

BASEBALL DIGEST



ALL STAR EDITION



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By Abe J. Shear
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Gary Darling umpired in MLB for 27 years and currently serves as the president of Umps Care, an organization established by the MLB umpires to provide emotional and financial support for youth and families in need. Gary umpired in two All Star games, two World Series and five Championships Series.

It is hard to imagine being an umpire. We only remember what are perceived as missed calls (remarkably few for the number of plays) and player/manager ejections (Gary averaged only four per year and had seven years when he ejected two or fewer).

I had always wanted to interview an umpire for this baseball series and Gary was referred to me by Shaun Clancy. Gary and I had a wonderful conversation, one without a disparaging word about a player, manager, umpire or anyone else. In fact, it is hard to imagine how unjaded his comments were.

Lastly, check out Umpscare (as he notes). This organization provides comfort to people in need. It is run by umpires, all of whom are unpaid for these wonderful services.

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Gary Darling "You're Out"

Shear: I am in Phoenix with Gary Darling. Before we get going though, I want to talk a little bit about Umps Care.

Umps Care is an official charity of Major League Baseball. It is hard to really define exactly when it was started because back in 1999 there was a labor dispute and lots of guys lost their jobs. I was one of them. The umpires started what they called the "helping hand fund" which was umpires giving money to this general fund and, when the 22 umpires lost their jobs, they could draw a little each month to help get through the rough time. That was very beneficial to a lot of guys.

When I got my job back in 2002, we did not do anything right away, but we started discussing how to move that to the next level, more than just helping umpires. We had our first charity golf outing in 2003, it was about 15 guys, 10 umpires with some of their friends

kids in foster care. We do Build-A-Bear workshops and we do hospital visits – just umpires giving back to their own communities around where they live, but also all around Major League Baseball.

And people can access Umps Care online?

www.umpscare.com. Simple address and website. People can make donations.

I certainly appreciate your time here. So, you grew up in California?

Born in San Francisco, grew up in Sacramento.

And your first memory of baseball?

Either playing catch with my dad or wiffle ball in the backyard with my dad and my sister, and then my brother came along a little while later. You know, just that, and then started playing little league baseball at nine years old, but a lot of it was playing catch with Dad, and wiffle ball in the backyard, and then just little league and Babe Ruth and Legion baseball.

"I was told by a scout that the only people who are going to draft me would be the Army."

playing golf in Florida. We just needed to take it a little farther than that, so Larry Young, myself and Jim Reynolds formed the non-profit. Larry did all the work and we tried to help umpires and also give away scholarships to deserving students. We have kids out to the ballpark with our ticket programs,

You played baseball through. . .

Junior college. I played for two years in junior college, and I was told by a scout that the only people who are going to draft me would be the Army, so it was time to think of another career. All my family are educators. My dad is a teacher. My brother is a professor. My

sister is a high school teacher. My dad's brother and sisters were teachers. My wife was a teacher. There was nothing

“I always had great partners throughout the minor leagues.”

in school that was grabbing my attention and my second year in junior college, in Sacramento, I took this sports officiating class and I umpired some games and liked it. I knew my playing days were done, and I started umpiring around Sacramento. One of the first guys I worked with had been to umpire school and learned a little bit about that and I wrote to Bill Kinnamon's umpire school. I ended up going there in 1980.

Let me drop back for just a second.

What position did you play?

In high school and junior college, first base.

That would be my guess. You are pretty tall.

Not quite 6'4", good fielder. Most years I did not hit very well, but I had a couple of decent hitting years. For the most part, I was a pretty good defensive first baseman.

When you were young, did you enjoy watching games, listening to games?

Oh yeah. My dad would take me to Candlestick, a two-hour drive. His mom and my mother's mom both still live in San Francisco. We used to go visit them and work out a trip to Candlestick. We would go to 3-4 games a year, at least. I always just loved the game, and umpiring was a way to stick around—stay around it for sure.

So the Giants were your favorite team when you grew up?

Growing up the Giants were. Yes.

And your favorite player?

All time, gotta be Mays—for sure. Ironically, my first spring training assignment was with the Giants in spring training down in Casa Grande where they had their minor league spring training back in the early 80s late 70s.

