

Fields Of Dreams

DODGERTOWN'S DIAMONDS PLAY HOST TO 101 ASPIRING UMPIRES

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Academy students assemble on the field every afternoon for an hour of conditioning and call-making drills.



Instructor Emma Charlesworth-Seiler huddles up after a session of plate work in the batting cage.



Students spend four hours of instruction each day in the Jackie Robinson Room and are given tests at regular intervals to chart their progress.

If you asked a million people what they do for a living, one of them might say professional baseball umpire. There are only 310 of them in the United States and Canada, 76 in Major League Baseball and 234 in the minors.

Looking to break into those ranks, 101 hopefuls descended upon Historic Dodgertown at the beginning of the year. They were here to take part in an intensive four-week course run by Minor League Baseball known as the Umpire Training Academy. The program, created in 2012, is a requirement for anyone wanting to become a minor- or major-league umpire. It shares that duty with one other program in the U.S., the Wendelstedt School for Umpires in Ormond Beach, Florida.

The purpose of the Dodgertown program is twofold. The first, according to its director, Dusty Dellinger, is to “supply 16 domestic leagues with quality umpires.” That’s the goal for many of the attendees, but not all. “We’re also looking to grow knowledge within the amateur ranks,” Dellinger explains. “For those not seeking pro aspirations, they can go back to their associations and become leaders and teachers.”

THE REGIMEN

The monthlong course isn’t designed for those looking to wallow in Florida’s wintertime warmth. The training runs six days a week, nine hours a day. Sunday is the one full day off, and while many students revel in the chance to hit the beaches or enjoy local attractions, it’s all business for others. Aaron Brown, a 19-year-old from Atlanta, says, “I’m looking forward to hopefully getting a job; I’m not here to sightsee.”

Each day starts at 8 a.m. with four hours of classroom work. The instructors, all current or former umpires, walk students through every rule in the book. “Use the rules to solve a problem, not create one,” head rules instructor Jorge Bauza will tell them more than once.

Students receive two thick manuals to study, one covering the rules and another detailing what to do in every imaginable on-field situation. They’ll learn things such as how to handle rundowns, pickoffs and steals, but also specific instructions for a fly ball with a runner on second or a drive to the outfield with the bases loaded. Many baseball fans think there’s not that much



“Once you get the home team’s lineup card, you’re in charge!” the head field instructor Darren Spagnardi tells students.



The Academy teaches the two-umpire system, one ump at home and one covering the bases, which is used in most minor league games.

to umpiring, that anybody could do as good a job, maybe better. They’re wrong. The variables and responsibilities are endless, requiring hours of study and practice as well as a sharp focus on every play. Other classroom topics are professionalism; duties before, during and after the game; illegal equipment; interference; injuries and dealing with venom-spewing managers, to name a few.

After a one-hour lunch break, students spend the next five hours alternating between on-field drills and “plate work,” calling balls and strikes in batting cages. One crucial factor is what umpires call “timing” — watching the ball into the glove, taking a moment to let the brain process what’s just happened, then making the call. In the field, umpires will often listen for the smack of the ball in a glove while focusing their eyes on the bag.

As everyone freely admits, not every call an umpire makes is going to be the right one. Tom Honec, a staff member with eight years of professional umpiring experience, explains, “Umpiring is the pursuit of perfection, and yet it’s unobtainable.” Not even veterans are immune. “Sometimes umpires make a mistake.

You’re going to blow a call,” MLB umpire Jeff Nelson tells the students one day. Another staff member and umpire evaluator, Larry Reveal, says, “An umpire is usually the first one in the park to know if they’ve made a mistake, often because of timing. They’ve made a call too quickly.” What then? “Learn from it,” he says. “Don’t make it again.” For the most part, major-league umpires are comfortable with replay officials looking over their shoulders, because it can relieve them of “taking a wrong call to the grave.”

