An Insider's Tour Through 'The Land of Umpires'

NPR.org, April 6, 2009 · In As They See 'Em, Bruce Weber, a reporter for the New York Times, draws on his own less-than-stellar stint in umpire school and over 200 interviews with men in blue to provide a richly detailed, smart, sassy and sad account of organized baseball's itinerant — and invisible — "tribal society" of 300 men and a couple of women. Taking readers on a tour of the minors as well as the major leagues, Weber reveals as no author before has that, although they are held together by "the powerful bond of their singular profession," umpires are a "dysfunctional family," at odds with players, management and one another.

The book is a feast for fans hungry for baseball lore. The men behind the masks, we learn, don't say "Play ball." They find "pole benders" among the toughest calls to make. And they are by no means opposed to instant replays.

Umpires, Weber points out, are highly competitive professionals who have chosen work in a field in which disaster — as Don Denkinger discovered in the 1985 World Series — is always one play away. Years after he blew a bang-bang play at first base, Denkinger was still getting death threats, and Whitey Herzog, the aggrieved manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, presented him with a braille watch at a charity dinner.

In a fascinating examination of "ballish strikes and strikelike balls," Weber demonstrates that QuesTee, the system of cameras and computers that measures umpires' plate performances during regular season games, is scarcely the last word on the subject. Looking for "consistency" and "control," major leaguers want the strike zone "to be established early and remain unchanged for the duration of the game."

And the stars do get the benefit of the doubt. When young umpire Ted Barrett rang up Cal Ripken Jr. on a pitch on the outside corner, the Orioles legend looked back and said, "Oh, I highly doubt that."

Weber reminds us that because only a handful of slots are available, the pay is lousy and there's no real job security, few fathers light up cigars, point to their babies and say, "That kid is going to be a major league umpire." And yet, hundreds of 20- and 30-somethings are "fervid or foolish enough" to register each year for umpire school. As only a boy (or girl) of summer can understand, they're "chasin' the dream."

Joyce Ravid

Author Bruce Weber spent three years researching umpires for his book As They See 'Em.
As They See 'Em: A Fan's Travels in the Land of Umpires

By Bruce Weber

Hardcover, 352 pages
Scribner
List price: $26.00

Excerpt: 'As They See 'Em'

by Bruce Weber

NPR.org, April 3, 2009

THE LAND OF UMPIRES

Just about the first thing they teach you at umpire school is how to yank your mask off without upsetting your hat. Umpires place great stock in their appearance, and if you're trying to make a call or follow a play with your hat askew or caught in your mask straps or — the worst — spilled in the dirt, you look foolish, inept, exactly the image you don't want the ballplayers, the managers and coaches, or the fans to have of you.

Like everything else in umpiring, or at least in umpire instruction, the method for removing the mask is reasoned and precise. You keep your head straight, your eyes forward, and move your hand to your mask, not the other way around. The only reason you remove your mask in the first place is to watch a play on the field, and you never want to turn your eyes down, away from the play, even for a moment. There's no worse feeling, umpires will tell you, than looking up from an instant's distraction, seeing the ball on the ground, and not knowing how it got there.

Anyway, you grab the mask with your left hand, wrapping your thumb, forefinger, and middle finger around it at seven o'clock. You don't use your whole hand. You can't, really, because your ball-and-strike indicator is also in the left hand, held snug against the palm by the ring finger and the pinkie. So with the three available fingers, in one swift motion you pull the mask straight out from your face to clear the bill of your cap, then straight up and off. You don't toss it aside; the catcher is the only one who ever throws a mask. If you have to come out from behind the plate and run to a spot to make a call, if you have to hold up your arms to signal foul, even if you have to use your left hand and pump hard with your elbow to sell the call that a ball was touched in fair territory, you hold your mask tight.

This is all, of course, rudimentary, something a professional umpire will do with muscle memory and a shrug, the way a concertmaster will toss off a warm-up arpeggio. But the reward is real. When you do it right, with the casual adroitness that approximates instinct, it looks both graceful and aggressive, leaving you, the plate umpire, properly possessed of the authority and dignity of your office.
Naturally, for a beginner it is a harder trick to perform than it sounds, and for me, a fifty-two-year-old student umpire, it was the first of many skills that looked simple and proved annoyingly resistant to mastery. During school drills, I'd get it right a couple of times, then let my concentration slip, undoubtedly because of something else to focus on. I'd come out from behind the plate to follow the path of an outfield fly ball or to straddle the third-base line to judge a line drive fair or foul, pull off the mask, and my hat would end up on the ground — usually smack-dab on the baseline so it was marked with a telltale streak of lime — or merely jostled and tipped crooked, the bill off-center like a rapper's, or tipped forward and shading my eyes. How you can pull your mask upward and have your hat tip forward I don't know, but that it is possible I am a witness. It wasn’t until school was done and I went out on the field to work an actual game and my frustration continued that I solved the problem for good (or thought I did) — by buying a hat with a narrower brim. Who knew different-size baseball-cap brims even existed?

It turns out that an ordinary baseball cap has a brim about 3 1/4 inches wide, with eight seams sewn into it. The brim of a base umpire's cap is a little narrower, maybe 3 inches and six seams wide, and the brim of an ordinary plate umpire's hat, which is what we were issued in school, is narrower still, 2 1/2 inches and four seams. The gradations downward continue until you get to a kind of skullcap with a 1 1/2-inch brim that looks like an appetizer portion of cantaloupe. Umpires call this version the beanie, and when you remove your mask, it makes you look like a refugee from the nineteenth century. But I liked the eccentricity of it and bought one.

Umpires, however, cannot afford eccentricity. Later I would discover a scene in the popular film *A League of Their Own* in which the actor Tom Hanks, playing a manager, accosts an umpire wearing the beanie. "Did anyone ever tell you you look like a penis with that little hat on?" he says. But I wasn't aware of this at the time, and the first game I wore it, I noticed the teenaged players giggling at me behind their hands. Whenever I made a call one of them didn't care for, he rolled his eyes and gave me a look — what a geek!

Immediately after the game, I went back to the store and bought a hat with a two-inch brim, and when I came back the next day to work a game in the same league, I held much more authority in the eyes of the players. Or so it seemed to me, which is really all that mattered.

At this point perhaps you are thinking, okay, taking the mask off,
enough already. This is far too much detail about a mundane thing. And that's correct, except that the process I just described is a perfect analog of learning to be an umpire. You master the fundamentals, you cast them off when they don't serve, and in the end you accommodate yourself to the game and its participants. It turns out you're not alone out there. It only feels that way.

From AS THEY SEE 'EM by Bruce Weber. Copyright © 2009 by Bruce Weber. Reprinted by permission of Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster Inc., N.Y.