STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

Former Hofstra softball student-athlete Jen Pawol made history in June when she became the first female umpire in the Gulf Coast League (GCL) since 1978, and the first female umpire in Minor League Baseball (MiLB) since 2007. She is only the seventh woman to ever umpire in a Major League Baseball-affiliated league.

Pawol, who caught for Hofstra from 1996 to 1998, made her minor league debut in Dunedin, FL, working behind the plate for the GCL Blue Jays-GCL Tigers game. She was selected in 2015 to attend the MiLB Advanced Course, where top candidates from the Umpire Training Academy qualify for further training. Her performance in this course led to her assignment to the Gulf Coast League.

A three-time all-conference selection, Pawol was an infielder who played 161 games for the Pride, batting .332 for her career. During her career, Hofstra posted a combined 110-51 record and went 33-3 in North Atlantic/America East Conference play.

She took some time recently to reflect on her place in history, opportunities for women in sports and her second career as an artist and photographer — a passion she has pursued since she majored in painting as an undergraduate student at Hofstra.
Who was the first person you called/told when you found out you were named an umpire in MiLB?

The first person I called after receiving my invite into MiLB was John Kurnat, my mentor from the Colonial [Athletic Association] as well as 20 years in the Big Ten. John is a three-time Women's College World Series NCAA Division I umpire and a career-long baseball umpire. We prepared extensively on a variety of topics, discussing improving every day, professionalism, game management, gender, size, hustle and conditioning that would help me train to be successful during the tryout process. John has mentored many young men and women into success umpiring within the Big Ten and into the NCAA Division I postseason. I am very grateful for the investment of time he has dedicated toward my umpire training and development. He absolutely deserved to hear the good news first!

Why do you think it’s been so long since there’s been a female MiLB umpire?

The past 10 years have been extremely prolific for women’s softball, women’s sports in general and women working in men’s sports. Women have had a lot of new choices, and perhaps umpiring hasn’t been as “attractive” when compared to all of the other new, less risky opportunities. Women’s softball has absolutely exploded with job growth for coaching, athletic training and administration positions. Also, consider the additional new career choices for all of women’s sports such as marketing, equipment, and uniform industries. Then expand this to the efforts by men’s sports administrations to include women for career positions on their staffs. There are a lot of new work opportunities!

From my personal experience within the Major League Baseball Umpire Camp tryouts, the MiLB Umpire Training Academy, the MiLB Advanced Course and now as a current MiLB professional umpire, I can say with a 200 percent certainty that professional baseball has also been an active participant in this prolific 10-year period attracting women for career positions in baseball. When you ask specifically about umpiring, we need to step back and remember that umpiring is only fun if you love it. In general, most people (men and women) do not love it. There are not a lot of people out there who willingly choose to sign up for a career that involves the possibility of being hit by a 90+ mph baseball, or traveling away from home for six months at a time, or taking on the athletic challenge of physically running on the huge baseball diamond day after day no matter that the weather, learn all of the rules and mechanics, and get all of the calls right. It takes a certain personality to want to umpire. It also takes good timing for job openings. It is very risky to go down this career path, because no one knows if they will become good enough or if a position will open for promotion before they pass their prime.

For the past three years, I have been offering beginner youth umpire training classes to help speed up the numbers process by attracting women and girls into umpiring. My classes introduce umpiring both baseball and softball to girls and boys early enough in a way that makes umpiring fun and achievable. Personally, I wish I had been introduced to umpiring while I was in college or high school. The umpire drills we do are fun and interactive. I help them with uniforms and find them plate equipment. Often, I am at the field with the new umpires as they pull their new shirts and pants right out of the wrappers from the manufacturer. We take the time to teach the basic rules and mechanics weeks before games begin. I am dedicated to exposing girls and boys to umpiring to find as many potential future umpires as possible.

Describe what you were thinking as you got ready for that first game.

I was enjoying the experience of my first day as a professional umpire. The Blue Jays were the home team, and their umpire locker room was the biggest I had ever seen dedicated to umpires. There were six huge lockers, a full double bath room, two full showers, table and chairs, laundry, towels, all kinds of sports soaps, shaving creams, hair gels, mouth washes, mirrors, sinks, refrigerator, and plenty of space for stretching out to warm up. We had everything we needed to prepare mentally and physically for the game.

