

An Official's View

By Dr. Azmy

The Impact of the Blue Badge Requirement on Umpires and the Sport

After visiting several Associations and attending their International competitions, one has to admit that the new ITTF requirement to retrain and raise the level of umpires is justified. It is not a secret that many Associations were not keen on training their umpires to qualify for the World Championships. According to ITTF statistics, the number of IUs (International Umpires) in the world is about 4000. However, those who qualify to do their job adequately are few. There are several reasons to take meaningful steps to rectify this problem. The sport today is moving toward more TV Coverage. There is a need for conformity of umpiring all over the world. And finally, many players are professional players and make their living from the sport. This is why the ITTF and URC are pushing for new qualifications for "Blue-Badge" umpires.

One does not turn his TV on and see a broadcaster turning his back to the camera, or walking around in circles not knowing where to sit or what to do, or talking to other people who are not part of the show. The same thing applies to guests. They are assigned their places on the stage, and prepared for the show. They too have a specific role to play and the host is responsible for controlling their performances. The host introduces the show, explaining to viewers what is going on and what is going to take place, the goal of the show, and the procedures to be followed. The host also introduces the guests by name and affiliation and their part in the show. All this takes place before the show starts. During the show he maintains the flow of the scenes and the performances according to certain rules. Before every break, the host summarizes to the spectators what has taken place so far. And after every break he tries to inform the viewers about what has taken place, and introduces them to what is coming next.

When an umpire today enters the court of play, he is either the broadcaster or the guest. In both cases he has to adhere to a certain format with defined roles and steps to be taken in a given order. These are the goals of the AUT training seminars that are taking place all over the world to give guidance to the umpires. The information and training given are structured strictly to guide the umpire toward what is required. In fact, there is a text that covers all these details. It is divided in three sections: before the match, during the match, and after the match. It also gives instructions for umpires on how to act when they go to the court, on the court, and how to depart from the court. The announcements are simply written, in a form that helps umpires to say exactly what will be covered. Of course, more importance will be given to applying the rules of the sport adequately, efficiently, and objectively.

The goal of these procedures is to create uniformity by all umpires in all matches at all levels. Gone are the days when an umpire will relax the rule on the assumptions that it is not hurting the opponent. The most important thing is that the rules have to be applied strictly from the first match in the tournament to the last match. We often hear complaints from players when they finally meet an umpire who applies the rules correctly, toward the end of the tournament, in the concluding matches. The players and their coaches will complain, "I have been playing that way from the beginning of the tournament, for four days, and nobody called it a fault." Or, "I have been playing that way all my life and nobody called it against me." These remarks are heard more often when a young player is introduced on the world arena, after being the champion of his association, where the umpires were not enforcing the rules adequately. It is time that all Associations seek the help of the URC-AUT training to give their umpires the opportunity to learn from the seminars conducted in their continents.

The last point is that players today are making money from the sport. A call by an umpire, or absence of a call, can cost a player thousands of dollars. It is not fair for a player to adhere to the rules of the game while he finds himself playing against someone who is trying to take advantage of an umpire who is not enforcing the rules. Players are loudly asking for the fair application of the rules.

After this long introduction, I will come to the point: how is this going to affect umpires and the sport of table tennis? There is a process that is taking place now by the URC requirement. That process is the evaluation of umpires in international tournaments and some national tournaments as well. Each umpire is under the microscope. Umpires will be evaluated about the procedures, from A to Z. The outcome is recorded under three headings: MEETS EXPECTATIONS, MEETS EXPECTATIONS-NEEDS IMPROVEMENT, or DOES NOT MEET EXPECTATIONS. Those who meet expectations will be the ones nominated by their associations when called upon to send umpires to international competitions.

All of this is going to affect the playing conditions of the sport in general. Players are going to find themselves under strict enforcement of the rules. Umpires are under the gun to apply the laws and regulations of the sport strictly. And coaches have to understand that from now on, being lenient about enforcing the rules during training may not be the best coaching in the future.

I hope these words will give us all some understanding so we can cooperate together to create a better atmosphere in the playing courts.