

Umpires are the lymphatic system of the baseball diamond

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When I go to a baseball game, I try to remember to watch the umpires. They move around in a counter-intuitive way: They don't run toward the ball. They don't run toward the runner. Even when the ball is far away, the umpire runs from what appears to be one irrelevant position on the field to another equally irrelevant position. Yet no matter what eventually happens, there's always an umpire there to make the necessary call. (As opposed to the players on the field, who sometimes forget to cover third base.) That's because the umpires aren't playing the game of baseball as it happens on the field. They're playing a different game altogether: They are continuously positioning themselves to see what needs to be seen right now (did the runner leave the bag too soon?) as well as anticipating what they will need to see five seconds from now. One of my colleagues is also a Little League umpire, so I get to satisfy my curiosity about this underappreciated profession at the lunch table. I learned that a large part of the job is actually psychology, convincing the players that your decisions should be accepted. And that umpires are watching for things that players and fans take for granted (like making sure the runner touches all the bases). One thing that I found interesting is that the umpires don't know what the score of the game is. They are worried about strikes, balls, and outs. The score is entirely irrelevant to the job of an umpire until the game reaches the final inning, when it becomes time to decide when the game is over. And then if you're near the scorer's table, you may hear the following conversation: **Umpire:** "What's the score?"

Scorekeeper: "22 to 2."

Umpire: "And who's winning?" My colleague points out that the official scorekeeper is sometimes surprised by that last question. I mean, anybody who's been following the game knows that it's a complete blowout. Anybody, that is, except the umpires: The rules of the game don't change based on the score. Three strikes and you're out; doesn't matter if your team is winning or losing. One of the repeating principles I noticed in the rules of baseball is that *starting the next play implies acceptance of the results of the previous play*. For example, pitching to the next batter removes your right to claim that a runner failed to touch a base or left a base too soon, or that the previous batter batted out of turn. Not only does it simplify the process for addressing a rule violation (you never have to rewind more than one play), it also reduces the amount of state the umpires needs to carry in their heads. The

infamous [Pine Tar Incident](#) combines many of these little tidbits about baseball rules and umpiring. When the illegal bat was identified, only Brett's most recent at-bat was affected. The results of earlier at-bats with the illegal bat remained valid. When the game was resumed a month later, the umpires were armed with statements from the previous umpires confirming that Brett had touched all the bases. They didn't have to include statements about prior events in the game, because the fact that the game continued put those decisions beyond appeal. I was reminded of this topic when I was alerted to the book [*As They See 'Em: A Fan's Travels in the Land of Umpires*](#). The [NPR book review](#) contains an excerpt in which the author Bruce Weber discusses the amount of detail involved in the seemingly casual action of removing one's mask. You can also [listen to an interview with the author on the March 28, 2009 edition of *Only a Game*](#) and [the March 20, 2009 edition of *The Leonard Lopate Show*](#).

Bonus chatter: I attended a little league game which my friend was working as an umpire with the intent of watching the umpires rather than the game. It takes some effort to *not* watch the ball as it sails into the outfield.

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