

Softball Ireland Umpires' Working Group

Introduction

Softball Ireland (SI) Board, due to growing concerns at national governing body level with the quality and quantity of umpires in Leinster particularly, decided to set up a working group to review the state and strategy of umpiring in Ireland at the end of the 2019 season.

Secretary General, Conor Sayles, chaired the group through 3 conference calls over October and November and employed a 3-stage approach: problems, ideas and actions. While the initial concern was with Leinster, a national solution was sought. The working group included 3 umpires from Ulster and 3 from Leinster. SI president, Colum Lavery, also attended the calls.

Working Group members: Maarten Blanken (SU), Niall Byrne (SL), Derek Harnett (SL), Paul Peake (SL), Sean Gottschalk (SU), Phil Wallace (SU)

Problems

The poor standards of umpiring in our leagues today has created a compounding problem, potential new candidates are more reluctant to get involved as a result of player feedback.

That said, insufficient effort is spent on organising and motivating existing and potential umpires. We must consider how to provide encouragement to take the next or final step. The opportunity for retired players to stay involved with the community being a prime example.

Ulster have a byelaw that all teams must provide two umpires, taking this approach from day one has developed a culture whereby all games have plate and field blues, despite not being paid. While this has ensured all teams have individuals with a good knowledge of the rules, it has failed to provide a high standard of umpiring and may be reaching a plateau.

While Leinster introduced an umpire levy for teams who didn't contribute and held a beginners' course, the impact and follow through has not been what was hoped for. Upskilling those that are there, should lead to a reduction in abuse and then more volunteers.

Issues arise in Leinster games when more experienced players and teams challenge the umpire, and insufficient control or authority is maintained. This has led to much of the membership disengaging. Fewer such occasions arise in Ulster, but may as the league matures.

Umpires have a responsibility for team and player management, as well as the rules, they run the game. The key traits of a good blue are authority, clarity, consistency and rule knowledge in that order. Teams must understand their role in the relationship too, for example home field set up.

It is common in Ulster for the umpire and players to feedback on decisions or even performance at the end of a game. However in Leinster the likelihood of someone being aggrieved makes it difficult to know how a discussion will be received. Umpires need to receive feedback, an environment of continuous learning is vital to improving quality.

Ulster and Leinster umpires each have their own WhatsApp group for discussion, although they tend to be rule-focussed. Good judgement, mechanics and game management can be harder to cover, but are as, if not more, important. Self-awareness is lacking in some, a feedback mechanism is key to development.

Too often umpiring is seen as a necessary evil, and we are failing to build a pipeline of talent. Limited opportunities exist to improve quality, and there is a significant gap between league games and ESF. For example, IOST is regarded as a low standard tournament, with a focus on drinking, and not an attractive prospect for umpires.

Ideas

Leinster is struggling to attract new players so encouraging existing players to play multiple nights - this makes it more difficult to encourage current players to umpire. Asking team captains to provide contact details for retired players could be a good option to keep them involved.

Beginner and refresher courses will improve training structure, and build confidence. Care is required to follow through with beginners and ensure we prioritise new umpires when assigning games to help them get started.

Umpires want assignment control and a learning path. Elite development should be governed by SI, but most of the rest should remain with the regions. Training requirements differ between the regions, given the higher experience in the south and the two-man system in the north.

A common approach to training would be beneficial, and there are umpires willing to travel to support each other. BASU are willing to share material. Courses must be held early before attention turns to the games themselves.

SI would support a two-day national course in Spring with a pre-season tournament in March run on the second day to provide real experience. First (book) day could be region specific. A second, outdoor day to focus on mechanics is vital to complement rules and scenarios which can be covered indoors.

A community approach to governance, to coordinate training, attraction/retention, scheduling and assessment, might work. It would be closer to a team and captain arrangement than another committee. The group could divvy out jobs, share responsibility and contact BASU. It might require an administration role (rather than umpire or UIC) on the SI board.

Actions

Ulster had sufficient plate umpires in 2019, but may need new field umpires next year. Leinster were short in 2019, and anticipate needing another 5 committed umpires for 2020. An all-Ireland community would be a better approach to get people engaged.

Recruitment and initial training should remain at a regional level. Beginners course should be held annually by the respective regions, then the umpire community will host a two-day advanced course for the select few to progress.

The current respective approaches in the regions to assign games should remain as is. Governance, community and elite development then should be run by a group of self-identified coordinators under Softball Ireland. Goals will be agreed between the two parties.

The coordinators will be asked to step forward from the list of umpires across the two regions.

We must encourage cross-region umpiring at tournaments in particular. Game of the Week would be a good opportunity too. The coordinators would then define the career path and identify talent for elite development from the larger pool.

Conclusion

Key to progress will be creating the right environment - community, training, governance and role models. Our vision is a third team on the field, and a vibrant, ambitious community.

1. Create WhatsApp group for all umpires across Leinster and Ulster
2. Request volunteers to stand forward to coordinate the community
3. Agree roles and responsibilities for the community and coordinators
4. Coordinators to run an advanced 2-day course in Spring 2020
5. Ask regions to poll teams to identify retired players and other candidates
6. Ask regions to plan beginners umpire training in spring 2020
7. Softball Ireland to propose goals and metrics for umpires in 2020
8. Softball Ireland to print and bind rulebooks for all registered umpires

Conor Sayles

Working Group Chair

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