Mock games are played on two of Dodgertown’s 10 baseball diamonds, each built to major-league specifications. Students rotate among running, fielding, and umpiring. A pitch is thrown and caught. Then one of the instructors hits the ball to a specific spot, first announcing the situation, for example, “two outs, runner on first.” The action is relentless and varied, including circumstances an umpire might rarely see. Positioning is crucial, getting in the best spot to make each call. But establishing a fixed position is equally important. Making a call on the move ramps up the risk of getting it wrong.

“Use the rules to solve a problem, not create one.”

– JORGE BAUZA

Throughout the four-week program, there’s one factor in particular that instructors are looking for. “Students are judged on classroom, rules, on-field and cage performance, but character and integrity far supersede all of those,” Reveal says. That emphasis goes to the very core of what an umpire needs to bring to the game — authority, impartiality and honesty — so it’s a fair, well-run game of baseball for both sides, may the better team win. Dellinger hammers home that point. “We’re sending young men and women into a profession where there’s a lot of responsibility,” he says, “So we emphasize character.”

THE STUDENTS

Who are these 101 umpires-to-be? They come from all across the United States, as well as Australia, Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, Japan, Mexico and Venezuela. The average age is 29, including several 18-year-olds, the minimum, and two men in their 60s. Many of them see umpiring as a way to stay in a sport they love. Others just have umpiring in their blood. “I’ve



Zdenek Zidek hopes to become the first Major League Umpire from Europe.



Sidelined from competitive baseball because of a leg injury, Jaylen Goodman turned to umpiring as a way to stay in the game.



Jim Vance, right, reviews a home plate "instant replay" on an iPad as the Academy director Dusty Dellinger looks on.

umpired since I was 10 or 11 years old," says Wesley Behrend, 22, from Washington state. "Even in elementary school, I didn't want to play kickball. I wanted to umpire."

For Zdenek Zidek, 26, from Czech Republic, "umpiring is the dream." That's despite having a masters degree in law. Zee, as everyone calls him, took time off from his law career to come to the academy. He also took time off from his new marriage. Zee exchanged vows just before departing, opting to spend his honeymoon at Dodgertown with 100 guys, 5,000 miles away from his bride. Should he advance into the majors, he'd be the first umpire from Europe. In the meantime, should he get a job in the minors, the plan is to practice criminal law in the off-season.

Jaylen Goodman, 19, from Atlanta, says, "I've been umpiring for six years." At age 13, he started calling games in the Miracle League for special education children. Last year in Atlanta, he attended a free umpire clinic hosted by Major League Baseball. That led to a scholarship to attend a professional mini-camp in Fort Myers, Florida, and then another scholarship to come to Dodgertown. "My mother couldn't afford this," Goodman says. The Umpire Training Academy costs \$2,400, plus another \$1,590 for room and board. "There was a plan, but to actually have it happen was amazing, mind-blowing," Goodman says of the path that brought him here. Should he make it all the way, he says, "Bringing a bigger presence of African-Americans into MLB would be a gratifying feeling."

Last up is Jim Vance, a 41-year-old high school history teacher from Elkridge, Maryland. One year ago, Vance suffered a heart attack, which served as the impetus for making some changes in his life. He lost 50 pounds and is training for his first marathon. He also gave up his teaching job just before coming to Dodgertown. His plan is to focus on college umpiring when he returns home to his wife and two kids.

There's often a woman or two among the students, but there were none this year. However, one graduate from two years ago, Emma Charlesworth-Seiler, was on hand for her second year as an instructor. "Everyone liked her when she was a student, so we invited her back as an instructor," Dellinger says, adding, "She's exceeded expectations." Charlesworth-Seiler umpired in the Gulf Coast League in 2017, the Northwest League in 2018, and has moved up to the Midwest League this year.

She's only the eighth woman to umpire in the minor leagues. Two of her predecessors advanced as far as Triple-A ball, but no further. There's currently one other woman in minor league ball, Jen Pawol, who's one year ahead of Charlesworth-Seiler. "We're good friends," Charlesworth-Seiler says.

Will Charlesworth-Seiler be Major League Baseball's first female umpire? "That's actually a little scary," she admits. "I'd rather have someone else do it first." It's not that she couldn't handle it; she'd just prefer going about her job without all the extra fanfare.



