

An Official's View

In Praise of the Old, Experienced Seasoned Umpires

By Dr. Azmy

As a player, one does not think much about what is going on around him or her. The player walks into the arena and the playing area is all set, the air conditioning is working, the water is there, the registration desk, control desk, computers, balls, match cards, etc., are all there.

At the table, there is a person sitting there, sometimes two. One of them checks your racket, name, number and shirt color, and then checks the net, makes the toss, and asks the players for their choices of service and ends. He starts controlling the game, applying any time-outs, the expedite rule if it happens, watches the behavior of the players and coaches, and at least, if nothing else, keeps the score.

How did this person come there? Who assigned him/her to be an umpire? What are his/her qualifications?

These people are the umpires, the unknown soldiers. They volunteer their time to serve and help the sport. They most often spend some money out of their pockets, regardless of the compensation they get. They sacrifice their vacation time to leave their jobs to come for the tournaments. Sad as it may seem, we only hear about umpires when one of them makes a mistake in a tournament. But we do not hear or recognize the thousands of matches the umpires perform adequately and successfully.

The Rules/Official's Committee (ROC) keeps a check on these umpires. This committee makes sure that umpires are qualified persons who know the rules of the game and can apply them fairly. There are a series of exams, interviews, and evaluations that take place as the umpires develop.

The USATT Official's Committee was one of the first ones in the world to establish a process to build up qualified umpires. In fact the ITTF considered that process as a model later on when they started their own.

A person has to take an exam to be a Club Umpire. Upon passing that exam he will be assigned matches in local tournaments. He has to accumulate a number of matches in sanctioned tournaments. It is the responsibility of the Tournament Referee to observe and evaluate the umpire's performance. One problem we have in developing umpires is the unwillingness of referees to assign them matches.

After one year the umpire can take the regional umpire test. Upon passing this the umpire can umpire in all the major tournaments in his/her region. After another year and additional recorded matches, the umpire can take the National Umpire exam. As the level goes up, so does the difficulty of the exam. The National exam is a written exam followed by an oral interview. National umpires can umpire in all the national tournaments and some international ones.

After two years and evaluations by the officials committee, he can be recommended to take the International Umpire exam. That exam is an ITTF administered exam. Upon passing it the umpire is eligible to umpire in International Tournaments.

The ITTF Umpires and Referee Committee (URC) recently added an additional step, the Blue Badge Umpire. That requires more time and a written exam and match evaluations. That badge is now considered for umpiring at World and Olympic competitions.

It is a long process to become an international umpire. Most of us begin the process as we get older and less skilled as players, and can afford the time away from our jobs. In several international competitions, notably the World Junior Championships, the umpire invitations

specify umpires under 40 years of age. Most of our international umpires are well past 50 years old. We will continue to nominate our umpires regardless of age.

Although we will continue to support our current umpires, we need younger umpires to step up to the plate and advance to the higher umpire ranks. International umpires have a much better chance of attending a World Championships or other foreign tournaments than they would as players.

Let us go to another subject that has been circulated lately about a new rule that allows wheelchair players to better compete in regular events. This is an email I received.

Q: If a wheelchair player is playing doubles with a standing able-bodied player, what are the rules for their play?

A: The players must alternate shots, otherwise the standing athlete could make most returns. This would be unfair to the opposing pair and also to the player in the wheelchair, who may be deprived of fully participating in the match. (Note that in wheelchair doubles, the players do not have to alternate shots.)