

The Pierzynski Affair

By *Daniel Kast*

Game two of baseball's American League Championship Series isn't the obvious place in which to find bits of Meaning and Insight—it's just a game, after all. Yet there I was, watching as my White Sox' revered Evil Genius, A.J. Pierzynski, struck out and then scampered off to first base under the auspices of a rule that still makes little sense to me. As A.J. ran, everyone else started walking off the field. Everyone, that is, except the only man who mattered—the one behind home plate.

"[The umpire] was still watching the play," a helpless Angel infielder would later report. "He didn't take his helmet off. A.J. was still running. That's when I knew something wasn't the way it was supposed to be..."

That sickening feeling turned quickly to full-blown nausea for the Angels and their fans, as Pierzynski was allowed to remain at first base. The next batter, Joe Crede, promptly knocked the ball into the left-field corner, scoring the winning run.

As the days passed, my thoughts turned more and more to this defining moment: the memory of Pierzynski's mad dash, and the feelings of near-guilt the play stirred in my die-hard, South-side heart. Did we "get away" with something? Did the umpire make a mistake? Did my team—*gasp*—cheat? For a team and fan base still stung by the eighty-six-year embarrassment of being responsible for the only (documented) case of "throwing" a World Series, the mere suggestion of impropriety leads down a path none of us wish to tread.

By the rules, Pierzynski did nothing wrong. He ran to first base, just as you are trained to do when that third strike is dropped. He had no way of knowing if the ball had been truly caught, and he rightly left it to the umpire to make the call. That the umpire appeared to make two different calls—first calling Pierzynski "out" yet later allowing him to remain at first base—changes nothing regarding A.J.'s culpability. He did not cheat.

Neither did Pierzynski's teammate, Jermaine Dye, a week or so later on an even bigger stage, when he took first base on another umpire's order—despite knowing he hadn't been hit by a pitch, as it had first appeared. Should Dye have told the umpire the truth? "Nobody would ever do that," was Jermaine's incredulous response to such a suggestion. "That's a crazy question."

Consider if the setting had been different. It's no longer the World Series, but a college baseball tournament. You, as the judicial officer for the home institution, are sitting front row center, decked out in school colors, waving your giant foam finger, and see the play transpire. Either due to serendipitous happenstance or extra-sensory perception, you notice what the umpire did not; namely, that the ball hit the bat, not the player. When that player blithely takes his base as instructed by the umpire, does that not constitute dishonesty? Is it not a violation of the *Honor Code*?

Do the internal rules of the game shield players from greater responsibility?

Perhaps the most telling part of the Pierzynski Affair is not the fans' reaction (who are by nature disposed to support whichever interpretation benefits their team), but that of the unaffiliated media. A clear delineation formed in the op-ed pieces which appeared in the aftermath. Writers who hadn't played the game were often vicious in their ridicule and vilification of the umpire who missed such an "obvious" call, or gave such "misleading" signals. Yet those writers who had traded a bat and glove for a pen were just as vocal in their own assessment: these things happen. Sometimes you get the calls, sometimes you don't. Blame, if placed, was given to the catcher on the play, who had assumed he caught the strike and, rather than tag Pierzynski to nullify the entire incident, merely threw the ball to the ground and jogged to his dugout as A.J. Sped (if one can use the term) to first base.

Wrote Hall of Fame second baseman Ryne Sandberg: "[While] covering second base on steal attempts, we are told to 'sell' the out by trying to convince the ump that we made the tag ... I would never just roll the ball back to the pitcher's mound. I would keep the ball in my glove and show that I got the out."

In other words, it's not important what you did or didn't do—rather, it's what you can convince the umpire happened. (But just in case, hang on to the ball...)

Sound familiar?

Maybe it is too much to expect baseball players, or undergraduate students, to "fess up" when it's just as easy to continue down a path already opened for them. If an umpire awards you that home run you know drifted beyond the foul pole, round the bases with a smile. And if a hearing officer is already inclined to clear you of responsibility for that alcohol found in your refrigerator, no need to produce the receipt—or the fake I.D. you used to purchase it.

As many have pointed out before and since that fateful night, baseball isn't perfect. Umpires make mistakes. And I don't expect (nor really even want) to see a sudden rash of guilt-ridden athletes correcting those mistakes for the "good of the game"—but it might be an interesting sight, just the same.

Whether or not we see a turnabout in players' reactions to questionable rulings, the experiences of this October can be quite educational for judicial officers. There are three lessons from these incidents which I believe can be applied directly to our daily routine.

SELLING THE PLAY

As noted above, it's understood in sports that you need to "sell" the play, even if you know it didn't go your way. Case in point: the "vicinity" call—i.e., on a double play, if the player covering second gets his foot in the vicinity of the base, the umpire will generally call the out even if it's unclear that the tag was actually applied. For this particular type of call at least, there's some reason for leniency—more often than not, the baserunner is doing his darnedest to

cut the legs out from under the player making the relay to first base. Requiring a player to stand on second base long enough to be obvious about it could result in serious injury.

