

'Yer out'

Ump on stump admits errors

By CRAIG PIECHURA

Sure they loved him in January, but will they boo him by August?

In wintertime, Rocky Roe sells software for Computer Methods in Livonia. By spring, he plays hardball in the big leagues.

The major league umpire was quite a hit Monday afternoon with the third-graders at Leonard Elementary School in Southfield. The kids lined up for autographs, swapped baseball tales and got to touch the chest protector, face mask and the little whisk broom umps use to brush off the plate.

Roe, 30, of West Bloomfield, came to class as the guest of Brian Feldman, a third-grader who dreams of becoming a big leaguer. His mother, Mrs. Sharon Feldman, attended Southfield High with Rocky and, after bumping into him at a shopping center, asked the umpire if he'd be a human show-and-tell subject at her son's "All About Me" week at school. Roe gladly accepted the offer.

Roe summoned Brian to the front of the class to dress the boy up in umpire gear. After all the planning by Mrs. Feldman, she was caught without the proper flash-cubes when it came time to record the moment for posterity with her Instamatic. Brian modeled the oversized equipment and then passed it around for his fellow students to inspect. They reverently fingered the face mask, noting that one metal bar was bent by a foul ball traveling 120 mph. They felt the umpire's chest protector, the kind worn inside the blue pelt and his protective shoes with steel plates in the toe and instep.

"YOU GUYS boo umpires?" Roe asked the third-graders. "I'm here to prove umpires are human. We do make mistakes, which is why you sometimes see arguments with us and the managers. You see, we are all grown men playing a child's game."

Roe doesn't wear eyeglasses, but he doesn't think he's infallible. When he works behind the plate calling balls and strikes, Roe figures he blows about four pitches out of every 100.

"I'd guess I cut-and-out miss probably 12 pitches a game. I'll just miss them. It basically revolves around timing."

There's no apology following the admission. Making an educated guess about 4 percent of the pitches doesn't look too bad, Roe says, when you consider hitters make millions of dollars if they miss two out of three times at bat for a .333 batting average.

The kids learned umpires travel 180,000 miles a year, visit 14 American League cities, and work 162 games (including

spring training) each season. Starting salary for major league umpires is \$17,500, plus \$77 per day for traveling expenses. A second-year major league umpire gets a \$1,500 raise and a third-year ump, which Roe will be in March, gets a \$2,500 raise.

While the salary is a far cry from the players' pay, Roe isn't complaining. He remembers the \$800 per month he earned as an umpire in the Florida State League in 1977. His wife, Jeanne, a teacher at St. Bede School, worked two jobs then to make ends meet.

ALONG WITH that \$800 a month, Roe also received his share of abuse from ruid minor league fans who had an unsettling tendency to blame the umps for their team's loss, says Roe.

"We got a police escort out of town after one game and were chased for 20 miles beyond that," Roe said of Cocoa Beach, Fla. fan-atics. "People taunt you, send threatening letters. It's all part of the job."

After graduating fourth in a class of 130 at umpire school, Roe spent two seasons officiating in the minors when he was invited to umpire in the major leagues — as a strikebreaker. He declined but was brought up anyway in July 1980 to replace Bill Kunkle, who developed kidney stones. Because the umpires struck, they now get a two-week vacation during the baseball season, along with improved pay.

One of the youngsters wanted to know if Roe liked to play baseball as well as officiate. He told them how he played in the minor leagues until 1972, when a Detroit Tiger talent scout told him he had a better future judging pitches behind the plate than at the plate.

Most of the class didn't really ask ques-

tions. They told Roe how they almost caught a foul ball at Stadium but how the ball popped out of their gloves and a "big kid" picked it up. Others wanted to know what their favorite player was really like.

STEVE KEMP?

"He never, ever smiles, but he's a nice man," Roe said.

Lou Whitaker?
"He was my first ejection in baseball," Roe said. "Lou and I don't get along very well."

A boy asked Roe which team was his favorite. The ump diplomatically demurred.

"Because of the job I have I can't have a favorite team, or it would look like I was taking sides. But there are players I like and hope they do well. If they make an out, I might feel bad for them."

Players Roe said he likes include Reggie Jackson and George Brett. He also likes Jim Rice and calls Carlton Fisk his favorite catcher, because he'll talk to Roe behind the plate.

And Ted Simmons, former St. Louis Cardinal catcher, is an old acquaintance of Roe's from high school. Now that Simmons will be playing for the Milwaukee Brewers, Roe will have to avoid any fraternization with his old Southfield High friend.

AT THE START of his umpiring career, Roe said, he had to make a conscious effort to avoid acting like a fan.

"I've always had a great deal of respect for Carl Yastrenski (Boston Red Sox veteran)," Roe said. "I grew up with the guy, and here I am on the same turf with Carl Yastrenski. That can put you in awe."

But following the example of veteran umpire Bill Haller, Roe said he learned to judge the game objectively. That doesn't mean he's unimpressed or biased about the achievements of the athletes, however.