Your favorite announcers as a child?

Probably you know, Russ Hodges and Lon Simmons, just being a Giants fan. I didn't really know about Vin Scully or Ernie Harwell or any of those, the greats that most people know about, National League. I enjoy listening to those guys.

And did you collect baseball cards?

Did you follow baseball by reading it, listening to it, watching it?

Mostly back then it was all radio, not many television games, the Saturday game of the week or whatever, but I just followed the box scores and listened to the games. I don't know if I listened every night but I listened to a lot of games on radio for sure.

Do you remember the first baseball game?

I couldn't tell for sure. I'd be better able to tell you the first 49er game I went to. My dad took me to Kezar Stadium a couple of times to see them. I'd make my dad take me to a double header and, now, I wouldn't be real happy if my son wanted to go to a double header.

We stayed until the end. Both 9 inning games. I remember the Expos were playing.

I hadn't thought about that. So when you umpire behind the plate, in a game, in a double header, the next game you umpire in the same series is at third base.

Not anymore. When I first came up, you'd work both games and little by little it has changed. Now, if there's a scheduled double header and they have enough time, like if you get rained out Friday night and there's a double header on Saturday, they might not be able to get another umpire from the minor leagues. If they know the double header's coming for a little while, they'll bring a guy in from the minor leagues. If

would go from home plate to third base.

Right. We always go clockwise.

Right. So the first base guy ends up working at home.

This was kind of the worst draw because it's just a long day with the second game. And especially because you're on your feet the whole time.

So you went to umpire school in ...

San Bernadino, in 1980.

And what was that like?

It was a blast. You'd have rule sessions in the morning, then they'd teach you the basics of just how to get in position with your hands on your knees and looking out and down a little bit, just stay still for plays. How to take a play at first base, then how to rotate on a double to come in and take a pivot and take the batter to second base or all the way to third base, so all the basics, all the basics of the two man system. And all the basics of the rules.

And how long was that course?

5 weeks. Pretty much the whole month of January, and then they promote the best guys out of there. At the time, there were two umpire schools. One was run by Bill Kinnamon; the other one was run by Al Summers. Now, Hunter Wendelstedt, his dad was a long time National League umpire, Harry Wendelstedt. Harry has passed away and now Hunter, his son, runs the umpire school.

Bill's school was sold to Joel Brinkman and Bruce Froemming. And then Jimmy Evans started a school, so at one time there were 3, and then Evans bought the rights to the Brinkman/Froemming school.

And then you were hired?

“You don't want to be the story but sometimes that's part of the job.”

you work the plate the first game, you're off the second game. And if you have the plate the second game, you're out the first game.

I didn't know that.

So the guy they bring up from the minor leagues, he works first base in the first game, then he flips over and works third base in the second game.

But it used to be before that, you

Well, then they put you on a list, the best 30 guys or so out of the 3 different schools at the time. Probably more than that, probably 40 or 50 guys would go to Bradenton where the Pirates do their training camp. The minor league had their supervisors that are evaluating those guys, and then most everybody gets into the minor leagues. They pick a third of them to go, they get to go to

minor league spring training, which was a big deal. Then you need to get assigned to rookie ball or "A" ball.

So where did you start?

The Northwest League in Oregon and Washington, and Victoria, B.C. Some really good cities. Medford, Bellingham, WA, Walawala, WA. My first partner though was Billy Spooner, who's now an NBA official.

And was it fun to be in the minor leagues for a while?

We had more fun in the minor leagues then you actually do in the big leagues. It was just you and your partner, and I was always lucky, I always had great partners throughout the minor leagues. You get along, you play golf during the day. We never had any money, but we didn't feel like we were poor all the time, we just kind of scraped by.

League, and then that's from the middle of September to November, and then spring training starts again in March, so you just try to find a job for 4 months or so. I always knew people that needed a little work in that time and Sears always hired me back. You definitely gotta work though.

The whole idea of lawyering, I think, is to be invisible. I'm guessing that umpiring is the same. After the game, if everybody's talking about the umpiring, something sort of went wrong in the game, and you guys want to be invisible I'd guess.

