

Mr. Baseball

Written by Mike Kelly
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Bobby Dunnigan is an innovator.

For a guy that saw his baseball-playing career cut short by an arm injury, Dunnigan has found his niche as an umpire. Yes, an umpire, the most despised person on a baseball diamond. No matter what the umpire does to maintain the rules, he can't please everyone.

But that didn't bother Dunnigan. Thanks to the encouragement of his family and friends, Dunnigan, at the young age of 16, took up his trade. And 33-years later, he has no regrets. "I love baseball, said Dunnigan, who was a pitcher at Watauga High and played one year at Pfeiffer College (now Pfeiffer University) before his career was cut short in 1980. "I kinda got pushed into it. And I'm glad I got involved. The coaches really worked with me, and fortunately, being so young, they sure had a lot of patience. Thanks to that, I avoided a lot of bad experiences. So the growing pains weren't all that bad."

And Dunnigan has developed into quite a umpire. He has worked at the collegiate level, he worked the Little League World Series (the International finals between Monterrey, Mexico and Tokyo, Japan that was televised on ESPN in 1997), and he has also worked a Class 1A state high school championship game between Princeton and Rosman in 2000.

"Umpiring has allowed me to keep in touch with the game," Dunnigan said. "I got out of it for a while because of my son (Trey). I coached Little League for about eight years, and thanks to coach (Pete) Hardee, I also coached at Watauga High School for three years. But since Trey graduated, I've gone back to umpiring games. I just enjoy it.

"I love being around the kids, being a role model and working with them and being involved with them. It's been quite a journey, but an enjoyable one."

Dunnigan recently umpired the Southeast Little League Regional in Greenville, South Carolina, August 4-9. It was his second regional assignment. He worked the Southeast Regional in St. Petersburg, FL in 1989.

"And it was all volunteer," Dunnigan said. "You don't get paid for these tournaments, but the people are great. Heck, the nice folks in Greenville (SC) took care of our hotel rooms for five nights, our meals, it was great. And I was glad to do it. It was a lot of fun, and it was great competition."

And Dunnigan was blessed to have some good mentors on his way through the ranks. People like Toby Thorpe, Randy Collins and Larry Braswell showed him the way.

"That's because they were never satisfied," Dunnigan said. "They pushed me, and they pushed themselves to be at their best all the time. The biggest lesson they taught me was to keep improving. Don't be satisfied with where you are; strive to get better each time out."

But Dunnigan, who plans to umpire for ten more years, admits the young guys don't last very long---a huge concern for the trade.

"It's a little tougher on the young guys," he said. "They just don't seem to last that long. It's a good question why they don't. I wish I had an answer. But the biggest thing you have to understand, that no matter what happens, someone isn't going to be happy. But if you make the right call, it doesn't matter. Just make the right decisions, and handle any situation that pops up the best way you can.

"It takes a lot of work and a lot of patience to become a good umpire. You just have to stay with

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it. It's a matter of getting experience and developing consistency. Everything else will take care of itself."

NOTES: District 7 had four teams in regional play. It was the best showing in District 7 history. Three softball teams (the Wilkes 9-10 year-olds, the Morganton Senior League team, and the Wilkes 11-12 year-olds) and one baseball team (the Wilkes Junior League team) advanced to regional play. And the Wilkes 11-12 year olds won the Southeast Regional title in Warner-Robins, Ga., and advanced to the World Series in Portland, Ore. The Wilkes Juniors finished fourth in Greenville, SC.