

LAST CALL

I am early in the count of my life's at-bat

A PERSONAL STORY BY JACK DJL.GARIAN

This is the story of a 22-year-old's celebration of an anniversary. Not in marriage, but of another special love. Here, I invite you to my baptism by fire into the humble world of umpiring.

It was a hot summer day in 2007. I was 12 years old and bored at my brother's Little League game. I knew the umpire from my early days of baseball, so I asked if I could participate on the bases to pass the time. As the game progressed, I could feel the natural reason for why people enjoy umpiring baseball and officiating in general. I saw how umpiring was a fantastic way to stay involved in the game I loved.



After the final out was recorded, I was about to leave the field when the umpire stopped me. "Hey, you weren't so bad out there. How would you like to umpire behind the dish for my second game?" I graciously accepted and ran home to grab my catcher's gear. There I was, a 12-year-old in cargo shorts and used catcher's equipment eager to call my first game. As soon as I yelled, "Play!" I felt a rush throughout my body. The feeling of calling balls and strikes felt natural to me despite the fact I had no prior training.

By the end of the third inning, my umpire-friend came over to thank me. "You're welcome," I responded, "but we still have half a game left to play." He replied in a serious tone, "I know, but I gotta catch the bus." I thought it was a cruel joke until I saw him depart the field on his bicycle. I was on my own, a pre-teen left in command to enforce the rules, which I did not know entirely. The game went on as I adapted to use my body language to act confident and calm. I vividly remember using my diaphragm to make my voice sound deeper and in charge.

By the grace of a miracle, the game concluded without any issues. I left the field and was approached by another umpire who was watching from the stands. He respectfully shook my hand and said, "You may not

have had the proper mechanics out there, but your demeanor looked like an umpire. If you are serious about becoming one of us, I can teach you everything I know. But you must work hard, be patient and disciplined."

I took the opportunity to learn from this umpire, who eventually became my mentor. Ten years later, I look back on this moment as one of the greatest opportunities of my life.

For those who have officiating experience, the connection to this short anecdote may leave feelings of warmth and nostalgia. Giving back to the game we love is the reason we put on the uniform. We take pride in our thankless job. We strive to put 100 percent effort in each action we take because we know these moments will be remembered and cherished by the players long after they hang up their cleats.

For those who have never officiated, allow me to share how 10 years of umpiring has prepared me for the game of life. Umpires are fantastic communicators. Nothing is more crucial than to understand the effective methods of human interaction to resolve conflict, explain a controversial rule and persuade others. Umpires are born leaders. I have learned the art of making a first impression and playing the role of a professional through the simplicity of a clean and pressed uniform. Finally, I have learned to accept the reality of not being liked by everyone. I once thought the job was to appease all players and each team through "fairness," but this was not the case. I learned the difficult truth that no matter what we do in life, we can't make everyone satisfied. The best way to umpire a fair game is to be fair through the rulebook. Umpires are ambassadors of our national pastime. We are constantly tested in our knowledge, ethics and character through each call we make.

I am early in the count of my life's at-bat. Just like an umpire putting on the uniform before the game, I mentally prepare for any unexpected obstacle that comes my way. It is often regarded in the umpires' code that "surprise" is the greatest adversary to one's decision-making. I have taken this code to heart in my everyday practice and preparing for the worst but giving the best effort when called upon.

There are times when we may fail or come up short in circumstances not in our control. We can adjust to the craziness of life - like an umpire pitted against the madness of spectators and coaches - if we prepare ourselves accordingly. When the big play in life is coming right at us, we must first accept the reality that there will always be controversy. From there, we can clear our mind from any distraction and make the right call.

Jack Dulgarian of Manhattan Beach, Calif. is celebrating 10 years of officiating baseball with four years varsity high school experience in California and Arizona. He hopes to umpire for the rest of his life along with his dream of becoming a university professor.