

As They See 'Em: A Fan's Travels in the Land of Umpires

Bruce Weber

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Millions of American baseball fans know, with absolute certainty, that umpires are simply overpaid galoots who are doing an easy job badly. Millions of American baseball fans are wrong.

As They See 'Em is an insider's look at the largely unknown world of professional umpires, the small group of men (and the very occasional woman) who make sure America's favorite pastime is conducted in a manner that is clean, crisp, and true. Bruce Weber, a *New York Times* reporter, not only interviewed dozens of professional umpires but entered their world, trained to become an umpire, and then spent a season working games from Little League to big league spring training.

As They See 'Em is Weber's entertaining account of this experience as well as a lively exploration of what amounts to an eccentric secret society, with its own customs, its own rituals, its own colorful vocabulary. (Know what a "whacker" is? A "pole bender"? "Rat cheese"? Think you could "strap it on" or "take the stick"?) He explains the arcane set of rules by which umps work and details the exasperating, tortuous path that allows only a select few to graduate from the minor leagues to the majors. He describes what it's like to work in a ballpark where not only the fans but the players, the managers and coaches, the announcers, the team owners, and even the league presidents, resent them -- and vice versa. And he asks, quite sensibly, why anyone would do a job that offers the chance to earn only blame and never credit.

Weber reveals how umps are tutored to work behind the plate, what they learn to watch for on the bases, and how proper positioning for every imaginable situation on the field is drilled into them. He describes how they're counseled to respond -- or not -- to managers who are screaming at them from inches away with purposeful inanity, and tells us exactly which "magic" words result in an automatic ejection. Writing with deep knowledge of and affection for baseball, he delves into such questions as: Why isn't every strike created equal? Is the ump part of the game or outside of it? Why doesn't a tie go to the runner? And what do umps and managers say to each other during an argument, really?

In addition to professional umpires, Weber spoke to current and former players including Alex Rodriguez, Barry Bonds, Tom Glavine, Barry Zito, Paul Lo Duca, Kenny Lofton, Ron Darling, and Robin Yount, as well as former baseball commissioner Fay Vincent, Atlanta Braves manager Bobby Cox, Chicago White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen, Detroit Tigers manager Jim Leyland, and many others in the professional game. He attended the 2006 and 2007 World Series, interviewing the umpire crews who called those games and who spoke candidly about the pressure of being scrutinized by millions -- maybe billions! -- of fans around the world, all of them armed with television's slo-mo, hi-def instant replay. As fans know, in 2008, a rash of miscalled home run balls led baseball, for the first time, to use replay to help big league umps make their decisions. Weber discusses these events and the umpires' surprising reaction to them.

Packed with fascinating reportage that reveals the game as never before and answers the kinds of questions that fans, exasperated by the clichés of conventional sports commentary, pose to themselves around the television set, Bruce Weber's *As They See 'Em* is a towering grand slam.

As They See 'Em: A Fan's Travels in the Land of Umpires Details

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From Reader Review As They See 'Em: A Fan's Travels in the Land of Umpires for online ebook

Chris Conrey says

Great look behind the masks of baseballs unsung arbiters. Any baseball lover will enjoy this book. Bonus - the audiobook is narrated by charley steiner

Desiree Koh says

Baseball fans love the minutiae of logic, the extrapolation of emotion, the magic of the moment and the nudge of nostalgia. And that's why if you love being wedged on a pew in the church of baseball, holy water in a plastic cup and communion with relish on top, you'll really enjoy this book.

Sports reporters can tend to be beautifully verbose and master of the simile, and I love all that. I've never read any of Bruce Weber's baseball writing for the New York Times, but in this book, he sits himself down next to me, the fellow fan, and he shares these chronicles of professional umpiring, from school minion to Major League commandeer. It's really an amazing account - as someone with Little League and recreational softball umpiring experience, I'm with the boys in blue. It's a tough job, and although someone has to do it (as well as enjoy pro athlete-level perks at the highest level), not everyone can. Here's where baseball can easily slip into the rhetoric, but it's true - I don't think sports judging can get any harder than with this game, with on-field coordination, snap decisions and a million rules enforced on every play. And to that, add pomp, aplomb and authority.

