

Summary of August 12, 2024 Umpire Advisory Team Meeting

On August 12, 2024, the Umpire Advisory Team (UAT) held its end-of-season meeting for the 2024 Spring/Summer season. UAT members in attendance were Bryan Richter, President, Joe Holonich, Secretary, Joann Brickwedde, Bill Chatterton, Jim Morton, Rick Morris, and Scott Snyder.

- Thoughts on Spring/Summer Season

Retrieval of Game Balls

The UAT has discussed this topic previously. Fans do not always retrieve foul balls. It is recommended that Softball Umpires of Maryland (SUM) ask United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) East Coast Events (ECE) to remind teams of the need to get foul balls.

Often, fields will lose all available balls. That causes delays in games, and at times, requires an adult or sibling to run to the umpire camp to get more balls. This is especially problematic at Cedar Lane, Field 2.

The UAT also recommends SUM ask USSSA ECE to work with Howard County parks to see if a gate can be installed on the first base side of Cedar Lane, Field 2. Without a gate on the first base side, individuals must walk all around the field to get out. Then they walk all the way back around the field to get to the wooded areas where the balls land. Because the team at bat is not on the first-base side, individuals on the third-base side at times will not retrieve foul balls.

Professionalism of Umpires

There were several areas where the UAT believed SUM umpires need to exhibit greater professionalism. For example, some umpires will work different mechanics, or bring inappropriate items on the field such as clip boards. One umpire puts his lineup card holder on the backstop.

When approached about this, the umpires say they have been told by SUM leadership it is okay to do this. When raised with SUM leadership, umpires have been told that certain umpires work a lot of games, and to not push things with them.

Another example of unprofessional behavior by umpires are fist bumping team members, taking food from teams, and talking extensively to coaches and players while on the field. This could lead the opponent to question the objectivity of an umpire.

A third example was the sale of unofficial, and use of incorrectly colored shirts at the East Coast Regional Championship. Umpires have been told to use the official hat and shirts at national tournaments. However, the Umpire in Chief (UIC) at the East Coast Regional Championship was selling unofficial shirts.

A decision needs to be made on whether the official USSSA attire is to be worn, or if alternate attire is allowed. If the latter, then umpires should not be told that they must wear the official USSSA attire at national tournaments.

Because of these examples, the UAT concluded that the demeanor of SUM umpires is becoming less professional and more aligned with recreational softball games. The UAT recommends SUM decide on whether it wants its umpires to exhibit a high level of

professionalism expected for competitive softball games, or is SUM willing to accept the umpire demeanor for recreational games. An action item was identified that SUM leadership make a presentation at the annual meeting on what professional behavior is expected from its umpires.

Consideration of 8:00 Start Times

A SUM umpire suggested that Maryland tournaments begin games at 8:00 am like is done in Northern Virginia. The UAT did not understand the benefit of making the start time 8:00 am, nor did the UAT know if that was even possible at Maryland complexes.

- Mentors for Recruits

The UAT was provided a copy of potential duties for mentors if SUM decides to implement a mentoring program. The draft provided to the UAT is Attachment 1.

A SUM umpire recommended that senior umpires review Game Change videos of games as a good way to provide feedback to new umpires. The UAT agreed this was worth adding to the mentoring responsibilities. The mentoring responsibilities would be to accept assignments with their assigned recruit early in the season when there are fewer, and less competitive, games.

Once the mentoring umpire is needed at older, and more competitive games, the SUM training coordinator would work with USSSA ECE to see if Game Changer videos could be obtained for recruit's games. The mentor would watch these games and provide feedback to the recruit during the season.

An action item is to revise the attached responsibilities to reflect this approach. The revised mentor responsibilities will be provided to UAT members. They will provide any comments by Friday, August 23, 2024.

- Training Group Meeting

The SUM training coordinator informed the UAT that the training leads would be meeting to discuss the winter training and mentoring program on Monday, August 26, 2024. This topic was purely informational, and no actions or recommendations were identified.

- Rain Delays

Two examples related to weather delays were discussed. One was a three-hour delay at Bachman. Although USSSA ECE did provide a game fee to the umpires who were there, the umpires were informed that this was not to be expected in all cases.

Because there were no objective criteria for weather-delay compensation, the UAT recommends that SUM work with USSSA ECE to identify a criterion, or criteria, on when such compensation would be paid. Without an objective criterion, or criteria, the umpires do not know when they will and will not receive compensation for weather delays.