From the umpire's unique vantage point, perched over the inside corner of the plate, Roe gets the best view of a pitcher. He sees what kind of "stuff" they're throwing.

In Roe's opinion, Nolan Ryan, renowned for his 100 mph-plus fastball, also "has probably the best curveball in the business." Tommy John, Roe says, has the best slider and sinker, while Detroit Tiger relief ace Aurelio Rodriguez "has got a great assortment of pitches and everything seems to be moving."

The kids exhausted the names of all their favorites and then asked Roe who he argued with him the most.

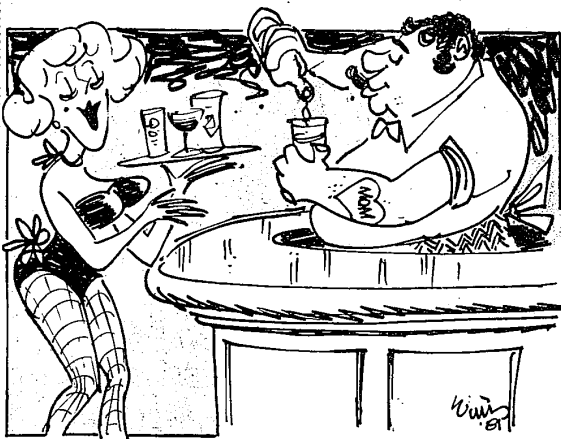
"Earl Weaver, hands down," Roe said, citing the feisty manager of the Baltimore Orioles.



"I'm here to prove umpires are human," says Roe. "We do make mistakes, which is why you sometimes see arguments with us and the managers. You see, we are all grown men playing a child's game." (Staff photos by Mindy Saunders)



Rocky Roe: "People taunt you, send threatening letters. It's all part of the job."



Support your local bartender with ballot

There are those who eschew the theory that man's best friend is some variety of canine. Man's best friend, they claim, is the loyal and faithful bartender who listens to all manner of trevial without every turning a deaf ear.

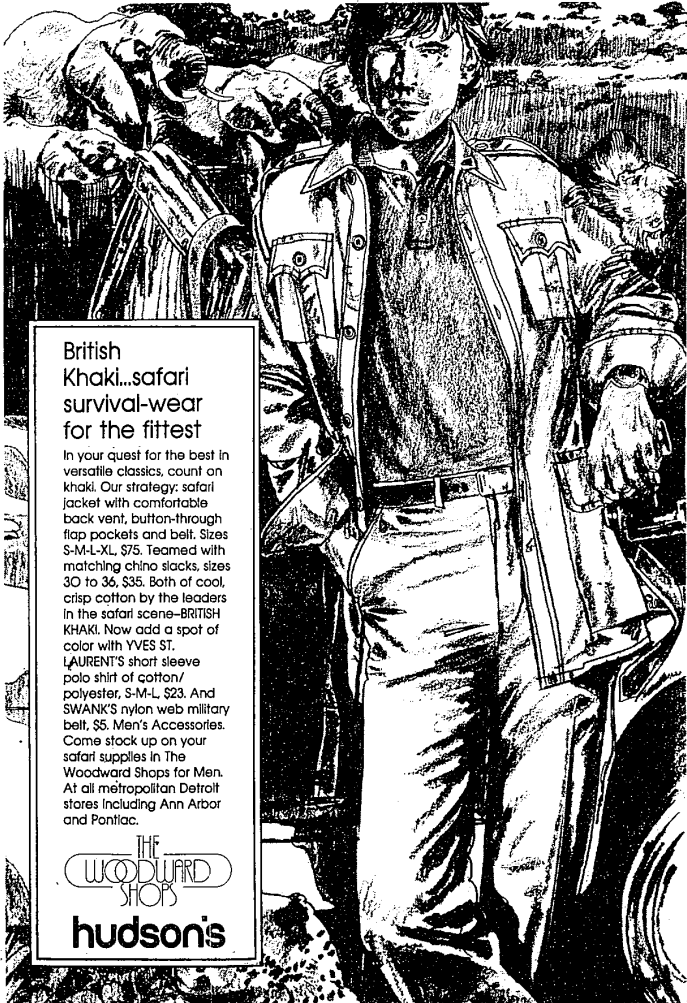
While we won't go that far, we think that the bartender is often an unsung hero and under-appreciated counselor and confidante.

To bestow some measure of recognition on the Best Bartender in Town, the Farmington Observer will consider the talents and capabilities of all bartenders nominated for the award. The

grand prize will be a plaque to hang on the wall of his or her bartending arena and a story and photos highlighting his or her strengths and abilities.

To nominate your favorite bartender for consideration, use the accompanying entry form. In 25 words or less explain why the bartender should be recognized.

Mall or bring your entry to the Farmington Observer office, 23352 Farmington Road, Farmington 48024. The office is just south of Grand River on the east side of Farmington Road.



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