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'To be a good umpire you have to be a good person' – Simon Taufel

What made you want to become an umpire, and importantly, what made you continue to want to do it?

When I stopped playing, one of my close friends suggested I join him in an umpiring course. I did not really want to, but he twisted my arm and I went along and we did the course at the New South Wales Cricket Umpires' Association [NSWUA]. It was a good experience. I managed to pass their exam and my mate failed, so he went back to play cricket and I decided to stay on and look at umpiring as a way of earning some extra dollars to help me through university.

I did not take to umpiring with a view to going anywhere or doing anything - I just wanted to be part of it, but it's my nature that if I do anything or take up a project, I try and do it to the best of my ability. So, very quickly I found myself just working up through the grades, like a player would.

It was a hobby, not a part-time job or a career path at that stage. It took about three years to get to first-grade umpiring. I got the first-class appointment four years after starting, and by that stage I felt umpiring was interesting. It was a big thrill to be part of first-class cricket.

In 1998, about seven years after I started, I was offered a contract by Cricket Australia to stand in representative cricket, and that is probably when I started taking umpiring more seriously from the career point of view.

Who were the people who helped you in your development?

I had some really good teachers, and great leadership from some very, very experienced people within the game - guys who were Test umpires or guys who had been around Sydney grade cricket for a large number of years. I was extremely lucky that they were very happy to pass on the benefit of their experience, to share knowledge, and also able to mentor me in a way that helped create who I am today. They helped me in my umpiring style, **where I try to be as unobtrusive as possible and try to be as professional and player-conscious as possible. I would not be talking to a player out on the field unless the player spoke to me. I would not try to be the centre of attention. I would make sure my preparation and presentation were of very high standards.** Looking back now, I was just lucky to be part of the NSWUA for so many years, learning those values of cricket umpiring.

The late Allan Marshall and [Ted Wykes](#) were two big influences in the early part of my umpiring. Dick French, Darrell Hair, Ian Thomas, Arthur Watson, to name a few, along with so

many umpires from first grade and the lower grades were happy to pass on tips and help me out, which was just invaluable.

Are good umpires born or made?

To be a good umpire you have to be a good person, have good people skills and have good values. Those are the things people can constantly improve upon. So it is really important going forward that we look at the right style of person to be a match official. Not everybody is suited because it is a very demanding and challenging role. When you do a good job, no one says anything or notices, but when you do a bad job, you get a lot of criticism and negative focus.

And it is a job that not a lot of people appreciate. I would not say you need to be thick-skinned, but you have to be mentally tough, you have to have the ability to deal with conflict, you have to have the ability to empathise and relate to people of different backgrounds, cultures and personalities. None of those are related to decision-making, but there are a lot of life skills that are really important to be a good match official.

You were one of the umpires who consciously built relationships with players.

Was it your personality, or did you do it so you could do a better job?

All I tried to do was be the best umpire I could be. I just tried to earn their respect on performance. I did not try to earn their respect or build a relationship based on friendship. That is a very difficult and dangerous way to go about it, because you do have to make very tough decisions: as to whether or not to give a player out, whether to abandon a game, and all those sorts of things. So it is really important that you make decisions for the right reasons and build relationships based on respect and trust.

My style was about doing the best job that I could do, about looking for ways to always get better, to appreciate and respect what the players were going through, to acknowledge the pressures they were under, hopefully remain calm and in control when tensions on the field were getting high, and hopefully to be approachable and be prepared to listen to what the players were saying and respond in a way that was clear to both teams. It is really important as a match official to maintain a high level of understanding, consistency and approachability.

There is an interesting picture of you with your arm around Mohammad Yousuf, the Pakistan player. Can you tell us about that moment? It seems a good example of building relationships.

I remember that Test match in Dunedin. That is one of best things about what we do: we meet some good people in the game. We are people first and players and umpires second. There are times when you do have to be firm with players and there are times when you can put an arm around the player and say, "You know, mate, I know you might have been at the rough end of something, but we just have to move on and get on with the game."

