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Between Innings

By Richard B. Siegel

You are still the umpire between innings. **The time between half-innings is a suspension of play, but not a suspension of your responsibilities.** This is not a time to pick a comfy corner behind the backstop, sit in the grass and pull out a lollipop. Especially if you are working alone, you cannot divert your attention from the field. First, it just looks plain sloppy and unprofessional to be sprawled out on the ground relaxing. Walking into the spectator area to chat with some buddies is just as bad. In youth league play, the families usually sit on the side of their team's dugout. What will the moms of the Phillies think when they see you exchanging hugs and handshakes with some folks over on the Braves' side? You never want to give the impression that you might favor one side.

You should never leave the field of play until the game is over. If it's a particularly hot afternoon and you could use 30 seconds of shade and a sip of water, if there is no neutral place for you to put your things, go into the dugout of the team that has just become the offense. Choose that side because those players have just retired a batter or runner for the third out, maybe thanks to your last called strike three. They are happy. The other side just lost their time at bat, maybe left runners on base. They are not happy. Stay away from them right now. When you enter either dugout, you're always going to be persona non grata. Act like a guest. If you must sit, take a seat at a far end and don't talk to anyone. Keep your attention out on the field. It's best, though, to avoid the dugouts.

Between half innings, while the teams are exchanging defensive positions, walk up the foul line of the side now becoming the defense. If the players aren't hustling, motion to them and make some remarks to expedite them like, "Let's go guys, it's gonna get dark soon!" or "Come on Dodgers, the curfew is only 20 minutes away!" Make sure the catcher is getting help suiting up, if he's not already on the field. If coaches are wasting time assigning defensive positions at this time, stand close enough to let them see you don't like that. Let them finish the assignments. Then quietly tell them this should have been done during their time at bat. Don't let coaches hold up the game this way.

One thing you particularly want to observe is the pitching mound. During the inning change, occasionally another fielder, say "Jimmy," the Senators' left fielder, is jogging past the mound and he will see the ball lying there where the other team's catcher tossed it when the last half inning ended. Jimmy has been wanting to pitch but the coach hasn't let him try yet. So just for fun, Jimmy picks up the ball, steps on the rubber and tells "Charlie," the catcher to catch one pitch for him. Charlie's got nothing to do since, "Elvis," the real pitcher, still hasn't come out onto the field. So Charlie squats behind home plate and Jimmy lets one fly. After Jimmy's "pitch," he turns and resumes his jog out to left field.

Jimmy has just legally become the Senators' next pitcher. Rule 3.08 (a) (1). Not only does Jimmy have to face at least one batter, but Elvis can no longer return to the position of pitcher in this game. Section VI - Pitchers (d). Sudden blindness can become an asset at a time like this. You have a wonderful dilemma to consider. Take a quick look at the other teams' bench. Did they see Jimmy throw the pitch? Are they asking you to enforce the rule? Did they see it, but not know the rule? Has Jimmy's coach been on your back all game? Has Elvis been a pleasure to watch? Or, has Elvis been complaining about every "ball" you've called so far? Ponder all these factors for about two seconds, and then decide if you think you should enforce the rule.

Let's see... Elvis has been mowing down the Marlins for five innings and the Marlins are losing 8 to 1. Jimmy might make this a more interesting game. "Oh, Mr. Senators' Coach, I've got to point out something that your left fielder just did...." He won't be happy, but you know the rule.

Or...

Let's see... The score is tied 4 to 4 going into the bottom of the sixth. Nobody is saying anything, and/or nobody noticed. Put your mask back on; get back behind Charlie, and say, "play" when Elvis steps on the rubber. Why spoil a good game?

However, this could happen also: "Coach Mike," of the Marlins trots out and says, "Ump, did you see that other boy throw a practice pitch? Doesn't that make him the pitcher?" If you saw it, then you have no choice but to enforce the rule. You could deny noticing the "Jimmy pitch," but that would do more harm to your reputation as a competent and fair umpire. That's not worth making the game more interesting.

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Remember your responsibility to keep the game moving. If you're lucky enough to be working with a partner umpire, don't use each break between innings as an opportunity to swap horror stories, quiz each other on rules, or catch up on old times. The base umpire should watch the next defensive team's dugout and try to hustle them along. Meanwhile, the plate man should be watching the field to count the pitcher's warm-up pitches and take substitutions. Warn the pitcher when he has two remaining warm-ups and call, "Balls in!" That is the traditional order for fielders to throw the practice baseballs off the field.

Although, umpire-partners will feel mutual camaraderie, you have to resist the urge to turn the breaks between innings into a social time. I've seen two-men teams at youth level games become so engrossed in a continual between-inning chat that they didn't notice the catcher, on his own, shout, "Coming down!" and make his practice throw to second base. The batter has stepped into the box and the pitcher, standing with hands on hips, eyes a piercing stare at the two umpires. Finally, one of the umpires notices the uncharacteristic quiet. Startled and embarrassed, they see that everybody at the field is looking at them, waiting for them to resume the game. This kind of behavior sends a message to the players and coaches that your own issues are more important than their game. Generally, umpires should keep away from each other between innings. If you need a quick rule clarification, or a review of a communication signal, that's OK. But keep your discussions brief, to the point, and related only to the game you're currently working. Remember, you're still an umpire between innings.