The second area discussed was the ability of Site Directors (SDs) and UICs to end a day due to weather. USSSA ECE has informed SUM that SDs and UICs have the authority to end a day. At the last tournament at Cedar Lane, games were delayed by thunder for nearly an hour and then a down pour of rain hit.

The SD would not cancel the games until he received confirmation from USSSA ECE. The individual umpires went to the field, and reported to the UIC that they would not permit play because of the field conditions. Coaches were at one field with the umpires, and confirmed they

would not let their players on the field given its condition. It took this action from umpires and coaches to end the day, and not an at-complex decision by the SD and UIC.

- **Communication Tone**

Several UAT members reported that umpires feel SUM communications are harsh. In addition, this topic was discussed in a minor way during the June 2024 UAT meeting. At that meeting, the UAT noted that umpires report that communications in Northern Virginia are more personable.

The UAT recommends that SUM leadership be invited to a future UAT meeting and hear the concerns about communication tone.

- **Other Topics**

No topics were identified.

- **Action Items**

A review of the current action items was conducted. The status as reported in Attachment 2 was confirmed. The following action items were added to Attachment 2.

1. SUM should discuss with USSSA ECE the need to reinforce with teams the need to retrieve foul balls.
2. SUM should ask USSSA ECE to work with Howard County parks to see if a gate can be installed on the first-base side of Cedar Lane, Field 2.
3. SUM leadership should make a presentation on the professional expectations of umpires.
4. Joe Holonich will revise the mentoring responsibilities to reflect the use of Game Changer videos for mentors to review during the season.
5. UAT members will provide comments to Joe Holonich on the mentoring responsibilities no later than Friday, August 23, 2024.
6. SUM and USSSA ECE develop an objective criterion, or criteria, that will determine when weather delay compensation should be paid.
7. SUM leadership should inform the UAT if attending a future meeting to discuss communication tone is desired.

- **Next UAT Meeting**

It was agreed that the next UAT meeting would be November 4, 2024. This will allow the UAT to provide input to SUM leadership for its annual meeting with USSSA ECE.

SUM members can email the UAT at uatumpires@gmail.com with any topics they would like the UAT to consider.

Attachment 1

Draft Softball Umpires of Maryland Mentoring Program

Softball Umpires of Maryland (SUM) wants to establish a mentor program for new recruits. Mentoring would be on a completely voluntary basis. Potential candidates could be individuals who help with the winter training or senior umpires who would be willing to commit to the program.

The objective of a mentor is to help the recruit accomplish their goals. There are several responsibilities that mentors have, but the end goal is always to help the recruit accomplish their objectives. Mentors, on the other hand, should be positive role models, and offer guidance in an effective way. Recruits need to be open to feedback, coachable, and willing to learn.

Some examples of goals could be:

What level of game does the umpire want to be assigned by the end of the season?
Does the umpire want to be assigned to a three-umpire, championship game at some point?
Would the umpire want to work on mechanics?
Is a better understanding of the rules something the umpire wants to gain?
How does the umpire handle difficult coach interactions?

Some of the responsibilities of mentors are to provide guidance, advice, feedback and support to the recruit, as well as serving as their role model, teacher, counselor, advisor, sponsor, advocate and ally. The mentor will provide them with the tools to be able to become a better version of themselves.

Some points for the program include:

- The mentor and recruit would be assigned to work together so the mentor could observe the recruit's performance and provide contemporaneous feedback.
- On assigned games, the recruit would work the plate while the mentor has the bases. This gives the mentor more opportunity to observe the recruit.
- During the off games, the mentor could report earlier than normal to the field, and watch the recruit on the base game, but without losing an excessive amount of the break time.
- At the end of the day, the mentor and recruit should share feedback and address questions.
- The mentor would share feedback with the SUM Training Coordinator to help identify areas to improve training and the assigner to consider in future recruit assignments.
- Umpires in Chiefs (UICs) should not provide feedback to the recruit if the mentor is there. This prevents the recruit getting too much, and possibly conflicting, feedback.

Roles and responsibilities of the mentor and recruit include:

Identify Goals of the Recruit and a Path to Get to Them

As a first step, discuss with the recruit what the goals and objectives are for the year. The example questions above could be a good starting point to help establish those goals. Once the goals are known, identify actions that could be taken to achieve those goals.

Confidentiality

A good mentor-recruit relationship is built on trust, mutual respect and a shared commitment to learning. The best relationships are those in which both parties are equally invested in the

success of the recruit. Do not share your mentoring conversations with any other SUM umpire, Training Coordinator, assigner, etc. unless the recruit has agreed.

