Self-Confidence And The Umpire

by Joel Balberman

In the pursuit of competence as a sports official, few factors make as big a difference to an umpire as the confidence to know that he can do the job properly. Self-confidence is the aggregate of a variety of ingredients combined, and is projected in many ways so that when it is present in an umpire, all who are watching can see this quality on display. Conversely, when confidence is not present, it is obvious to even casual observers. The umpire who has confidence believes in his ability to do the job.

Of course, it is an oversimplification to think that all it takes to be a good umpire is confidence. If that were the case, there would be a lot more of us working in the major leagues! No amount of confidence can overcome a lack of ability or an absence of knowledge. You cannot use confidence to compensate for not knowing the rules or an incomplete grasp of the mechanics of umpiring.

As it is with many worthwhile human pursuits, the development of self-confidence is a journey rather than a destination. Along the way, barriers have to be overcome. One type of barrier is psychological. We have all heard of the self-fulfilling prophecy, which tells us that if we expect something to happen, it can actually help cause it to happen. If we expect to succeed and believe in our ability, we are helping to set up a positive self-fulfilling prophecy. Others may doubt their ability, and this self-doubt can result in a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. It is easy to get down on yourself, but it is self-destructive and self-defeating to let a missed call pull you down. A bad call does not make you a bad umpire!

According to Robert S. Weinberg and Peggy A. Richardson in their book "Psychology of Officiating", there are 4 characteristics of confident officiating. They are:

- concentration
- control
- goal setting
- persistence

Being confident allows an umpire to maintain focus and concentration and little can happen that will disrupt the umpire's focus. Umpires who lack confidence tend to worry about failure or get distracted thinking about how they are performing rather than maintaining concentration.

Confidence allows an umpire to appear relaxed and project that so that situations that arise are handled with self-assurance. The umpire is in control of both the game and himself. The confident umpire is capable of setting higher goals and working to achieve them.

Good umpires have a strong desire to excel, and will keep working over time to achieve excellence.
Finding the optimal level of confidence

Weinberg and Richardson point out a very important relationship when they examine how confidence relates to umpire performance. The relationship is called an inverted-U relationship. What that means, is that confidence helps performance to improve, until an optimal point is reached. After this peak, further increases in confidence actually produce a decrease in the quality of performance. In simple terms, it is possible to be both under- and overconfident.

(Note: The same inverted-U relationship occurs with regards to stress level and activation level. An umpire can have too little or too much and there is an optimal level which produces the best results.)

Underconfidence can result in breaks in concentration, fear of the big game, self-doubt, indecisiveness and anxiety. Overconfidence can lead to lack of proper preparation for games, false confidence, and below par performance.

Peer and Self-Evaluation

Both peer and self-evaluation can assist umpires in finding the optimal level of confidence. We often talk about the importance of a pre-game conference with our partners, but having a post-game discussion can be very valuable as well. Talk to your partner about situations that arose and how you felt during the game. Listen for the tips that can help you to improve, or ideas for another way of handling a situation. Experience is a great teacher, and it can help you to recognize how and when you might have shown greater confidence.

Self-evaluation can be done by keeping a journal to reflect on your game-to-game performance. A series of questions can be asked of yourself. These may include references to your ability to:

- keep calm under pressure
- maintain self-control
- communicate with athletes and coaches
- how focused concentration for the duration of the game
- make the tough calls in a decisive manner
- handle challenging situations

You can also work to build your self-confidence. Here are some suggestions to assist you on your journey to greater self-confidence:

- Use self-talk and keep your self-talk positive. Eliminate the negative messages we often send ourselves.
- Umpiring is a bit like acting at times. Make your calls in a decisive manner, using body language, signals and a loud voice to convey your confidence. Sell your calls to your audience. Even umpires who are physically smaller can compensate for their lack of size by making effective use of their voices.
• Learn to use imagery to see yourself performing properly and handling any potential problems effectively. Use imagery as a pre-game preparation technique, or between games on your days off.
• There is no replacement for game experience in building confidence. Work as often as you can; aspire to reach the highest level of ball you can work. Success breeds success; if you have performed well in the past in certain game situations, you have greater confidence that you can do it again when it is required.
• Attend clinics and workshops that give you the opportunity to learn more about the sport and the art of umpiring.
• Develop physical fitness to help combat fatigue and give you the tools to meet the physical and mental challenges of the game.
• Be mentally prepared for every game.

In summary, confidence involves the way we think, act and feel on the diamond. A strong belief in your ability to perform and the expectation that you will succeed help to give an umpire the self-confidence needed to do the job to the best of his ability. Make your performance on the diamond a matter of self-fulfilling prophecy.