"When you do make a mistake, you have to look and see: what can I learn from that, how does it fit into my trends analysis, what can I do differently next time I am presented with the same sort of circumstances"

That Test match in Dunedin was one of the coldest games we had stood in. Yousuf was the Pakistan captain at the time and he was under a fair amount of pressure, and those sort of light-hearted moments are a way of just being able to step back and reflect on what is important. Sometimes a joke or a smile is a way of just diffusing a situation that could get heated from time to time. It is within my nature to just be able to have a quiet word with the player or pass a simple comment as the bowler walks to his mark - just to make sure things do not get out of control.

In Rudi Koertzen's book he writes of an incident where Shane Warne, walking back to his mark, kept saying, "I want that wicket, I want that wicket." And Koertzen remarked: "What do you want me to do? Take the wicket?"

Very early in my career, I was umpiring in a first-class match and Greg Matthews, the former Australian and NSW offspinner, was bowling. Greg was the type of the bowler who would give you his sweaty cap and say, "Just be ready for my straight one and put your finger up." Once, he was late for a match and had turned up unorganised. He pulled a \$100 note out of his pocket and said, "Can you swing this for me?" I told him, "Greg, it would take me more than \$100 to turn a decision in your favour that you don't deserve." He was someone who really tested umpires - from people management and the game perspective. But it was good fun and I enjoyed it.

Some countries now make it mandatory that to be an umpire you need to have at least played first-class cricket. Do you feel that is relevant now in the modern game?

Cricket experience helps, but I do not think it is the be-all and end-all. Sometimes people say you are too old or too young to be an umpire, but I do not think age is a factor either. It is about having the right people skills, having the right approach to handling the game of cricket. Sometimes your cricketing experience helps you with some of the decisions you have to make. That can be overcome by umpiring at lower levels of the game for as long as you can before you hit representative level. Having the feel for cricket certainly is an advantage, but I do not think you need to be a first-class cricketer to be a first-class umpire. It is about your ability to do the job, as opposed to what you have done in the past.

Is umpiring more taxing mentally than physically?

Certainly more a mental game. I would say mentally it is 95% of what we do. Standing for five days, travelling many different time zones and thousands of kilometres puts some stresses and strains on the body, so there is also a physical component to the pressure. But the ability to be mentally tough, to be able to focus at the right time on the right things, to be able to deal with setbacks, to be able to deal with the scrutiny that you are under and to be able to stay strong at important times and just keep focusing on the ball is 95% mental activity. We are there all the time without a break, unlike a team or a player. It is certainly incredibly challenging and not something everybody can cope with. It also tests you emotionally.

Can you talk about your regimen - what you do to prepare for these demands on mind and body?

For me preparation is before the game begins. If you are talking about a series that is coming up, I would go back to my notes from the last time I was there at the place. One thing we are very big on now is, we do our tour-file report where we record information on grounds, airports, cities and hotels. I can then prepare accordingly in terms of what I need. I am also big on checklists: things to pack, things to check before I leave.

Talking about cricket specifics, I am very strong on who I am working with, getting video footage of teams and players from a recent series - what some of their tactics might be, what the conditions were like, what kind of appeals and things to expect, if there are any trends in my own game I need to address. I try and go through my self-assessment in that format of the game or with those teams and look at areas I could have done better in and develop those into new match- or new series goals.

Then I do ground inspections: work with the local authorities to study the conditions, what sort of curators they have, how many rollers, making sure they are preparing the ground as properly as possible, where does the bad weather come from, what do we do if it rains, how long does it take to clean up, do the Super Soppers work, how long do the covers take to get on and get off. I am very strong on what-ifs and plan Bs.

Batsmen and bowlers switch on and off between deliveries. How did you do it?

I was really lucky early on in my career at NSW when one day Ian Healy, the former Australian wicketkeeper, came and talked to us at an umpiring conference. I suppose we related what he was doing as a wicketkeeper to what we do as umpires. The keeper has to focus on every ball out there, as we do.

Ian said something that day that stuck with me: **you do not switch off and switch on, you switch up and switch down**. That is pretty much what an umpire has to do all the time; you have to learn to switch up at the right time and switch down. Obviously we have to focus on the ball, but it is only probably two or three seconds that we actually have to be at a high level of focus, just like the wicketkeeper. **It is about focusing on the right things at the right time**. If you can do that consistently ball after ball, you are going to do a very good job. Our challenge is to umpire one ball very well, ball after ball, until we run out of deliveries.