Cultivate a Teacher and Pupil Relationship

A mentor should not only serve as a positive role model, but should know how to offer guidance in an effective way. If you observed the recruit in a game situation and saw some areas for improvement in mechanics, be able to show what can be changed.

For example, how the posture between innings can signal the attentiveness of the umpire to the game. If the recruit is observed standing outside the dugout with arms folded demonstrate that stand. Then explain that standing on the ball diamond at parade rest with your arms behind your back signals the engagement in the game. Demonstrate that stand too, and ask the recruit which looked like the umpire was more engaged in the game.

Build Trust Through Engagement

Establish an approach to communication during the season. Would the recruit consider doing a Google Meets or phone call every Monday evening to discuss the experience during the weekend. A recruit wants to learn not only how but why, and a mentor has the responsibility to provide both insights and background on things.

For example, explaining the basis for a ball thrown out of play and awarding two bases. Tell the recruit the basis for that rule is the view for a ball thrown wild to a base the runner would get the base and be able to take another if the ball remains in play. Because the ball is out of play, the runner cannot advance so she is given the benefit of the doubt and awarded two bases.

Facilitate Learning Opportunities

Mentoring is a transfer of knowledge so a learning environment that complements the recruit's learning style is essential. Topics discussed could be rules applications or interpretations, coach interactions, how to handle requests from coaches to review a play, what to bring for the long days at the complex, etc. Be prepared to hear some personal issues too such as the performance or treatment by the recruit's partner in a game. Again, keeping these conversations confidential.

Be Part of Your Recruit's Games

Being with the recruit in game situations is essential. The mentor should be willing to be assigned games at all levels. Such games could be 10UC or 12UC, especially early in the season. Being at those games with your recruits tells them their development is important to you as the mentor.

Teach the Proper Mechanics and SUM Policies

Make sure you know and understand the proper mechanics and SUM policies. SUM benefits from having its umpires work for several different organizations. However, when mentoring SUM umpires, the mentor should follow the prescribed mechanics taught to SUM umpires. Avoid confusing the recruit by explaining other types of mechanics.

In addition, work with the recruit to know and understand the SUM policies. Explain that being at the field 10-15 before the scheduled or actual game time is important in keeping the games moving. Site Directors, Umpires in Chiefs, and game partners have long days at complexes. Waiting of an umpire from a game to come back to camp before heading to the field could cause unnecessary delays.

Similarly explain that being at the complex a minimum of 30 minutes early helps ensure games start on time. Earlier arrival times help facilitate the ability to start games earlier if teams agree on the first game. This could compensate for games that run past the time limit later in the day.

Emphasis the importance of keeping Arbiter up to date. Help the recruit understand that not blocking days and then declining assignments could result in game partners having to work multiple games in a row

Attachment 2 UAT Action Items		
Action Item	Owner	Status
SUM should look to USSSA ECE to address the inappropriate walk-up music and sounds.	John Dye	No action
SUM should ask USSSA ECE to get the porta potty at Fairland, Field 3 back.	John Dye	Need to return porta potty has been mentioned to USSSA ECE
SUM should make sure USSSA ECE reinforces with Site Directors and park staff the need to make sure lining the field is done properly, for example batter's boxes.	John Dye	Need for proper lining has been mentioned to USSSA ECE
SUM should discuss the use of derogatory sounds and music with USSSA ECE, and recommend USSSA ECE remind teams that derogatory sounds and music should not be played.	John Dye	Open
Authoritative guidance to umpires on the use of proper mechanics should be issued by SUM.	John Dye	Closed: John Dye provided guidance in a SUMmary.
Joe Holonich will work with the training development team to investigate the use of mentors.	Joe Holonich	Open: Joe Holonich has included this as an agendum for the SUM Training meeting.
SUM should work with USSSA ECE to see if NoVa teams can be informed before tournaments weekends that unlimited substitutions are not permitted.	John Dye	No action
SUM should remind UICs to provide water and power bars to umpires at fields.	John Dye	Complete via JDye 20240810 Email.
SUM discuss with USSSA ECE the need to reinforce with teams on the need to retrieve foul ball.	SUM Leadership	
SUM should ask USSSA ECE to work with Howard County parks to see if a gate can be installed on the first-base side of Cedar Lane, Field 2.	SUM Leadership	

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UAT members will provide comments to Joe Holonich on the mentoring responsibilities no later than UAT members will provide Friday, August 23, 2024.	UAT Members	
SUM and USSSA ECE develop objective criteria that will determine when weather delay compensation should be paid.	SUM Leadership	
SUM leadership should inform the UAT if attending a future meeting to discuss communication tone is desired.	SUM Leadership	