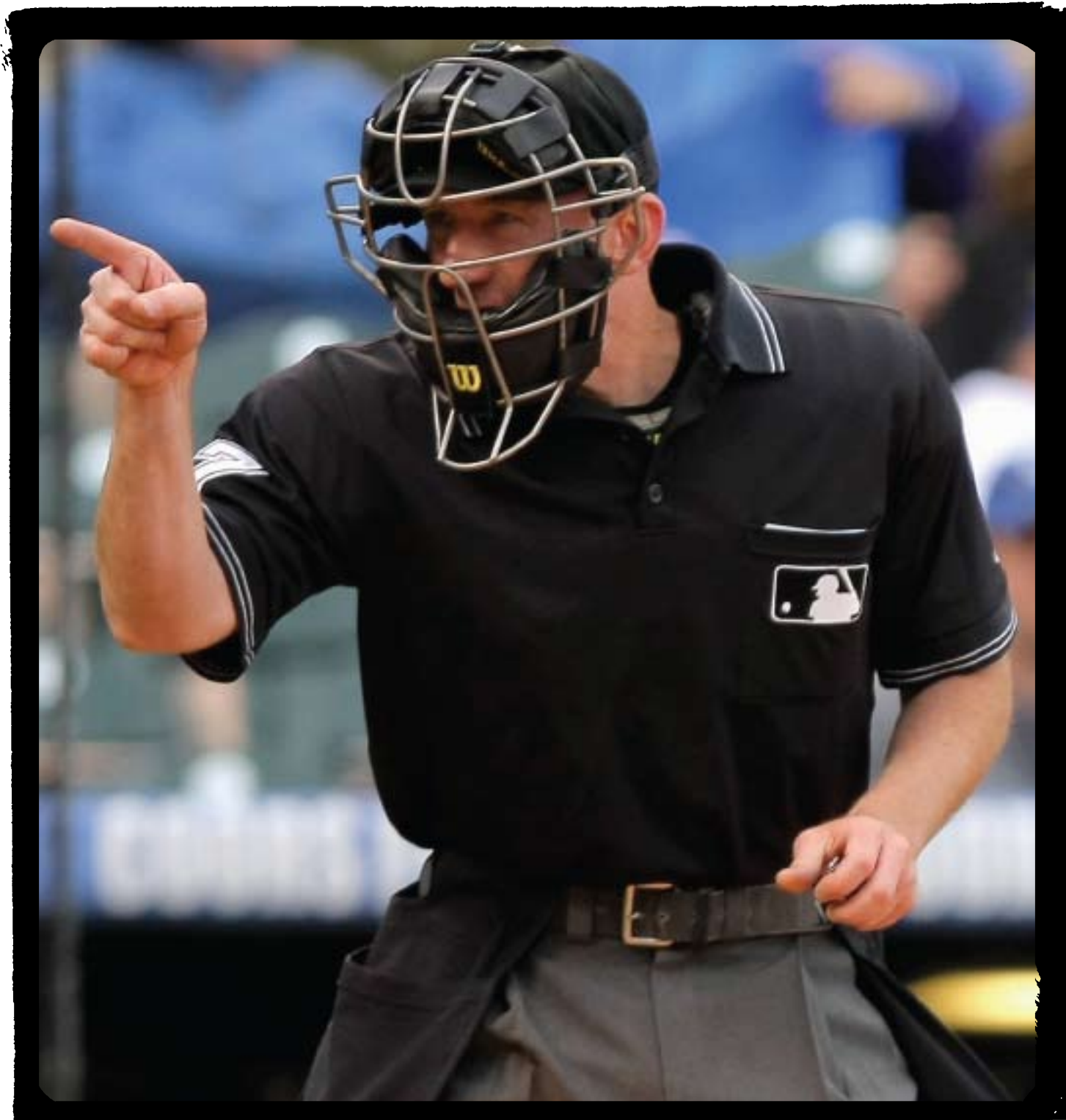


# BEST SEAT

*in the House*



When umpires are at their best, they go unnoticed. But their perspective on the game is one of the most unique in the ballpark. **As told to Jonathan Lesser**

It takes a special person to umpire in the Majors. Aside from having the necessary training, it must be someone who can concentrate like a chess grandmaster, has the nerves of a surgeon, and is, at his best, invisible. Even if you have what it takes, good luck: There are only 67 positions. The reward for making it, though, is one of the best seats in the house. Umpires don't see the game like anyone else does. Their vantage point is incomparable. Here is a glimpse of how some of the best games in recent history looked through their eyes.