I learned a lot about professional umpiring and through that, the evolution of baseball and the corporate conglomerate it is today. It's a fantastic insight into living the game and the life of the game - most want to see it from the perspective of the players, coaches and even general managers but the honest truth is, no one sees it all better than the guy behind the face mask.

itpdx says

As They See 'Em is not JUST for baseball fanatics. This interesting and well-written account will appeal to anyone with a basic knowledge of baseball. Bruce Weber weaves his experiences at baseball umpire school, umpiring non-professional games and, even, umpiring a few innings of a major league intra-squad spring training game with lots of interviews. He interviewed major league and minor league umps, players, managers, and officials. The stories are peppered with humor and tension. He includes the recent history the umpire unions and labor disputes, giving us a feel for recent changes in the umpire's job. He explains and illustrates the skills that umpires need and the career path that they have to take to get to the majors. From minor league umpires, in their first season, facing a broken-down car on the way to Spokane to umpires coping with dressing room chaos at the World Series. I really enjoyed his tales of the two women umpires who have come closest to the major leagues and how they didn't make it, somehow. It appears that the powers that run professional baseball aren't willing to go there, yet.

Through his interviews, Weber gives us an inkling of what it is like to umpire the World Series or be the

plate ump for a perfect game.

I have been to three major league games in the past three years (bringing my lifetime total MLB games to four) and I find that I enjoy the ambiance of a baseball stadium on a pleasant summer evening, but I do need help from my companions understanding some of the things that happen on the field. But I am unable to watch baseball on TV--it does not hold my interest. But thanks to this fascinating book, I know that the next game that I watch, I will be watching the umpires almost as much as the players.

Carolyn says

This is a great book for any baseball fan. It reveals a completely unknown (to anyone outside of umpires) aspect of the game. Unknown, unsuspected, and probably literally unimaginable. Mr. Weber took his journalistic responsibilities seriously, going as far as getting training at one of the two professional umpiring schools and then working as an umpire at various levels. He even managed to talk his way into umpiring behind the plate for three innings at a spring training intra-squad game. Let me just say that I would NEVER make it as an umpire.

Eric_W says

I was a FIFA and NCAA soccer referee for eight years, and when I watch a match now I spend more time watching the officials than the players, their positioning, their interactions with the players, their decisions, etc.

“The impetus for this book was a visit I made in January 2005 to the Jim Evans Academy of Professional Umpiring in Kissimmee, Florida, in order to write a story for the New York Times, where I work as a reporter. I thought it would be a lark, a chance to talk baseball rules and baseball trivia—I’m the kind of baseball fan who has never gotten over his boyhood obsession, who reads the sports page before the front page and pores over box scores as though they were hieroglyphic finds—not to mention a chance to wear short sleeves in midwinter. But what I found there in three days of observing—the whole course of instruction runs five weeks—was weird and intriguing, an amalgam of strict vocational...came away convinced that a land of umpires exists, that it has citizens, laws, and a culture, and that it is exotic enough—both in the context of baseball and the context of, well, the known world—to warrant further exploring. Indeed, the presumption of this book is that professional umpires are an unusually isolated and circumscribed group, sort of like the inhabitants of a remote country that few people have ever visited, and that I am the sociologist who was dispatched to send back word of what life is like there.

Weber is dead on in his description of the attitude of umpires toward the game. Officials really do not care who wins; they care about the game. All officials really want to get it right and anyone who has been an official realizes how little the fans know of the game, some of the arcane rules, and the often subtle differences between high school, college, and professional rules. (A simple example, in high school a player can touch the line with his foot during a throw-in; in college not. Whether a throw-in is given to the other team if it doesn’t enter the field differs by age group even. And we won’t even begin to discuss the ramifications of the offside rule and how it’s applied.) As Weber notes regarding professional baseball umpires, *“But I never saw any umpire do anything that made me question his on-the-field integrity. It bears acknowledging that in 130 years, only one major league umpire has ever been accused of professional*

dishonesty, and that was in 1882. "The integrity of the game is the umpires," Doug Harvey said to me. "Nobody else. The entire integrity of the game is the umpires."

