

# The Woman in Blue

by John Haakanson

It's 86 degrees and getting hotter as Delma Stuck peers through her protective mask at the pitcher 40 feet from home plate.

As the batter edges into position, Delma signals the pitcher with a quick left hand, and crouches low over the catcher. The ball explodes from the pitcher's mound and smacks loudly into the catcher's mitt.

"Steerike one!" says Delma, shooting her right hand out full length, then snapping her forearm back briskly so her hand points skyward.

The fast-pitch softball game has officially begun, and, true to form, the crowd is soon nit-picking over Delma's interpretation of the strike zone.

"People tend to rip you about your strike zone," says Delma. "But if you're consistent, most good pitchers will adjust. I've had more trouble with coaches than with pitchers."

Although Delma, 38, is paid for umpiring, she has a day job with the Eugene school district and says she isn't doing this for the money.

"I have a really good time umpiring and when I reach the point that it's a job, I'll probably quit," she says.

She was playing slow pitch softball when then-umpire Anne Freuchte, now assistant athletic director with the Eugene Parks and Recreation Department, encouraged her to begin umpiring four years ago.

She's been calling them as she sees them ever since, and her love for the game is obvious as she praises players like Churchill High School's Dena Carter, or recounts the details of a close play.

"I've made bad calls and I admit it when I do," she says. "If I blew it, coaches have the right to yell, and I'll let 'em yell maybe a little longer than

another ump would."

But there are limits. Delma recently made a difficult call on a foul ball at a crucial moment in a state tournament game. The wrath of the home field crowd and one very angry coach descended immediately.

"There were lots of people and nobody liked me, but I went to the coach and said, 'That was a good call,'" she says.

"He apologized after the game for coming unglued."

Back on the field, Delma flips off her mask as a runner races home, sliding just under the slap of the opposing catcher's glove. Delma watches the play unfold, then spreads her arms wide and hollers "safe!"

She wears black shoes, navy blue slacks and a light blue shirt. After the inning is over she strides down the first base line to confer with the base umpire.

The two toe the foul line, backs to the crowd, and talk for a few seconds. Both seem to enjoy this ritual, and they return to the spot several times during the afternoon to discuss calls of the previous half-inning.

Delma's toughest moment as an umpire may have come this year in a very close game. With two outs in the bottom of the last inning, a runner slid home as the catcher applied the tag. The play represented either the tying run or the final out of the game, and it was all up to Delma.

"The ball was there . . . but I made my call too quick," says Delma, who initially called the runner out. Umpire's decisions are final, right or wrong, except in the rare instance when an umpire agrees to ask for help from his or her partner.

Delma felt her call might be wrong,



Fast-pitch baseball umpire Delma Stuck.

asked her partner's opinion, and changed her call, which meant the game was tied instead of over. After the initial call, one coach had come "ripping and tearing and screaming" off the bench to protest. Now it was the other coach's turn.

"He ripped me apart, told me I was a coward and said the first coach had intimidated me," she says. "But going back over it in my head, I knew I blew the call."

"I had to eat that call," she says now. "In some people's opinion you lose your credibility, but I think it takes more guts to admit you're wrong."

"That may not be what other umps think, but that's the way I'll continue to officiate."

Between innings at today's sweltering game, Delma heads for the water

cooler and quickly drains two cups. The sun glares on the diamond as she steps to her place behind the catcher, adjusts her mask and settles into the familiar crouch.

It's a pressure cooker out there, with no room for indecision as the ball screams to the plate in a blur of white. The batter swings and misses, then looks at strike two as the crowd hums and mutters.

A pause. Then the pitcher rears back and rockets the ball over the outside corner of the plate while the batter watches helplessly.

"Steeerreeekthree!" the woman in blue yells, combining words into one guttural sound while shooting her right hand out. Her fingers clench for one moment into a fist as her arm points skyward again.

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## SPORTS CORNER

by Garde Wells

# Athlete's Alert!

David Heisler, Butte-to-Butte Race Director, wants runners (and walkers) who didn't yet get t-shirts to bring their race numbers to Nike Eugene (in the Atrium at 99 W. 10th) to pick up their t-shirts.

The McKenzie Riders Bicycle Club leaves Alton Baker Park Sunday at 9 am, for a 45-mile spin out Deerhorn Road. Call 747-2625 to confirm.

Yo! It's the 5th annual YMCA Triathlon, Sunday, August 23. You must register yourself or your team by August 17. Register at local athletic stores or at the Eugene Family YMCA. The cost is \$28 for individuals or \$48 per team. New this year will be the Corporate Challenge team division. There are eight sub categories for the corporate team entries—legal, media, medical/dental, retail, restaurant, manufacturing, professional/service, athletic facilities, and government.

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