the fundamentals, the fewer problems you'll have."



A Solid Background

Jim Quirk, NFLRA executive director and former NFL umpire, said the backgrounds of umpires off the field are indicators of success at a higher level. During his years with the NFL, Quirk worked in a Treasury bond trading room on Wall Street, a contentious environment which required facing off with assertive and aggressive traders. Those years helped shape him as a person, which in turn was reflected on the field. “It carried over into my officiating career,” Quirk said.

Your personality and experiences off the field help form you during a game, establishing your style. From those qualities come your strengths. In his case, for example, dealing with the intense trading environment prepared him to deal with the intensity of the NFL trenches.

Quirk cited NFL referee Jeff Triplette as another example. Triplette, who served in the military and is a retired colonel for the Army National Guard, is a high-level corporate executive (CEO of ArbitratorSports), so he is what you would call a “detail guy.”

“It also was a strength he brought to the field,” Quirk said. “You bring your background from your day-to-day job and transfer it to the field.”

Game Management

If you handle a big situation correctly, coaches and umpires will respect you. Cress called the ability to handle situations another important factor that sets you apart — the one everyone wants.

In softball, that means being ready for the second or third play in a sequence, not just the routine ground ball. If, for example, all you are ready for is the basic grounder, then the throw goes wide at first, you may just react to the second incident instead of being “ahead of the play,” he explained. “You need to be anticipatory for the unordinary. It’s not as big an issue in the pros because the talent level is higher, and the routine plays are normally made. But if you have a 10-and-under game, that’s where you learn. The ball gets thrown around a lot more.”

Cress stressed the importance of being in position for the unknown. “Former players who become umpires have this ability,” he said. “They know what the offense and defense will do and anticipate what could be missed and what might happen next. They are ready to react when the unexpected happens.”

Cress will pay attention to the umpires’ ability to anticipate and where they position themselves, along with how they adjust to situations. “If the umpires aren’t handling the routine, they probably won’t be able to handle the unusual,” he added.

Quirk suggested that speaking up when you know a fellow umpire is wrong is important as well. “Go in, ask questions, start a discussion,” he said. “Don’t ‘tell’ your partner something. Ask questions instead. Help bail out your fellow umpire. When you step in and help save your partner, you’re preventing future mistakes.”

Becoming the umpire everyone wants to work with takes experience — working games, having a mentor and being openminded.