Officials form their own unique clique. They are routinely despised by management, players, and fans so it's natural they, much like cops, see the world differently.

I've always thought it would be great if everyone in fan-dom were required to referee/umpire several games. They would develop a greater sense of respect for what these underpaid folks do (the pay for a minor league umpire is \$1,900 per month—for five months—and the pay scale doesn't exactly shoot up from there. If you prove to be an exemplary minor league umpire and rise from level to level with regularity, you may reach Triple A in six or eight years, at which time, at maybe thirty, thirty-five, or even forty years old, you'll be making about \$20,000 annually.) The myriad mistakes players and coaches make during a game are rarely blamed for a loss. It's always some perceived error by the ref that's always at fault. The most vociferous and loudest critics of decisions would never switch positions. A job description for an umpire/referee might read: *"If you like having every close decision you make criticized, if you like doing your job surrounded by thousands of people ready to blame you for mistakes other people make, every one of them believing they can do your job better than you can, and if you don't mind the only response you get for a job done absolutely perfectly being silence, then maybe you would like being an umpire."*

The school, a requirement for anyone ever wishing to even think about becoming a professional umpire, a goal achieved by an even smaller percentage than professional players, lasts five weeks and there are only two that are sanctioned by the major leagues. Above all they teach the rules -- and baseball is filled with bizarre and arcane rules, many of which are explicated here -- and technique. That's another thing fans never consider: position. We harped on that in soccer referee school. You had to be in position to have the best view and baseball is no different. How you move your feet, where to move your eyes, what to concentrate on. All those things have to become second nature. The school the author attended even focused on how to salute the flag for the national anthem because it helped act like a switch. OK, now the game has begun and the little petty annoyances that might have occurred before the game and might affect one's attention are put aside.

There was a lesson in this for me, though, namely the difference between calling plays and umpiring. Just having to be in the right place at the right time was intimidating enough, and I was surprised at the energy, both physical and mental, that I had to spend just to keep up. Staying aware of your precise location on the field and knowing where everyone else is as well; keeping in mind the situation and the possibilities for action, both likely and not so likely, these things are energy-sapping. At one point, with a man on second, I was so intently focusing on the pitcher in his stretch and the possibility of a balk that I barely moved."

As FIFA/NCAA officials, we used to have a little mantra. The presence of referees permitted everyone to go home happy: the officials were happy because they got paid; the winning team was happy because they won; and the losing team was happy because they could blame the referees for their loss.

Referees and umpires suffer from inherent contradictions: "Major leagues umpires are driven and aggressive men, goal-oriented and highly competitive, which is why it's so odd—poignant and odd—that they've chosen a profession in which literally they can't win and figuratively they don't, in which not only does disappointment always threaten but triumph is almost always bland. Listening to Everitt, I had to wonder when he'd begun to understand this, when any umpire does, and what does he then make of a professional life where at any time the agony of defeat is, in Ted Barrett's words, just one play away, and where the closest you get to the thrill of victory is getting to the end—of an inning, of a game, even of a career—without ruin."

Probably not a book for everyone but highly recommended for those interested in the culture of officiating (that's me) or baseball in general (most other people).

Karina Dulin says

Liked it okay. His organization of material is difficult--text contains lots and lots of names of both players and umpires, more than I could keep straight. But the topic is very interesting, and I'm pretty sure I'll never look at an ump the same way again.

Paul Hamilton says

There is a key lesson within Bruce Weber's book about baseball umpires, *As They See 'Em*: The lesson is that no matter how avid a fan of baseball you may be, it is highly likely that you take for granted the arbiters of the game's rules. In fact, there is a telling portion near the beginning of the book where Weber carefully reveals that even lifelong fans of the game aren't all that familiar with the rules themselves.

