

Umpire sees playing field as chance to get away

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Randal Schoppa heads back to home while working the Henrietta softball game against Holliday Friday, March 24, 2017, in Henrietta.(Photo: Lauren Roberts/Times Record News)

When one door closes, another one opens.

It worked out that way for Randal Schoppa at least. The Wichitan wanted to find a softball league to play in after he'd finished at Gallaudet University and taken a job with AT&T in northern Virginia.

But what he found was a huge waiting list. More softball players than spots in the local league. Big problem. And a tiny solution in the form of a one-paragraph newspaper ad.

"I was a tennis player and tennis wasn't popular in northern Virginia, so I tried to get my name on the waiting list to play softball and they said there were 120 teams on the waiting list," Schoppa recalled. "But that weekend I read the newspaper and a short paragraph said 'Need Umpires.' I called that number and it was for baseball and softball umpires."

Schoppa found he was at home on the diamond even if he had to give up swinging the bat. It's been a place to get away whether he was in Virginia, Houston or back home in Wichita Falls, where he returned in 2008. Twenty-nine seasons and more than 6,350 games later, he's still in love.

And if you're not liking his strike zone, well tough, he probably can't hear you. Schoppa is hearing impaired. His first umpires association had never dealt with that before, but he quickly proved he was one of the best rookies on the job.

"My first year they had 35 rookies and I was one of the top five," Schoppa said. "They said rookies (are) not going to work with rookies. About six weeks later I got a call and they said this is your partner. I said wait a minute, to the assigner, I thought rookies can't work with rookies. He said you guys showed what you could do in the training. We had three games and didn't have a problem."



Henrietta head softball coach Blake Arbogast argues a call to Umpire Randal Schoppa in the game against Holliday Friday, March 24, 2017, in Henrietta. The Lady Cats defeated the Lady Eagles 16-1. (Photo: Lauren Roberts/Times Record News)

So I asked Schoppa if he tries to go play softball now.

"I forgot how to play. I umpire almost every night and plan to keep doing it as long as I can," Schoppa said.

He's enjoyed doing more fast-pitch games since coming to Texas. He loves the Wichita Falls association.

"I love it here, we get together often to go over issues and mechanics. We help each other," Schoppa said. "I enjoy umpiring. You take everything off your mind. You forget all the problems at work or issues at home. You have to concentrate on the rules."

Schoppa said the toughest things for him are foul tips or responding quickly to an appeal play. He can read lips so he warns the coaches to get in front of him if they have a question. Some haven't always taken that advice to heart.

"I had a partner, Mike. He moved to Oklahoma, but we're doing a high school game and he asked me to take the plate," Schoppa said. "I watched my partner and just before the pitcher started to wind up, he had this big smile. I had no idea. I thought what in the world is he smiling about.

"When the game was over I was like, 'Hey, Mike, you had a big smile, what was that about?' He said you know the coach has been yelling at you like crazy about balls and strikes. I said, 'Which one, the coach on my left?' I can't hear a thing in my left ear. I said I'd warned him before the game that I'm hearing impaired. I told him if you have a question, you have to look at me."

Schoppa said the biggest thing for umpires in those situations is remaining calm. "When they question you, they can get very emotional, but you try to explain to the coach about your judgement call. You don't want to show emotion and get angry with them or you'll lose control of the game."

Like fans, Schoppa can enjoy a great pitcher's duel where the pitchers are in control. He recently called a 0-0 game with Clyde and Abilene Cooper in Graham's tournament. "Two good pitchers, a lot of strikeouts and it was an hour and 20 minutes. First time I'd had a game with no score," Schoppa said.

He's been on the field for several good playoff games in recent years. And he felt honored to call a Seniors Players Association Championship where "they had a great time. Nobody complained and we just had fun. I had the championship behind the plate."



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He said he was quite humbled back in 2013 when he was voted the Most Distinguished Umpire for the WFSUA. "All the members in TASO voted. I was honored. It showed I was very caring. We help each other and show respect. I love it here."

"It's a passion for him," his friend Sammy Milam said. "It's a dedication for him, not just something to do."

Something to do would have been to play a little softball 30 years ago. Instead, Schoppa is doing his best to help players of all ages enjoy their time on the diamond as much as he does.

One little newspaper ad: nine state tournaments, six national tournaments, nine regional tournaments and more than 6,000 games.

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