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## The umpire strikes back

Kevin Dunleavy

Jan 13, 2020

When Little League umpire Matt Dinsmore was hit in the face by a Gatorade bottle thrown by an angry fan, his initial thought was to let it go.

After all, Dinsmore wasn't injured and bore no ill will toward the bottle thrower, who he didn't know.

But the more Dinsmore thought about the incident, the more he recalled the increasingly bad behavior of adults at games and the more he talked to fellow umpires who also have been subject to similar abuse, the 40-year-old from Sharpsburg became convinced that he needed to take a stand.

So Dinsmore pressed charges.

Six months after the incident, which happened last June, Norman Potter, 31, pleaded guilty to second-degree assault. On Dec. 19, the Hagerstown resident was sentenced to 18 months in jail, with all but four days suspended. A \$500 fine also was suspended. Potter was ordered to write a letter of apology and to undergo anger management help. He will remain on unsupervised probation for 18 months.

Potter's lawyer, Martin Palmer, declined comment.

Dinsmore, an umpire for several years in Washington County, hopes the case serves as a cautionary tale for adults who have become increasingly unruly at games.

"I'm glad the judge took it seriously, saw it as an issue and did something about it," Dinsmore said.

"Talking to other umpires, they now feel like they have some kind of backing, that they've got someone supporting them."

The incident happened on June 17 at the annual City Championship game, which pits the top two teams from Hagerstown's four Little League organizations. The game featured Alsatia of Federal Little League against Sunoco of West End.

According to Dinsmore, the game quickly became contentious after a baserunner from Sunoco was ejected when it was determined he was stealing signs from the Alsatia catcher and relaying them to the batter.

Dinsmore wasn't involved in the call, which was made by home plate umpire Travis Poole. It was a costly ejection as Sunoco lost its starting pitcher.

According to Dinsmore, as the game progressed, Sunoco fans became increasingly abusive, hurling insults at the umpiring crew. When the game ended, with Alsatia upsetting previously undefeated Sunoco, 3-2, the complaints of fans intensified.

"I walked back to the backstop because I wanted to watch the trophy presentation. The whole time people from West End were just screaming — vulgar language and obscenities," Dinsmore recalled. "I asked them, 'Guys, the game is over. There's kids everywhere. Please stop.' I just wanted them to quit cussing."

Eventually, Potter asked Dinsmore to "come on this side of the fence," the umpire recalled.

"I said to myself, 'I don't need this,' so I walked away," Dinsmore said. "Then he threw the bottle and it caught me on the side of the face. It was half to three-quarters full. It was enough to sting.

"And he didn't even have a kid in the game. He was strictly there as a spectator."

The incident prompted another member of the umpiring crew, Steve Mohl, to summon police. As Potter was departing, Mohl followed him and took pictures, which the police used to identify and find Potter.

Police did not charge Potter. Dinsmore took that step in October.

According to Jay Hawks, the president of West End Little League, the strong reaction from fans had much to do with the manner in which Poole ejected the player from Sunoco.

"What set everyone off was the demeanor of how he came out from home plate," Hawks said. "He came barging out like a wild man. You're throwing your mask off like a football player, you charge the mound, screaming, chest puffed out and that's what set the fans off."

Dinsmore said the the ejection "could have been handled better."

"You're talking about a 12-year-old kid and a 275/300-pound man charging after him," Hawks said. "It had nothing to do with the base umpires. They were all very fine gentlemen. It was the home-plate umpire."

With that said, Hawks added, there was no excuse for the virulent reactions of fans, the cursing and especially for a bottle to be thrown.

"That should have never ever happened, no matter what had transpired," Hawks said. "The guy got time. I'm glad for it. I told him he wasn't allowed on the premises at West End Little League."

Dinsmore and Mohl were pleasantly surprised by the result. They weren't convinced there would be any repercussions for Potter.

"I hate to see anything around youth sports that requires that kind of punitive action," Mohl, 48, said. "But on the flip side, I hope word about this gets out and people realize that this is not acceptable behavior and if they continue in this manner, there will be negative consequences."

During the game, Mohl was astonished that one of those helping stoke the fires of the fans was a West End Little League board member.

"He did a lot of stirring the pot," Mohl said. "I think if it hadn't been for that, this whole thing with Matt being assaulted might not have happened. I don't think it would have reached that fevered pitch."

"He was really upset, said a lot of things," Hawks said. "You just can't act that way, no matter what."

Dinsmore and Mohl both said that several parents of players from Sunoco approached them to offer support.

"I got more apologies from West End parents, asking me, 'Please don't hold West End responsible for this, because not everybody at West End is like that,'" Dinsmore said.

Hawks was disheartened to see a Little League game become so combative and with so many adults at fault.

"It's a kids' sport. We're all there to develop them, teach them good sportsmanship," Hawks said. "I'm thinking, 'Am I really seeing this stuff going on in front of these kids?'"

Dinsmore thought long and hard about pursuing the case. Now he hopes some good comes from his decision.

"At times I thought, I am being petty by pressing charges. Is the judge going to look at this and laugh and say, 'You're wasting my time with this nonsense?'" Dinsmore said. "But I got a lot of calls and emails from umpires around the county asking me to do something. In Washington County none of the umpires get paid. I went up there and got pelted in the face and afterward I got a soda and a sandwich. I wasn't making any money. I was doing it for the kids."



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