Of course, because the baseball umpire is ubiquitous both in the pastime of the baseball fan (casual or hardcore), and in fact is symbolic in its own right as a result of its association with that profoundly American activity, but is often unconsidered the book holds a particular fascination found in the unveiling of the secret worlds behind everyday things we take allow to exist below our fields of view.

Weber is an excellent tour guide in this arena. He covers the ground from umpire as a symbol of authority, umpire as denigrated root cause for the woes of the sports fan, umpire as the unheralded guardians of the integrity of the game, and even umpire as the men (and women) behind the masks. Granted, Weber is sort of aimless in his approach to the subject, preferring to loosely connect a sort of stream-of-consciousness flow that wanders between personal experience (he attended umpire school and subsequently umpired a few amateur and semi-pro games), anecdote, journalism and contextualization.

A lot of the book is devoted to trying to understand where umpires fit into the sports fans' worldview and why: Weber discusses historically significant controversial calls and relates how the umpires involved viewed the incidents as well as providing context for the circumstance itself and the subsequent fallout. There is also a lot of discussion about the trials of becoming a major league umpire and the history of umpiring's often contentious relationship with baseball bigwigs.

What comes through most potently is that Weber, by the time he sat down to write the book, felt a new appreciation for umpires. You get the clear sense that he admires and respects the incredibly, impossibly difficult and certainly thankless job they perform. He stumbles a bit when trying to ask the questions of why someone would want to do this for a living or what it might take to improve their public relations perceptions though he gamely stabs at the subjects. In the end, the irony is that it seems (for me at least) umpires really just needed a light shone on them to illuminate what they do and what their value is to baseball. My perception of the game is changed, perhaps subtly, but definitely for the better.

Mark Liderbach says

A must read for every baseball fan! It will change the way you watch America's Pastime! And you will respect umpires rather than hate 'em!

Beth says

Did you know it's more difficult to become a major league umpire than to become a major league baseball player, based on the number of slots available -- and once someone rises to the majors, he holds onto the position like a supreme court judge? NYT reporter Bruce Weber covers all aspects of umpiring--from myths to history to politics--like an anthropologist, even going so far as to attend one of the two grueling 5-week umpire schools in the country to round out dozens of interviews with hired, fired and retired umps.

Although the writing is thoughtful, excellent and engaging, the focus on the minutia of baseball's complex rulebook may only be of interest to hardcore fans. Overall, Weber is a good storyteller (though occasionally repetitive) and the details of who he couldn't get to talk are nearly as interesting as the stories he wrangles about diva players, apoplectic managers and legendary games. The tale of professional baseball's underdogs is fascinating reading for the this rabid Red Sox fan, and changes the way I look at the game. After the Indians' manager Wedge got ejected from a Red Sox vs. Indians game on Monday April 27 after questioning two (correct!) calls by the umpire at homeplate, I found myself paying attention to details and commentary like never before.

Sebastian says

As They Seem 'Em provides some level of insight into an aspect of sport that is often overlooked -- the development, life, history and challenges of umpires in professional baseball. While the book is often interesting, at times it is tediously over-wordy and slow moving. It could probably stand to be edited and slimmed to some extent.

Weber ranges from his own experiences in umpire school, to the wretched lives of umpires working through the lowest levels of minor league baseball, to the complexity of the work these men (and much more infrequently) women undertake. The last chapter *The Braille Watch* is one of my favorite, a collection of anecdotes from umpires recalling critical moments in which they did (or, sadly, did not) rise to the occasion and make a great call which they confidently stood and continue to stand behind.

Weber at times seems too eager to make the lives of umpires a metaphor for aspects of America that may or may not be fleeting -- moral absolutism, respect for authority, shunning the spotlight and individualism in favor of faceless teamwork, endless hard work in the face of marginal rewards, etc. Some of this clicked for me, but often it read like a considerable stretch. I think Weber obtained a large amount of interesting data (including from his own experiences), old writings on umpires, as well as somewhat enlightening interviews from current and former umps (he notes on several occasions their common reticence), and thereafter struggled to put it together in a cohesive whole, thus resulting in an overstretched thesis that threatened to sentimentalize the collection of information.