You don't want to be the story, that's for sure, but sometimes you gotta make that unpopular call, you gotta call a balk in the 9th inning or obstruction or interference or whatever. You don't want to be the story but sometimes that's part

So while you were doing AAA, you'd go to spring training and umpire there too?

At first you're assigned to minor league spring training, but then once you get on the radar of the big leagues, then you get invited to major league spring training. Each one's a nice step, you want to get out of the Northwest League and you want to get to AA, and then every year you want to be moving up the ladder. Getting big league spring training is really kind of the first time as a professional umpire, minor league umpire, that you have any money, because now you're getting the big league per diem. You're not on big league salary, but you're getting the big league per diem.

So you can make money eating at McDonald's.

You can eat wherever you want at that point. In the minor leagues, you live off the hot dogs after the game sometimes, so you know, we were making \$900/month and that included expenses. So in the big leagues, 2 days of per diem is more than your whole month's per diem in the minors.

So the game ended and you'd try to find food at the ball park.

Well, most of the teams would bring you back a leftover hot dog or something and there were plenty of times where I would order dinner, for sure. You would try to eat at Bonanza or Sirloin or those kind of places. I'd have a nice big lunch, a salad bar, and get a hamburger or sandwich or something. You weren't eating 3 big meals a day, that's for sure. You were lucky to have 1½.

So then you got called up to the major's.

My first games were in 1986.

Were you pretty certain you were going to get called up then?

My first year of big league spring training was in '85, so it kind of moved a little quick, but there were some guys... it just kind of varies when the opening is coming, but I wasn't certain for sure. There was no guarantee I was going to get any big league games ever, even when you do get big league spring training.

When they called you up, did you go up at the beginning of the season?

Oh no. Starting in '79, the umpire's

“You live off the hot dogs after the game sometimes.”

Did you drive from location to location?

In the lower minor leagues, we drove. I was the driver in the Northwest League. I had a '66 Volkswagon and all the stuff was in the back. We had the ice chest behind the seats with sandwiches and sodas, and maybe a beer or two. We would just drive from city to city and switch off. We'd usually drive through the night, because then you'd get to the next city and get to sleep a little bit. The drives weren't real bad in the Northwest. There were a couple of long ones in the Texas League. There were two of us in that league as well.

But nobody hated extra inning games more than the umpires.

You don't get paid anymore, that's for sure. They don't pay you overtime.

It's free baseball and it's also free umpiring.

Free umpiring, yes.

When the season ended, what did you do?

The first year, I worked a little construction with a buddy in Sacramento. I worked for Sears in their credit department. I did construction. The off season is only about 4 months. You're done by September and then the first 3 years I did the Instructional

of the job. You gotta follow what you see and hope that you saw it right.

So what was like to get the call to move up.

I umpired in the Northwest League and the California State League for a year and a half. Halfway through my second year there, I got promoted to AA. I worked with Pam Postema at the time, the only minor league female umpire. Went back to the Texas League the next year and it's now '83. And then half way through the next year, I got promoted to AAA.

Which AAA League?

The Pacific Coast League.

That probably was nice. Nice cities in the Pacific Coast League, and nice parks.

They're probably nicer now, but I mean we played in Phoenix. Tucson and Hawaii were in the league, as well as Salt Lake City, Las Vegas and Vancouver. There were some great cities in the Coast League then.

And you flew then?

We flew then, yes.

That probably was ok for a while.

You don't want to be there very long. You don't want to become a veteran of any league, except for one of the two major leagues.

started to get two week vacations. After the first real big strike, they hired some of the guys that worked as scabs, which made the staff too big, so that created the vacations that guys get now. Then it was 2 weeks, and it started in June to Labor Day. Once June came around, that's when the vacations start, so they pulled guys out of the minor leagues to cover those vacations.

What was the first game you umpired?

That had to be the Giants and the Expos at the Olympic Stadium in Montreal.

Was anybody there but the umpires and the players?

“The 5 o'clock games in L.A. are brutal because the sun is setting.”

There were a few people, 10,000 maybe.

And what was that like?

That was fun. I joined Lee Weyer and Eddie Montague, Dutch Rennert.