**Braves vs. Twins, Oct. 27, 1991**  
**World Series Game 7 — Jack Morris vs. John Smoltz**  
**By Home Plate Umpire Don Denkinger**

The home team had won every game in the Series up until that point. Kirby Puckett hit the home run in Game 6 that won it for Minnesota, and so we went back to the Metrodome for a seventh contest. We had Atlanta's John Smoltz up against Jack Morris.

Morris had the best change-up you'll find, a good split-finger, and a better-than-average fastball. His change was so good that if you're a little quick, you're going to get in a jam. It looks great to hit and then it damn near bounces when it gets to the plate. Smoltz was fantastic, too. He's a great competitor, and he went seven-and-a-third innings. Morris went 10 and was remarkable.

There were some minor jams, and the managers sometimes would go out and talk to their pitchers. One time I walked to the mound on Twins Manager Tom Kelly because I thought he'd been there too long, and he said, "Donny, you know what we're going to do? We're gonna walk this guy, then we're gonna get the next guy to hit into a double play." And they did it. I thought, "Man, he's a prophet."

From an umpire's perspective, a pitching duel is great because the game moves along. But when it's 0-0 and both teams have had few chances to score, you begin to wonder how long it's going to

go on. The pressure mounts, because you surely don't want to make a mistake. And this is Game 7 of the World Series.

In the bottom of the 10th, the Twins have one out and the bases loaded, and Braves Manager Bobby Cox is talking to his pitcher. He brings the outfielders in closer so they can throw out the runner at home plate. I turn to Gene Larkin, the pinch-hitter, and say, "Gene, if they keep bringing

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those outfielders in, even *you* will be able to hit it over their heads." And he never said a word to me. He was absolutely silent.

He *did* hit it over their heads. When we were at the White House I ran into Gene and said, "Gene, did you not hear what I said to you at home plate?" He called his wife over and said to her, "Tell Don what he said to me." She repeated my exact words. I said, "Why wouldn't you talk to me?" And Gene said, "I couldn't. There wasn't any saliva in my mouth." Now *that's* pressure.

Opposite: Barksdale. This page: During the 1991 World Series, Denkinger umpired arguably the best Game 7 ever.

PEISINGER/GETTY IMAGES (BARKSDALE); FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES

## BEST SEAT *in the house*

### Astros vs. Cubs, May 6, 1998 — Kerry Wood K's 20 By Home Plate Umpire Jerry Meals

I'd never seen Kerry Wood before. The funny thing is, the first pitch that he threw, Cubs catcher Sandy Martinez never touched the ball, and I took a fastball right in my face. I'm thinking, *It's going to be a long day.* But Wood got into a groove. He struck out the side in the first. Houston pitcher Shane Reynolds also struck out the side. The whole inning was strikeouts.

Wood had a breaking ball that fell off the table and froze guys, a slider that was working great, and he was just throwing hard as hell. He mixed them up well, and threw strikes, and the batters either looked at it or swung and missed. Houston had good hitters and they never touched him. The only hit was a grounder that went off the glove of third baseman Kevin Orié. Wood must have struck out the side four or five times. The guy was dominating.

I had no idea he had 20 strikeouts until after the game, and I didn't know the record. At Wrigley Field, there's no Jumbotron, no K counts. I just knew it was 1-0 until late, and both pitchers were on. I think it was when I got into the locker room, someone said, "That tied a record. He got 20 strikeouts." I said, "You're kidding me!"



Everything's got to come together to have a game like that. For an individual performance, it's up there with all the games I've ever been a part of. It was a Wednesday afternoon, the last day of the series, and it was not a big crowd — though I'm sure there will be a lot of people who will say they were there.

### Red Sox vs. Yankees, Oct. 16, 2003 ALCS Game 7 — The Aaron Boone Home Run By Home Plate Umpire Tim McClelland

That night I was probably the most nervous I'd ever been going into a game, with all that had gone on in the series. The pressure is heightened in any Yankees-Red Sox series, and then to have them meet in the ALCS, knowing what's at stake — and to have a Game 7, when one team's going home and the other club is going on ... But once that first pitch was thrown, my concentration level went to where it needed to be. All the outside interferences were gone, and I just focused on each and every pitch.

Both starters — Roger Clemens and Pedro Martinez — had reputations of not being afraid to throw inside, and we'd already had the bench-clearing situation during Game 3 in Boston. I knew it was possible that something could happen, but that it wasn't

likely. The pitchers were smart enough to realize there was no sense in throwing at somebody — one, to put runners on base, and two, for a possible fight and ejection. But still, the thought was lingering out there.