Students bring their own slacks, shoes, and equipment, but the Academy supplies each of them with a hat, jacket, and six shirts.

THE ROAD AHEAD

At the end of the four-week course, about one-quarter of the students will be invited to stay on at Historic Dodgertown for the one-week Advanced Course, all expenses paid. A roughly equal number will be culled from the Wendelstedt school. The good news is that, historically, 85% of those Advanced Course graduates will end up working in Minor League Baseball. The bad news is that over the past 20 years, only 3% of those entering the minors have become full-time Major League Baseball umpires. Another 5% have worked MLB games as substitutes. In other words, one of these students might make it all the way.

Major league umpires are full-time employees and are well-paid. Salaries start at \$150,000 a year and can rise to as much as \$450,000, plus benefits, first-class air travel, and a per diem to cover food, lodging and incidentals.

In the minors, umpires are paid monthly, for either a three-



Students rotate positions to simulate game conditions. One student, on deck in the back, gets in a bit of extra practice.

“Students are judged on classroom, rules, on-field and cage performance, but character and integrity far supersede all of those.”

— LARRY REVEAL



The colored-baseball boards in this trunk are sometimes laid in front of home plate as an aid for calling balls and strikes.

or six-month season. The pay starts at \$2,000 a month for Rookie ball and rises to \$3,900 for Triple-A. Lodging, travel expenses and insurance are covered, plus a per diem of about \$45 to \$65. Umpiring in professional baseball is a nomadic lifestyle, traveling every few days from town to town. In the minors, it's done almost entirely by car. Only Triple-A umpires fly. And since there's no fraternizing with the players or coaches, it can be a sometimes lonely existence, far from family and friends. “You'd better get along with your partner,” one instructor, Tyler Funneman, says with a smile. The majority of umpire crews in the minor leagues are two-person.

“It's a grind,” instructor Brennan Miller says. But few choose to walk away from it, he adds. He's going into his seventh year of umpiring, still fueled by the dream of getting to the majors. “The intangibles make it a great profession,” Tom Honec says. “Very few jobs pay you to travel and live. And your daily responsibility is only a three-hour game.” Funneman sums up minor league umpiring simply: “It takes a special person, and I think a lot who do it are special.”