At the same time, you don't want to take this state of affairs for granted; in other words, the player must "sell" the play well enough that the umpire won't be mocked by the fans (or abused by opposing coaches) for giving you the benefit of the doubt.

How does this translate to disciplinary meetings? Well, let's face it: it's doubtful that even half of what we hear during the course of a week is entirely truthful. To be sure, most judicial officers' internal lie detectors are honed to the point where we can root out deliberate falsehoods quite easily. At the same time, I doubt I'm the only one who has allowed a student to spin a tale of regret and remorse that didn't quite stand up to close scrutiny.

In some way, I am allowing the student to sell his own vicinity call. Maybe I hope that if a student knows the right things to say, and respects the process enough to tell me what he thinks I want to hear, along the way some of it might actually sink in. Besides, in order to truly take responsibility, a student must be able to say, "I am responsible", even if she doesn't really mean it at first.

But there is, predictably, a down side. Allowing a student to execute a blatant "snow job" can do much more harm than good to the developmental process. Thus, much of the art of judicial affairs is in knowing when to let the play be sold, and when to call out a student who isn't even in the vicinity.

CONFLICTING SIGNALS

After the Pierzynski play was over and the smoke cleared, it was interesting that the opposing manager didn't take the umpire to task for "missing" the call in the first place. Instead, his main frustration was that the umpire first appeared to call the batter out. The manager's interpretation was that only after Pierzynski ran to first base did the umpire decide that maybe the ball hit the ground after all.

In hindsight, it seems reasonable to presume that the umpire did not change his mind, and it's obvious that the catcher's actions had nothing to do with whatever signal he gave; yet it is just as reasonable to fault the umpire to some extent for a lack of clarity. "I should have sold it either way," he said some time afterwards.

An important parallel to the judicial process is that we have a responsibility to make our decisions clear—and, more importantly, to adequately explain the reasoning behind them. One of the most common errors I see from first-time hearing officers is in mixing messages. I was a resident assistant for three years, and know well the temptation to be the "good guy", to say things like, "If I don't see it, I can't document it."

Such urges can be felt by those who deal with low-level discipline as well, and I can confess to occasionally trying too hard to be "buddies" with students even now. There may be times when it's appropriate to fess up to our own misconduct during younger and less discriminating years—

but the value must be weighed against the possibility that the student will merely take such disclosure as tacit consent.

We're in student affairs because we like students, and we don't want to seem unreasonable or "out of touch". But in trying to maintain that connection and empathize with our students, it can be all too easy to unwittingly shift the focus from the reality that the student has violated university expectations to the fact that the student just happened to get caught.

BEING OPPORTUNISTIC

Lost in the hoopla surrounding these controversial plays is one important consideration: neither the Pierzynski Affair nor the Phantom Beating directly led to runs. The team still had to execute under pressure. Granted, beneficial calls make things a bit easier, but being opportunistic is really what competition is all about.

Similarly, a single decision made by a hearing officer will in itself rarely be a deciding factor in a student's educational career, much less in his life. Even students who find themselves suspended will usually return to school—perhaps not at the same institution, but a suspension is more often a speed bump than a dead end.

Knowing this, we should remember that student development is a process, not a moment in time. It is unrealistic to think that we can solve all of a student's problems, correct all of his behavior, in one 30-minute meeting. In a sense, we simply "call 'em as we see 'em"; it is then up to the student to use the opportunity in whatever way he can.

Thus, a student who "sells" us on a decision has been given an opportunity. Perhaps the call was a good one, or maybe it was questionable. It is still up to that student to make the most of the experience. If she decides that she got away with one, and chooses to continue the behavior that sent her through the disciplinary process in the first place, that's her choice. (And there's no guarantee I'll be as willing to be "sold" the next time around...)

Or, perhaps the student realizes there is value in the words tossed about during his disciplinary hearing, and that there just may be a way to make it through college within the constraints imposed by the institution. The shift from partying freshman to policy-abiding citizen rarely happens overnight, but even a baby step brings him closer to the desired goal.

Either way, judicial affairs is about providing opportunities to students—opportunities to learn, to experience, and to develop into positive, productive members of our community. Whether we give a student the benefit of a dubious call, or we impose a severe sanction in order to send a stern message, what she does with the opportunity presented to her is much more important than the decision itself.

Baseball is just a game—a game played by men who make more money than most of us will ever see, but a game nonetheless. Among the myriad reasons why sports resonate in our society much more than they objectively should is that the crucible of multi-million dollar competition has a

way of providing perspective. We can often see things in sport that suddenly cast our own experiences into a new light.

Of course, comparing the role of campus judicial officer to that of umpire in the World Series may be just a tad unfair.

After all, our stakes are much higher.

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