Baseball fans will enjoy it, but it's not exactly a page turner.

James says

As impossible dreams go, the odds for minor league umpires are significantly longer than those overcome by the 1967 Red Sox. With virtually no turnover at the major league level, even the most competent aspiring arbiters are generally dismissed after 8-10 grueling years climbing the ladder.

Their journey begins at umpire school, where Bruce Weber got to know many dreamers, as well as the more experienced umps on hand to train them. Weber, on assignment for the New York Times, visited the Jim Evans Academy of Professional Umpiring in Kissimmee, Florida, four years ago. After writing several pieces for the paper, he became fascinated with the umpiring community and decided it warranted more than he could cover in the Times. Thus, “As They See ‘Em” was born.

Weber returned to the Evans Academy, this time as a student in the school’s five-week program. His 120 classmates included an ex-marine recruiter, a painting contractor, a cattle rancher—men from a wide variety of backgrounds, many looking to start over on a career that paid next to nothing. Six days a week they spent mornings in the class room, followed by an afternoon on the diamond as instructors tested the students with simulated plays to help them master positioning, timing, and knowledge of the rulebook.

The cream of the crop from the Evans Academy, as well as a school run by former umpire Harry Wendelstedt, advanced to an audition for the Professional Baseball Umpiring Corporation. PBUC oversees the progress of minor league umpires, grading them as they climb from rookie ball to Triple-A, where evaluations are taken over by Major League Baseball. Most umpires don’t have many kind things to say about PBUC or the minor league presidents who rule their worlds. Weber recounts a handful of stories from umps who felt pressured to return early to work following injuries or family situations. Current big league umpire Bill Miller received a major league reaming by International League president Randy Mobley after he was robbed at gunpoint in his hotel in 1995. An emotional wreck in the aftermath of that stressful ordeal, he went AWOL, incurring Mobley’s wrath.

Mobley is one of at least a dozen folks who aren’t painted in a flattering light by Weber. It’s a good thing he said all he has to say on the subject, because many of the people he interviewed aren’t likely in a hurry to talk with him again. Many of them were reluctant to talk with him the first time around. Weber found major league umpires especially reserved, though he spent enough time traveling with them that he collected plenty of interesting tales.

One of the more fascinating chapters—of Weber’s book as well as recent umpiring history—deals with the umpires’ union and its suicidal decision to resign en masse in 1999. With the basic agreement governing the umpires’ relationship with Major League Baseball set to expire after the season—and doubting the legality of a strike—union leader Richie Phillips concocted the resignation scheme at a meeting during the all-star break. When the union splintered, the strategy backfired, with baseball accepting the tendered resignations. Many of the men who quit were never welcomed back. Ten years later there are still hard feelings on all sides.

One of the saddest stories of that episode belongs to Jeff Nelson, who recalled feeling bullied by Phillips and some of the veteran umpires. Nelson had just reached the majors after 10 years in the minor leagues. After sacrificing so long to make it, he was suddenly out.

Nelson's sacrifice was one most of us wouldn't—or couldn't—choose to make. For as little as \$1,800 a month, aspiring umpires travel the minor league circuit, often in a vehicle they themselves must provide, driving several hundred miles in a day to be cursed and vilified by players, managers, and fans alike. The abuse wouldn't be worth it for twice the money. Of course, if they overcome the odds and reach the brotherhood in the big leagues, that all changes.

Major league umpires make on average more than \$200,000 a season. They travel first class and stay in nice hotels. Their lives are completely different than they were on the way up. But along with the rewards comes tremendous pressure, especially in the harsh glare of the postseason. Weber talked with several umpires who unwillingly became the center of attention for a call made in October. Some, like Larry Barnett, who ruled there was no interference on Ed Armbrister's bunt in the 1975 World Series, received death threats. And his call was correct.

