

## Officials Appreciation Week Profile:

# Richard Siegel

Richard Siegel has always been an enthusiastic baseball fan, right down to having an interest in the rules of a game from an early age.

“An aunt gave me an Official Baseball Rules rule book as a gift when I was 10 years old,” he recalled. “After reading the OBR, I became fascinated with the intricacies of the rules and I became even more passionate about baseball. I never got the opportunity to play In Little League or make the high school baseball team, but I was always looking for ways to stay connected beyond watching it on TV. In college, most of my friends joined fraternities, but I never did. There was a fraternity softball league, and they needed a neutral guy to umpire. They paid me \$10 a game to officiate! I would have done it for free! That’s where the bug hit me.”

His interest continued when his children began to play baseball.

“When my sons began to play in our local Little League, I discovered that they did not use trained umpires for the under-12 games,” he said. “They relied on the coaches of the teenaged players teams to go umpire the games for the younger players as a ‘volunteer.’ That may have saved the league some money, but the umpiring was terrible. As we all know, many coaches know very little about the rules, and especially how to umpire. Often they didn’t even show up. So I volunteered to umpire the games when we had a no-show. Then I volunteered to umpire all the games that my sons’ coaches were required to cover. They were glad to let me do it, and I enjoyed it.”

The next step was to get better at the job.

“Even though I thought I knew what I was doing, I soon realized that I needed better training,” he said. “I attended the week-long Little League umpire school course in Bristol, CT. Now there was no turning back.”

Next up was a move up to high school umpiring, which he has now done for decades.

“A few years later, an umpire friend who worked high school games encouraged me to join the local umpire chapter and take the cadet class,” he said. “After a few more years, our chapter cadet instructor retired. So, the president asked me to take his place. Having been a science teacher, I was able to pair my love of teaching with my love of rules and umpiring. I served as the chapter cadet instructor for 12 years, then I moved on to become our baseball rules and mechanics interpreter.”

## Getting to know NJSIAA sports official Richard Siegel:

### *What do you do in your job as an interpreter?*

“The job is mainly being available to help our members understand the proper enforcement of the rules, but especially present and explain the constant rule changes and new rules that NFHS gives us every year.



During the years I served as the chapter cadet instructor and rules interpreter, I had the pleasure of mentoring many guys who started out knowing nothing about umpiring and helping them advance to work in very high-level games. Several of the students that I had in my cadet classes even went on to attend professional umpire school."

***What do you enjoy most about being an official?***

"As an umpire capable of working high-level high school games, it gives me an enormous amount of pride. Doing this requires an extraordinary amount of training, hard work, study, experience and knowledge. I love working high school games and seeing players I knew from Little League mature, and some have gone on to play professionally. Over the years, I've loved attending over a dozen professional weekend camps and clinics run by MLB umpires. The knowledge I gain at these camps is immensely beneficial, and the opportunity to share experiences with so many like-minded high school officials is invaluable."

***Do you have a favorite memory from officiating an event?***

"In 1999, I was selected to work in the NJ Junior League state tournament. Pitching for the Toms River team was Todd Frazier, at age 13. In the prior year he was an outstanding player for the Toms River 12U team that won the Little League World Series. As a fairly new umpire at the time, I have to admit I was a bit starstruck. I really felt bad when I had to call a balk on him."

***What's the best part about any given day of officiating?***

"The satisfaction that one gets when the game is over, when you realize that you nailed the difficult and unusual decisions that happened during the game. There are some plays and situations mentioned in the rule book that you rarely see occur, maybe once or twice in 30 years. Sometimes never. But the satisfying thing for me is that when it happened, I knew how to properly deal with it."

***Do you have any memories from your first game as an official?***

"It always haunts me to think back to when I volunteered to umpire in those early Little League games, before going to LL Umpire School, about how many things I didn't know and how many things I did wrong. Also, after passing the cadet class, the first high school game I was ever assigned was to work the bases for a JV game with a veteran. Of course, he didn't show up. This was in the days before cell phones. So, I couldn't call anyone to find out what was going on. I had to quickly change into my plate gear and do the game alone! I was lucky and came out of it unscathed."

***Do you have a funny memory of an interaction between yourself and a player or coach?***

"It wasn't funny at the time, but in my very first varsity game, in the bottom of the seventh inning with two outs, the home team had the bases loaded and they were losing by a run. The count on the batter was 3-2 when the batter takes a half swing at the ball. I'm positioned at 'C,' on the infield in front of the shortstop, when the plate umpire comes up, points at me, and shouts 'Did he go?' Suddenly I realized that if I said 'No,' it would tie up the the game. If I said 'Yes,' the home team would lose. That was an uncomfortable situation for a guy working in his first varsity game."



***What's the biggest misconception about the job of being an official?***

“That it’s easy work and that anybody could do it. It’s true that perhaps anybody could do it, but very few people could do it well. Statistics showing that most people that try out being an umpire give it up after one season speaks to this reality.”

***What would you say to anyone thinking about becoming an official?***

“Don’t think that your general knowledge of the game as a spectator, player or coach qualifies you to become an official. When I taught my chapter’s cadet class, each year I would enroll cadets that were former high school coaches and former college or minor league players, all of whom informed me that they ‘already knew how to do this,’ saying they’re just taking the class so they could qualify to get to work high school games. In every case, each of them told me after just a few classes that they had no idea how much about the rules and umpire mechanics they didn’t know, and how foolish they were to have thought they had it all figured out.”

***Think you might be interested in becoming a high school sports official?  
Check out this link to learn more: <https://www.njsiaa.org/officials/become-official>***