Over the years, has the respect from the players increased or lessened?

Players have always appreciated that umpiring is a difficult job. Whenever we ask a player whether they would like to give umpiring a go, the vast majority of them would say, "Why in the world would I do that? You've got to be joking. I could not stand in the sun for six to seven hours and do what you guys do." There is a healthy level of respect.



"There are times when you have to be firm and there are times when you can put an arm around the player and say, "You know, mate, I know you might have been at the rough end of something, but we just have to move on and get on with the game" © Getty Images

What has happened is, with the way we use technology in cricket today, a lot of people now appreciate how difficult the decisions are to make and how good the umpiring is at the highest level. When you look at the decision-making percentages these days, which are as high as 94 to 95% (and that is the average), there is a healthy understanding and a healthy respect for how difficult an umpire's job is. Having said that, it is incumbent upon me and every match official to always look for ways to get better.

How important was it for you to have a grasp of all the Laws of cricket?

One of the real challenges is, we have 42 Laws, and lots of ICC playing conditions. At the international level you might have six to seven playing conditions [that are relevant at any given time], so it is a real challenge for a match official to have the right sort of playing condition at the forefront of his mind. So most off days were about constantly revising probably six Laws a day, going through playing conditions regularly, making sure that there was the understanding of the knowledge but also how to interpret the Laws in a consistent way.

From the umpiring perspective you will get the odd decision wrong from time to time, but what a lot of people will not forgive is if you get a Law or playing condition wrong. Our knowledge has to be second to none, because the players expect us to know the Laws and playing conditions thoroughly.

Just because you have passed a driving test 20 years ago, it does not always mean you are driving in the best way possible 20 years later. Even if I'm an Elite Panel umpire, there are a lot of other umpires who are willing to test your knowledge, test your ability about how much you do know. So it is really important for us to make sure that we stay on top of our game day in day out, and that we are not complacent with our knowledge and our skill base.

Did you feel comfortable having all that power over 22 players on a cricket field?

I do not like the word "power". It is a responsible position and I do not take the responsibility lightly. My job is to be able to live up to the expectations of the customers: the players, the

media, the broadcasters and the other stakeholders in the game. It is really important to do what you can and deliver the best possible performance on the day. And that is why preparation is so important, continual improvement is so important, showing empathy and your people skills is so important. To be able to live up to those expectations is a constant challenge.

Part of development is learning from your mistakes. How much did it hurt when you got decisions wrong? Did it affect you for the rest of the match?

I made a lot of mistakes in my career and I have learned a lot from them. At the time it did hurt, because there is a lot of pride in your performance, and I am no different from anybody else, and I want people to say good things about what we do and the way we do it.

What is really important is, you have to look at it rationally and ask yourself what you can learn from the mistake. Being involved in cricket umpiring for 22 years, I have made my fair share of mistakes. What we do know is, umpires at the highest level make the fewest mistakes compared to everybody else, and that is encouraging. But when you do make a mistake, you have to look and see: what can I learn from that, how does it fit into my trends analysis, what can I do differently next time I am presented with the same sort of circumstances, so that my performance is constantly improving? In doing so you have to go into what actually was happening at the time you made that error.

And that is why I always focus on the input side and not too much on the output. I look at my preparation, I look at my mental state, I look at what I was doing at the time, I look to see whether I was in that here-and-now space that we talk about, whether I was focusing on the right thing at the right time. When you are competing with 29 cameras, Hawk-Eye, Snickometer, Hot Spot, there are going to be times technology is going to show you did not see or you did not hear. There are times when, like a batsman who gets an absolutely unplayable delivery, the umpire has not seen it the way he wanted to, or he could not make the best decision at the time.

I did make one mistake in my last Test, at Lord's, when I gave Morne Morkel out caught behind. The DRS was being used in that series and Morne challenged my decision. I heard two noises before the ball went through to the wicketkeeper: I thought the ball had come off glove and then onto his helmet and through to the keeper. The replays showed the ball was not hitting glove, it was hitting something else. I gave the best decision I could, based on the information I heard and saw at the time. That is part of the challenge of what we do. That incident took place on day four. Up until that point I had a lot of close decisions to make and I was feeling good about what I was doing.