That's a great crew.

Great, great crew. They welcomed me aboard and it's just another step up the ladder, but that's a big step when that first call to go up came. Still there was no guarantee you're gonna get hired at any point.

And do you remember the first game behind the plate?

I started at 3rd base and then we went from Montreal to St. Louis, and the first game in St. Louis...I was kind of ignorant on what the rivalries were. I was a baseball fan, but I didn't really realize that St. Louis – Chicago was this mega mega rivalry and it was in early June of '86. I had the plate the second game of that series on Saturday. Actually there was a fight, so I had my first ejection.

Who did you eject?

Greg Bargar, pitcher for the Cardinals. I guess he and Shawn Dunston had a little issue from the minor leagues earlier, the year before or whatever. Bargar threw at Dunston, and Dunston didn't like it and I did a little dance with Dunston trying to get him from going to the mound and spun him around. Then Bargar came and tried to get at Dunston, so I got knocked to the ground, my hat got lost. It was a typical baseball fight. There wasn't a punch but on the camera you can see me on the ground looking for my hat. You

see Lee Weyer running in from first base and he pulls his hamstring, so Lee grabs his leg. And we still got that old VHS tape at home somewhere.

I'm always curious about something. Everything about baseball is sort of the same, more or less. Except the umpires call strikes all completely different. Do you practice calling strikes in front of a mirror? Do you decide how to do it or is it just instinct?

It kind of just evolved. I don't think anybody starts in umpire school and spends a whole career calling strikes the

same way. You start at umpire school very basic, the right hand comes up, you keep your head still. They don't want you being too fancy turning off to the side, because it's just you and your partner. They want you paying attention to everything that's going on in front of you where the ball is. As time goes by, you try coming out to the side, whatever feels comfortable. Mine just migrated back to the umpire school and I bet my last 10, 15 years, the young guys that got called up, the hammer was just basic, like you're knocking on a door kind of strike call. My strike 3 was not much different, maybe just a little more energy into it, but the less I did worked better for me.

I know from having caught, some umpires put their hand on my back, which I did not much care for at all because I was always afraid I was going to fall on my head. What did you do?

There were times you want to keep your head up and not look at the catcher when he is moving so you have your hand just kind of barely touching him, you kind of feel where they're moving. Some guys, use it as a distancing thing, so they put their hand on the catcher, so they know they're not too close to them, so they do it that way. Some of the guys just get right in there and kind of hug them.

And do the catcher's talk about it to you?

A lot of the catchers don't like it. They don't really mind if you got your hand

on them, but they don't like you really grabbing them.

What's the best and worst time of day to umpire?

The worst, dusk. The 5 o'clock games in L.A. are brutal because the sun is setting, the lights haven't kicked in, there are shadows and anytime you have a shadow, that shadow comes between the pitcher and the hitter, and it doesn't stay in one spot. But when the sun's setting, it just kind of keeps moving so you don't like it when the ball is coming out of the glare into the shadow. Vision wise, it's dusk. At night, you have the true lights of the stadium, you don't have the glare and the clouds and the different things like that. Night games in a major league stadium are the best. If you have a night game during spring training, not so much because those lights are lower.

That being said, umpires always look at the schedule, and we're kind of picking what schedule we want. We always wanted to get to Wrigley for Friday, Saturday, Sunday, all three day games because then you get to eat dinner at night in Chicago. You put on 10 lbs but if you could get an off day, going in there on a Thursday or have a day game someplace else, and get in to Chicago on Thursday night, I have a dinner that night, then Friday, Saturday and then you're probably going to leave on Sunday after the game. Get away day games work because then you get to your next city, you don't have to wake up at 5 in the morning for your flight in order to get to your next city. You gotta have some night games too.

I guess you use the counter, but . . .

No. In the minor leagues I did, but about halfway through my big league career, I stopped because you don't know if it's right.

So you just kept the balls and strikes in your head.

You tried to keep in your head. I wasn't one to give the count all the time. I would say it in my mind, and when we got to 3-2, I would say 3-2.

Would you ever be asked what's the count, and you go, I just don't know.

