The Sad State of the MLB's Umpires

Game 1 of the ALDS, Yankees vs. Twins. A line drive in the 9th inning is shot out to Yankee's outfielder Greg Golson for the last out of the game. Golson runs in and smoothly catches the ball, inches from the ground. As he runs in to celebrate his team's victory, the umpires rule the catch a trap, and after some dispute from Yankee's players and coaches, the game goes on. The play does little damage however as the side is retired shortly after and the Yankees win Game 1.

Game 1 of the NLDS, Braves vs. Giants. Giant's catcher Buster Poser attempts to steal 2nd. The throw goes to 2nd, and Posey is tagged out several inches from the bag. Atlanta fans, rejoice? Not so fast, as he has been called safe by the 2nd base umpire! Posey goes on to score the only run of the game, securing the Giants both the win and eventually the series.

Possibly most egregiously, earlier this season in June, Tiger's pitcher Armando Galarraga lost his perfect game thanks to a blown call by a 1st base umpire, one out away from a faultless victory.

In most other sports, these scenarios would be challenged, instant replays would be evaluated, and after further consideration a corrected call would easily have been made.

In baseball, these plays are just another "classic" part of the game. Coach doesn't like the call? Go ahead and argue. Stay out of the dugout for too long (which for most umps is approximately 10 seconds) and you're out of the game. The umpire himself doesn't like the call? Well, just apologize the day after. Nothing will change. We all just have to deal with it.

We made it through cheating scandals, we made it through the color barrier of the sport, and we're making it through steroids. Perhaps the next hill to climb in the game of baseball is dealing with the umpires and their calls themselves.

That seems a bit harsh. Let me clarify: I don't believe the problem is with the umpires. I believe the problem is how the MLB handles situations like Mr. Galarraga's blown perfect game. It seems to me that baseball execs are stubbornly refusing to allow for any sort of human error in the umps, and that every call they make is flawless.

Some have suggested holding the umps accountable for their errors, and possibly even docking their pay for the worst ones, but this gets into tricky territory for two reasons: one, who decides what plays are bad enough to merit a fine? One man's "That was a close one" is another man's "HE WAS OUT BY A MILE!!!" And two, umpires are paid to make tough decisions. It is a big part of their job. I honestly believe that most umpires are giving it 100% and trying to call each game as fairly and unbiased as possible. Can we then truly fine someone for trying their best under such stressful circumstances?

I have another solution in mind: instant replays.

Currently video reviews are used only for disputed home-runs and fan interference. This is a good start, but I would recommend taking this a step or two further. Because as it stands right now, the game can sometimes become more about the judging of a game than the playing of the game. And this is obviously very wrong since if a fan begins to question the legitimacy of a sport, it loses its appeal.

If the use of instant replay were to be increased, certainly there would have to be limits. There couldn't and shouldn't be revisions made to individual pitches; the game already lasts long enough. It would potentially never end that way! I also don't believe in every single close play being reevaluated. Baseball is built on the drama of safe or out, strike or ball. The game is pretty darn close to perfect and the baseball fanatic in me would prefer to see it as un-tampered with as possible. However, when entire games are being blown, when players' achievements are being discarded because of a bad call, clearly something's got to give.

And while I understand the men in charge of America's favorite pastime being wary of changing too much about our beloved sport, it is time to recognize that the majority of its audience can see each individual play in HD, slow-motion, and with the time-controlling capabilities of Tivo. ESPN breaks down nearly every pitch, showing its speed, curve, and placement in the strike zone. The audience can plainly see what calls are a mile off and which ones are dead on, and they can see them repeatedly on every sports channel available to them. With this in mind, it is absolutely ludicrous to not introduce some kind of technology into the game itself to help improve its accuracy.

Perhaps implement a limited number of challenges per game like football. That ensures only the biggest, most apparent mistakes get called out and fixed and that coaches will only be thrown out when they truly deserve it rather than every other game. Perhaps introduce a system that encourages a kind of "group-umping" where other umpires that saw the play can provide input and occasionally overrule a call. Perhaps install a Boo-O-Meter where only the calls that the crowd really hates get reviewed (Totally kidding about that one). I don't know the right way to handle it. All I know is that it is time for baseball to change in a way that will benefit the umpires, the teams, the fans, and the game itself. It's time to enter the 21st century, baseball.

And to those who disagree and believe baseball should be left alone, you could be right. Maybe I am just bitter. R.I.P. 2010 Braves and Coach Bobby Cox. Heck of a season guys.