One thing I was very conscious about was letting that one mistake ruin a big game, so it was really important to get back on the job and make sure that I did not make another mistake for the rest of the game - which I did not. That is the mental toughness and bouncebackability I was talking about earlier on. If you make decisions because you were not focused on the right things at the right time, that is when I tend to get upset.

Is the DRS a friend or a foe?

Basically we should be using technology to get as many decisions right as possible. In my role going forward, it is a really challenging environment to work in, because now that we have got DRS, it has opened up a new challenge to the role of the third umpire and how the on-field

umpire deals with it. It is almost becoming a different skill in itself. Some would also argue that being a third umpire in a DRS environment is almost the most important umpiring role. So to be able to interpret, communicate and work with [TV] directors to get those decisions right is super-challenging.

Part of what I am looking at doing is developing accreditation material to help umpires prepare and develop their skills to be able to work within an environment that involves the co-operation of broadcasters, that involves the co-operation of the providers of technology. That means as cricket umpires we've got to increasingly look at our skill sets to be able to deal with the changing game.

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Don't you think the concept of neutral umpires is outdated, with technology available to assist officials?

What is really incumbent upon the game these days is that we do not even consider neutrality as an issue. We have got a professional panel of Elite umpires. We have a career path for home board umpires to get to international cricket and build credibility and show the administrators that they have the ability to go further. The Elite Panel has the 12 best umpires in the world and they do the majority of international cricket, but you do have to provide opportunities for other umpires coming through from home boards to show their skills and ability, allow them to work on their game. So it is always a balancing of the development. **There is no perfect system.**

The Elite Panel is an exclusive club with so few members, all of them seemingly overworked. How do you reckon the ICC should deal with that?

I would not say they are overworked. It is always about a balance - sometimes we get large breaks and sometimes we have a heavy workload. If you look at the present contract year [from July 2012 to June 2013] we have a large number of bilateral series, two ICC events [World Twenty20 and Champions Trophy] and then we have the Champions League Twenty20 and the IPL. The cricketing calendar is very busy, and it is incumbent upon every Elite Panel and international panel umpire to look at their own workload and juggle and give themselves sufficient breaks. It is no different to what a player has to do - except that a player will be a little bit more conscious in not giving someone else an opportunity within the team. But as an international umpire, it is really important to have the ability to say no to other events like franchise-based cricket if they have a heavy workload schedule. Given how much cricket is played, it is important to remain fresh, it is important to have a balance of other duties and pursuits.

What can be done to encourage more people to take up umpiring?

You are right that it is not a job that suits everybody. But from a participation perspective, at the lower levels of the game we get people actively involved in umpiring.

It is the best seat in the house. It is a great place to get involved in cricket. It is something that offers a unique challenge as a person to manage a game of cricket and be actively engaged in the game.

So the boards and the local cricketers and umpires' associations have to sell the positives of being a cricket umpire. There are a lot of good things that cricket umpiring does give you: there

is a lot of good camaraderie, there are a lot of good moments, there are a lot of good cricket matches that you are involved in. It is an outdoor activity and it is something that does give good benefits.

Isn't it the responsibility of the member boards to protect, educate and train umpires at the lower levels to avoid issues like the sting recently that involved corruption allegations?

It is the responsibility of the clubs, not boards strictly. If every club is able to develop a couple of umpires towards their own competition, we will have more than enough umpires.

Remember, I talked about how to be a good umpire you have to be a good person, with a high level of professionalism, a high level of integrity, the right people skills - those are the people we want umpiring. If you have those skills and ability, then corruption and those kind of issues cannot even come close.

Is cricket still a gentleman's game?

It is a really difficult question because it would depend on who you talk to and what they felt was important to the game. The game is always changing but there are still traditional values that are part of our sport and it is really important to hold on to those values, and certainly a large part of it is the spirit of cricket. That is incumbent upon all of us, to uphold the values of the spirit of cricket. And when you look at the central theme of respect - if everybody has respect for each other, the role of the umpire and for the umpire's decision, the game is going to be in a good position.

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