99% of the time, you knew, but there are those times I lost the count, one time in the NLCS at Shea Stadium, between the Cardinals and the Mets actually. And

a lot of times, if you're not sure, the hitter's not sure, you say it's 1-2 or it's 2-2? Usually between the hitter and the catcher, you're going to come up with the right count. Every now and then, they disagree because they forget there's been a foul ball or whether you called a pitch a strike and they thought it was a ball and vice versa. Now they go to replay. They can call up to the press box and get it right. That was something we usually didn't do that back in the day. We were old school. I remember once I called in Tim Welke and Jimmy Joyce and we got the count right that way. Guys on the bases don't carry any indicators either, and it just became more of a nuisance because sometimes you look down and my indicator was wrong, or the scoreboard is wrong.

I'm guessing that you watch games today, but when you watch games, do you watch the game or do you watch the umpires?

More umpires. When I watch the game, I don't sit and watch the whole game. I'll watch part of it. My wife likes the Diamondbacks, my son is a big Cubs fan, so we watch a little baseball. I follow more online and my iPad or my computer just checking box scores, see where the guys are going and what's going on. There's a website www.closecallsports.com that tracks all the ejections and I kind of take a peek at that and see what's going on that way. But to sit and watch a whole game, it's not my idea...

Do you have any pictures of you ejecting somebody from a game?

Pictures?

Yes.

I got a few, yeah. I had enough ejections, I had to get pictures.

So, the funniest catcher that you ever umpired behind. I know catchers often like to talk.

Some catchers talk, some don't. The catcher, I'm trying to think of the name, he's with the A's. I remember one day he came in and said 'this is the coldest game in my career'. I went back and looked...he had been the big leagues for 3 months. So we put a candle in a Hostess Ding Dong or something and sent it over and said, "congratulations on your 41st game". Brad Asmus was

alright. I wasn't a real social guy that did a lot of talking out there. I had some conversations, but not a whole lot.

One thing that I was wondering, it seems to be that in baseball, as fast as it is, in some ways, it's harder to umpire first base than it is to umpire behind the plate because behind the plate the next pitch comes, right away. The catcher might be happy, he may not be happy, but then there's another pitch coming that's right down the middle and you call it strike and on the game goes. But at first base, the calls are so close, you have to be so decisive.

Yes, but when you're working first, you're expecting plays at first base. The tough one, where you gotta fight yourself to keep paying attention is when you're working third because you might have a check swing every now and then, you might have a fair or foul ball, but generally there's not a whole lot of action. Generally third base is the least active base and, if you let your mind wander, you just never know, you're not paying attention to a check swing, and that could be the pivotal point of the game.

That's a great point. If you call a check swing from first or third, I'm sure the league is saying "sell the call". They really want you to decisively say yes or no.

"I never ejected Glavine because Bobby would always get out there ahead of time and get it for him."

They want you to be decisive. Not really "selling".

And they don't want you to just go like this (Abe shrugs).

Some of them just warrant that. I worked with a lot of different guys when I was coming up, and you take a little bit from all of them. One of them, Paul Runge, had a philosophy that was completely the opposite. Keep out of it. All the team wants is for you to get it right. By selling it, sometimes that makes them jump up and why did he sell that, was it really that close? So then they go and take a look at it. Larry

Poncino, another guy I worked with in my era, not a crew chief, but in my era, thought it's not an event, it's either out, or it's a ball or strike. I just kind of developed...I don't want them jumping on my case so I went back to the basic out call instead of trying to sell it, just basically get it right, which I didn't always do but that's the goal, for sure. **It's a fast game. When I was catching one time, we played in a league where we knew the umpires really well. And I'd be behind the plate and the umpire was always telling stories. I had a rule, I'd say, "Kenny, you can tell the stories until there's two strikes. When there's two strikes, can we both just concentrate please? Can I just concentrate?" It was kind of funny. Umpires can talk too. So just a few more questions. The city you liked the most?**

I would say Chicago. I liked going to New York. I'm the guy who wouldn't want to live there but I love going to Manhattan and I have a lot of friends there. I like different restaurants and bars and I like Pittsburgh, an old National League city which is a great city. San Francisco is a great city. We were fortunate that they took us to a lot of good places. Or they ask you "What's your favorite stadium?" For sidelines? For crowd atmosphere? Yankee Stadium. We liked Atlanta back

in the day cause there were no ground rules. Everything was like the old cookie cutter River Front and Three Rivers where the fans could not reach over, they couldn't interfere with the ball. Now every stadium they build is for fan entertainment, they want them right on the action and that causes headaches for the umpires.