Did the first batter, or the catcher, acknowledge you and the somewhat historic nature of your first game, or was it just business as usual?

We did take a commemorative photograph that included my partner, Scott Molloy, and both head coaches from the Blue Jays and Tigers. Aside from that special moment at the plate meeting, we got right into business as usual. The pitcher threw his eight warm-up pitches, the catcher threw the last one down to second base, I swept the plate, got into position as did the batter, and yelled “Play!”
What was your first call – do you remember the location of the pitch (down and in, high and tight?)? What did the batter do?

First pitch of the game was a ball. The batter struck out looking, which made my first big call a called strikeout!

Did you anticipate the attention/press, or was that a surprise? Did you feel any additional pressure as a result of it?

We did prepare for attention and press. Professional baseball values and protects their tradition more than any other sport. The history of baseball is a passion for many writers. So I did expect people to become enthusiastic as the season started. Whenever something unique occurs to add to the history of baseball, much is usually written about that event. I didn’t feel any pressure, more so anticipation and excitement because of all of the training leading up to the start of my professional career.

Did you allow yourself to celebrate the accomplishment after the game, or was it just one step in a journey?

It felt great to get off to a good start. The most significant moment occurred after the game. Jeff Lantz, MiLB senior director of communications, came in and asked me to sign baseballs. He then went on to say that “stickers of authenticity” would be placed on them. I understood at that moment the magnitude of the day, and that it had forever changed my life. I am so excited to embark on the great challenge to pursue a long journey in professional baseball.

What was the craziest play you’ve ever made the call on?

Triple play during my very first game umpiring one-man!

How did you end up umpiring?

I chose to transition into umpiring as I finished up my playing career. Umpiring became the next challenge for me to channel my drive into.

What’s harder: playing or umpiring?

Umpiring is by far much harder than playing. I used to obsess about hitting well over .300 during my season to be considered a “good” hitter. As an umpire, to be considered “good,” I have to get every single call correct game after game. Umpires have to bat .1000 every time they take the field.

How did playing at Hofstra prepare you for what you’re doing now?

Competing for [retired] Head Coach Bill Edwards is directly significant to my success now on the professional baseball field, and as a dual business owner and art educator. Bill Edwards expected and cultivated all of the women on his teams to be independent thinkers and to become self-made. He encouraged all of the women to think for themselves, to make split second decisions on the field, to allow their individual talent to express itself, and to make our Hofstra Softball team stronger. Hofstra Softball became Hofstra Softball because Bill Edwards empowered every woman who earned a Dutch uniform to build the reputation of the program one play, one hit, one run, one win at a time.

Young women especially need to be encouraged to think for themselves and act on their ambition. Too often I see girls being scolded for independent thinking on plays. If a catcher sees an opportunity to pick off a runner, and has the arm to do it, that aggressive nature needs to be cultivated rather than squashed because of a fear of failure.

Decision-making skills are vital to umpiring. A strong umpire will do well if they can think for themselves. A weak umpire will continue to doubt themselves when pressure from fans, coaches or players arises in response to a call. As a woman, I believe that strong decision-making is necessary to become successful in all areas of life, from buying a car, to buying a house, or building a career.

Who were your mentors at Hofstra?

I had three mentors during my playing career at Hofstra: Head Coach Bill Edwards and the Aigotti twins, Chrissy and Lora.

Did you have any family or friends at your first game?

My family and friends were not able to attend the first game, although some do plan to visit during the season. They have been texting, calling and emailing me like crazy!

Anything else you want to add?

My major at Hofstra was fine arts: painting. I continue to make artwork as a professional photographer and artist with my own studio (www.pawolpictures.com). I am using the art education I received at Hofstra University. The paintings I have been making over the years are of the strike zone of games I umpire or watch live. I went on to earn an MFA in painting from Hunter College in New York City, 2005.

I also pursued an art education teaching career, having earned my K-12 NYS Teaching Certification in 2008. After all of this excitement with professional baseball, I am looking forward to returning to my home where I operate a second business called Evolve. I train baseball and softball players to prepare for the college recruiting process, as well as encourage them to become well-rounded student-athletes in the arts, umpiring, and local community.