



Mark Graves/The Oregonian

Umpire Fred McKeown in action during a Little League Baseball tournament in Scappoose on Saturday.

## Little League umpire leaves field after 40 years

By TOM HALLMAN JR.  
The Oregonian

When Fred McKeown, a Little League umpire, learns the story is going to be about him and not the kids who play baseball, he's reluctant to talk. McKeown is most comfortable behind the scenes, quietly slipping away when the game ends and letting the spotlight fall on the players.

But in Oregon Little League circles, McKeown is a legend. For the past 40 years, he has umpired Little League baseball games in Oregon District 1, a territory that includes teams in north and northeast Portland, Parkrose, St. Helens and Scappoose. With a total of about 2,400 players, the teams have a season that runs from March until August.

McKeown, a north Portland cabinetmaker by profession, typically umpires three or four games a week and a couple on Saturday, all of which adds up to nearly 150 games a season. He also umpires in a girls softball league. He has mentored the next generation of Little League umpires, runs statewide umpiring clinics and leads an annual umpire camp in California.

All for free.

Now, at 73, the man considered the dean of Oregon Little League umpires is calling it quits when the 2021 season ends. He and his wife plan to move to Spokane, Washington, so she can be close to her sisters.

"This guy has been a fixture in Little League forever," said Matt Farr, who met McKeown long ago when his kids played Little League. "He does it out of the goodness of his heart."

Jon Coney, trained by McKeown to be a Little League umpire, said McKeown, about 5-feet-6, is quiet and unassuming until he gets on the field.

"He has a bark to his voice when he makes a call," said Coney. "He sounds like he's 10-feet tall. But he's one of the kindest and most patient people you will meet. No pride or ego to get in the way. Everything he does is done to make it fun for the kids."

Over the decades, Little League aficionados, familiar with high-strung coaches and parents, have watched McKeown handle everyone and every situation by being calm.

"Even if you don't like his calls, you like the guy," said April Rice. Her 19-year-old daughter, who still plays softball, met McKeown when she was 6 and he umpired her games.

Bob Hudlow, the former executive director of Oregon District 1 for 20 years, said McKeown was umpiring when Hudlow took the position and was still working games when he moved on. "We never had a personal complaint from a parent, player or coach about the man," Hudlow said.

But Hudlow, who coached his son's Little League team when the boy was 8, admitted to arguing with McKeown. "His nickname is 'hummingbird' because his strike zone is as small as a hummingbird's ass," said Hudlow. "I'd get to arguing with him. Fred was

always in control. He'd just tell me that was enough, and the discussion was over."

When Hudlow's son, Nick, turned 12, he told his father that he wanted to one day be a professional umpire. Hudlow called McKeown, who volunteered to work with the boy — for free.

"My first impression of Fred was he was a strict guy who was going to be hard on me," said Nick Hudlow. "But he's so good at delivering a message to help all umpires get better. Whether it is a kid or a 65-year-old grandfather. Here I am 14 years later still umpiring."

Nick Hudlow rose through the Little League ranks. He also umpires high school ball, and a few years ago was selected to be part of the Western Regional tournament in San Bernardino, California. The games were on ESPN, and Hudlow's father got to see him work the game. On the second to last night of the tournament, the umpiring crew received an award for their work.

"I stood up there in front of everyone and bawled my eyes out," said Hudlow. "I thanked my parents. But first and foremost I had to thank the man who made it all possible — Fred McKeown."

McKeown, who played Little League in Portland in the 1960s, fell into umpiring one afternoon when he went to watch his daughter's softball team. When the umpire didn't show up, the coaches asked the parents at the game if any of them would volunteer. McKeown stepped forward.

"I made a call that a girl was out," he said. "The coach convinced me to call her safe. I later learned I was right. I started to learn the rules of the game. At the time I was coaching my daughter's softball team. She finally told me no more coaching because she didn't want me around. I said I'd be an umpire, and I've been doing it ever since."

McKeown, who has two daughters, has been behind the plate when his grandson and later his great-grandson played Little League.

"I called strike three on my great-grandson," McKeown. "He turned around and told me I was right."

McKeown has umpired games for teen players, but finds the game at that level is different than it is with the youngsters.

"Too many parents try and live their baseball fantasy through their kids," he said. "They expect too much. In all the years I've done this, I've only seen two kids go pros. What a kid really needs in Little League is simple. That's just the love of the game."

McKeown fondly remembers his time as a boy playing Little League. The umpire, he said, made the kids feel like they were real players, letting them imagine — if for a brief moment — as if they were in the big leagues, not just some kid getting ready for fourth grade come the start of the school year.

"Someone made that possible for me," he said. "I just wanted to give it back for another kid."

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Jon Coney | Little League umpire who was trained by Fred McKeown

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