If you could be Commissioner for a day, what would you do to change the game?

I'd put a little more teeth into penalties, which is all collective bargaining, but they want to speed up the game and they

have these new rules, well there's no real penalty besides fining them \$100 for slow play or not coming out of the bull pen fast enough. It's not gonna get the guy to come out of the bull pen fast enough. The only way they're going to understand, is if it starts taking real money from them and then I guarantee the reliever will be coming a little faster, they'll warm up a little faster, the hitters will stay closer to the box. It's not to be an anti-player commissioner but I think the penalties should be more in line with what they're making.

When you were behind the plate, who was the pitcher you enjoyed watching pitch as an umpire?

For low stress, one of the best was Oral Herscheiser. He didn't show emotion out there. I'm sure I didn't make him happy all the time but he got the ball thrown. He was always around the plate. Like Maddox. Greg would nibble. Back in the day, if you called a pitch 4 or 5 inches off the plate, it wasn't crazy. But Maddox didn't like throwing stuff off the plate, because he didn't want the guy chasing it. He wanted the batter to hit the pitch that he threw, not the one that the umpires were kind of nudging the hitter to start swinging at.

Well the umpires had to like guys like that because you could go back and eat dinner pretty soon. Those were fast games.

Yes. Randy Jones of the Padres was fast. Jim Kaat. Not too many guys that get it and go anymore.

The games are long now.

It can be painful. You get the Yankees and Red Sox, you know it's going to be a 4 hour game, you know it going in. So you kind gear yourself up, that it's going to be one of those games where they're just going to grind everything. Just grind it.

And my last question, I would guess you think about stuff. If you could have umpired behind the plate for a pitcher say pre 1970, before you umpired. Do you ever look up and say I wish I could have umpired a game and watched him pitch?

I heard he was kind of tough to work with, Bob Gibson. The year that he was at low 1 ERA [Note: 1.12]. How fun would that have been? And I guarantee he wasn't on a pitch count. He didn't like anyone talking to him. Seaver, I miss Seaver. He was late '60's and then on after that, I don't know, Lefty Gomez, one of those old guys. Sandy Koufax.

That's exactly what I thought you'd say.

Guys that threw strikes. You want guys that throw strikes. The reliever for Houston, Mike Scott. You'd love to get Mike Scott. Guys like Fernando Valenzuela nibbled a lot.

That's what Tom Glavine did. He didn't try to throw the ball ever over the plate.

No, not Tommy. Tommy and I had a couple of issues, a couple of blow ups. I never ejected him because Bobby would always get out there ahead of time and

get it for him.

So you ejected Bobby Cox.

A couple of times. Both times over Glavine. Bobby led the world in ejections, but he was like your grandfather. He would always back his players, you knew that. He'd get a little grumpy sometimes, but the next day he'd completely forget about it.

And you knew you were going to eject him as soon as he walked on the field.

Yes, but not every time he came out did he get ejected, but more times than not. If you thought he was taking it for a player, I mean Chipper or whoever. He would take the bullet every time for those guys. Every time.

We used to go to the Braves games and watching him get ejected was really fun.

Oh yes. He wasn't bad about it. He'd get a little mad and he'd waive his arms around a little bit, swear a little bit, but you don't hear about Bobby bumping somebody. He wasn't Billy Martin or Earl Weaver and Lou Pinella when he was a younger manager.

Bobby's ejection record will never be broken because of instant replay and everything else today keeps the managers in the game.

Managers get ejected today on balls and strikes.

Right. I don't have any more questions. This is great. It's a perfect interview and I really appreciate it.

Great.

Gary Darling
"You're Out"

*** 75th EDITION ***
BASEBALL DIGEST

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