Looking back on the controversy of whether Boston's manager should have pulled Pedro or left him out there in the eighth, I think he made the right decision. Pedro was still throwing well in the eighth. Derek Jeter took a high fastball and hit it into right-center — the pitch wasn't even a strike. Jorge Posada had a pitch that he kind of hit off his feet, a Texas League blooper. It was kind of a lucky hit. Matsui hit a line drive down the first-base line that was just barely fair. I had a great position to see how Pedro was throwing, and that inning, luck had escaped him. I don't think Grady Little should be chastised for leaving him in.

When Tim Wakefield came back to the mound for Boston in the bottom of the 11th inning, Boone was the first batter. Wakefield had done so well in the previous games in the series, really shutting down the Yankees, so I figured we were going to go a lot more than 11 innings. You try to block out the crowd noise. When you get to this level you need to do that. But when Aaron hit the home run on Wakefield's first pitch, the noise at Yankee Stadium was deafening. There was a lot of jumping around and excitement. As I walked up the tunnel, Peter Gammons was standing there and he said, "Quite a game, huh?" This is my 27th year in the league, and that was the best game I've ever been a part of.

*"I had a great position to see how Pedro was throwing, and that inning, luck had escaped him. I don't think Grady Little should be chastised for leaving him in."*

McClelland (right) has fond memories of Game 7 of the 2003 ALCS.



## BEST SEAT in the house

Barksdale had a close up of Johnson's intimidating glare on his 20-K day.



### Reds vs. D-backs, May 8, 2001 — Randy Johnson K's 20 By Home Plate Umpire Lance Barksdale

When you've got a guy with good stuff like that who's hitting spots on a given night, it's fun for an umpire. It makes our job a lot easier. Back then, Randy's stuff was so dominant. You're looking at a 6-foot-10 left-hander on the mound, and he throws in the mid-90s.

I remember that particular night Damian Miller was catching, and he commented early in the game on how well Johnson's slider was working. It seemed like he kept throwing it, running it in, and to right-handed batters it was especially nasty. Early in the game I knew he had a lot of strikeouts, but I didn't realize how many. They put the K's up in right field out in Arizona. I didn't know what the record was, but I knew this was something special because they kept putting up the strikeouts. I didn't know he had tied the Major League record until after the game.

I believe there was more swingin' than ringin' that game because I remember the slider. They just kept swinging at it and missing — and most of them weren't even in the strike zone. They just kept running off the plate. Randy went nine innings, though the game went 11.

As far as working the plate, that's by far my most memorable game. That's a milestone, a record. If you have a no-hitter going into the eighth inning, you'd know, because you look up there and see zero hits, but a strikeout record is something that just happens. If I had it again, a guy with a lot of strikeouts, I'd know. But that night I didn't know what the record was, so I had no reason to count them. I'm kind of glad that I didn't know since I probably would have jinxed him. I probably would have said, "Oh, you have two more to tie the record," or something. And then he wouldn't do it, and I'd feel bad that I jinxed the guy.

*"I believe there was more swingin' than ringin' that game because I remember the slider. They just kept swinging at it and missing — and most weren't in the strike zone."*

### Red Sox vs. Cardinals, Oct. 27, 2004 World Series Game 4 — Red Sox Break the Curse By Umpire Dale Scott

The Series started Saturday in Boston. I flew in on Thursday, the day after the Red Sox beat the Yankees in the ALCS. The city was on cloud nine. I'd never seen a city like that. It was as if the Sox had already won the World Series. In a way, looking back, it's one reason why the Red Sox did so well in the World Series, because all the pressure was off. By beating their archrivals, I think they were so loose and so happy that they were able to keep it going.

I knew the Red Sox's history, but it didn't affect me. The World Series is historic every year. This one was big for Sox fans, but to an umpire, it's work. You're honored to be a part of it, but you don't look at it as a fan does: Boston hasn't won in X years, and if they do it will break the curse, so to speak. That's all good, and great copy for newspapers, but it didn't affect my mental approach.

That was my third World Series. One of the first two was a sweep and the other was a seven-gamer. A sweep is a different feel. But again, that's the fan's point of view. As an umpire, you still approach every game and every pitch the same way. You can't get caught up in the peripheral stuff. That's not to say that when it was done and I was back home, I didn't look back and say, "Wow,



It wasn't until the Red Sox finally wrapped up the world title that Scott could reflect and say to himself, "That was cool."

that was cool." I was on the field when the Red Sox broke their jinx. It's something I would have never dreamed of when I started umpiring at just 15 years old, working Little League games. ♦

*Jonathan Lesser is a freelance writer based in New York.*