Imagine how Don Denkinger felt. He blew a key call in Game Six of the 1985 World Series that helped shift momentum to the Kansas City Royals. No St. Louis Cardinals fan is likely to ever forgive him. Denkinger knows now it was the wrong call, and he explained to Weber how the play unfolded, and just how it was that he called Jorge Orta safe at first. Time has helped heal some of that hurt, but you know he wishes he could have a do-over on that call.

Weber's immersion into the world of umpires resulted in an insider story that most insiders couldn't share without fear of being blacklisted. "As They See 'Em" is an entertaining and informative book that will affect the way you look at the judges on the field.

Linda says

When Bruce Weber talks about traveling in "the Land of Umpires", he's not merely engaging in creative metaphor for effect. As his excellently detailed book ably demonstrates, the world of umpires and umpiring is something of a closed society, with much of its inner workings shrouded from public view, and like any closed society, what is known about it by outsiders is more mythology and misunderstanding than fact.

Weber's book is as much a guidebook to this world of umpires as it is a travelogue of his own visit. He describes not only the ins and outs of his training at a professional umpire academy, but also umpires' long slog to recognition up the career track, the interplay between officials and players and on-field staff, and the fraught relationship between the umpires and "baseball", that is, the baseball power establishment, with the conflicts, some more spectacular than others, between umpires and baseball, that have frequently flared up over time. Fervent baseball aficionados will relish the details that Weber provides, but even casual fans will be fascinated by this inside look at baseball from a rare and unexpected perspective.

It won't be surprising that what emerges is a decidedly sympathetic portrait of umpires as a class. But it's deserved. The reader quickly learns of the difficulties umpires face in their chosen career. It's one of hard, generally undervalued work, low pay, constant abuse from fans and disregard, at best, from management. The career path itself is a punishing one, from the daily ignominies of the most junior umpires at the bottom of the minor league hierarchy, to the relative comfort that comes with making it to triple-A life, to the much-wished for perks of the major league, to the ultimate pinnacle of the post-season.

To be sure, umpires are not angels -- there is some legitimately bad behavior that is tolerated, much, again, a result of the closed clubbishness of the job. Also, the lack of racial diversity in the umpire ranks, and the

bald-faced opportunism of management in putting a diverse face on the post-season crews, is shameful. And the treatment that the very few women umpires that have come through the staff have faced is nothing short of appalling, a shocking outpost of neanderthalism in the 21st century.

Having said that, though, I gained a new respect for umpires through this book. The professionalism with which they, as a whole, approach their work, and their commitment to protecting the integrity of the game, is genuinely admirable. And no amount of instant-replay or on-field technology can overcome the fact that umpires are indispensable. They are an inextricable part of that amalgam of skill and history, tradition and chance, that beloved drama that is baseball.

Seth says

Those four stars only apply when this book is being read by those of us who would want to read a book about baseball umpires, of course. For us, it's engaging and revealing. Weber keeps the attention on working pro umpires and wisely minimizes his fish-out-of-water, a-writer-tries-umpiring stuff, because as a character Weber is at best uninteresting and at worst kind of irritating.

Fluffy says

As a casual baseball fan, I am pretty sure there have been umpires at most of the games I have attended. Beyond that I had no knowledge of them. This book will fill you in! The tension in which the game is held is remarkable, and the umpire is central. Everyone wants a fair game---that said there is a lot of ambiguity and someone needs to control it. There are many different and cross purpose interests on the field and off that are managed visibly and not so visibly. The tv land spectacle, the sports personalities, the sportscasters, if you can read this and not feel stressed out, and realize there likely more than 1 way to call plays and almost all disenfranchise someone, then maybe umpire school is for you!!

All that being so, the book itself was a tad confusing as it had a tendency to skip around a fair amount. I do commend the author for writing an in depth book that still allowed a casual fan to relate.

John Cagle says

good inside baseball.