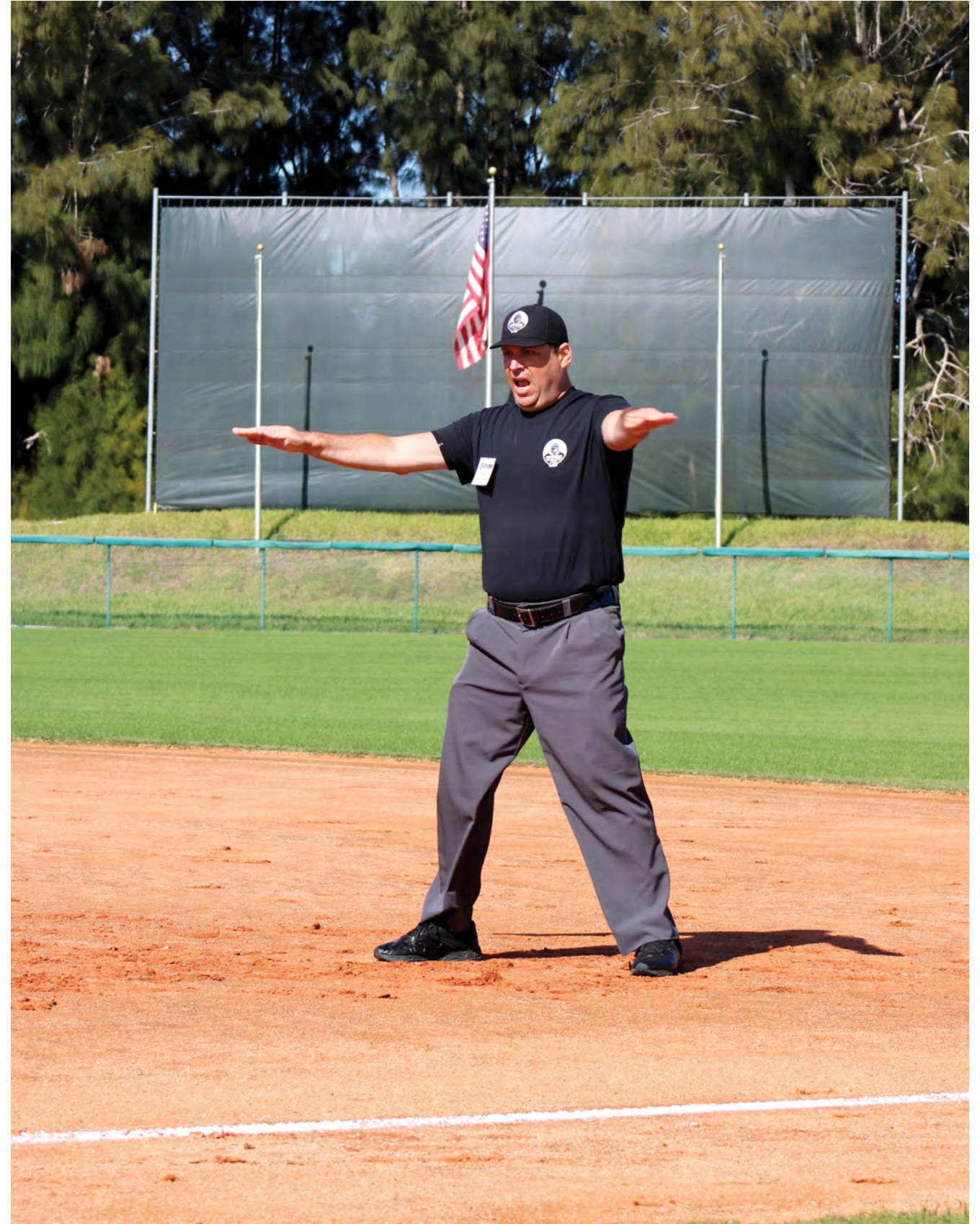
The average length of time it takes to get called up to the majors, if the call comes at all, is about eight years. Evaluators for both Minor and Major League Baseball compile a comprehensive report on each umpire twice a season, at the halfway mark and again at season's end. Those who aren't showing improvement, or who are deemed poor representatives of baseball, are let go. Several will leave each year of their own choosing. For those who make it to Triple-A ball, the stay there is generally no more than three years. If a call from MLB doesn't come within that time frame, you'll likely be asked to hang up your mask.

THE RESULTS

This year's Umpire Training Academy came to a close on the weekend of February 2. A celebratory coat-and-tie banquet was held on Saturday night, followed by the moment of truth at 8:00 the next morning. One by one, the students filed into a room to face three senior staff members and a pair of junior staffers. Individual feedback was given, along with the all-important verdict: Would they be invited to take part in the Advanced Course?

Zdenek Zidek and Jaylen Goodman both made the cut. So did Aaron Brown, the one who said he wasn't here to sight-see, but not Wesley Behrend, the grade-school kickball ump. Jim Vance also didn't move on, but that was never the goal. He headed back to Maryland to kick his college umpiring career into gear, a fantasy fulfilled just from attending the academy. In total, 30 students from the academy moved on, in addition to 27 more from the Wendelstedt school, including one woman, Greta Langhenry.

At the conclusion of the Advanced Course, 26 of the candidates had won themselves minor league jobs, including Zdenek. He'll be umpiring in Florida's Gulf Coast League, composed mainly of players just drafted by major league teams. Goodman and Langhenry, along with 14 others, will be going to the Coastal Plain League, a 52-game summer league for top college players. After a bit more seasoning there, many of them will advance to the minors. The balance of the class was placed on reserve, but they'll likely all see action before the end of the season. “This was a really good group,” the Dellinger says with a satisfied smile, another crop of umpires trained and ready to make the dream come true. 🍀



Safe! At first base, umpires will often focus their eyes on the bag while listening for the smack of the ball in the fielder's glove.