

Bond among umpires sets light tone on and off field

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WARNER ROBINS -- Umpires for most of the year and comedians all of the time, eight men who only met a week ago have become comrades.

“We’ve been together for a week and acting like we’ve been together for years,” said Dan Collins, of South Carolina.



Little League Baseball Southeastern Region Tournament umpires do the YMCA dance Wednesday between innings of the Georgia-West Virginia game.

Georgia, represented by Warner Robins, and Florida, represented by New Tampa, will face off at 8 p.m. Friday in the Little League Baseball Southeastern Region Tournament’s championship game. The winner will advance to the World Series in Williamsport, Pa. The championship game, to be played at Little League Southeast Park, is free and open to the public.

The ballpark is located at 439 Snellgrove Drive in Warner Robins. Snellgrove Drive is located off of Cohen Walker Drive, halfway between Lake Joy Road to the west and South Houston Lake Road to the east.

The game will be televised on ESPN, and live updates will be available at macon.com. The men are umpires for the Little League Baseball Southeastern Region Tournament. They sometimes can be seen doing the YMCA and the chicken dances on the field.

Hailing from five states are Bill McKinney, Guy Vilt, Buddy Peyton, Richard Zuckernick, Collins, Rick Eanes, Jim Lenas and Larry Clutter.

There was an instant connection among the men. They are so comfortable that they are willing to play practical jokes on each other in public.

While at Steak 'n Shake, the crew persuaded the waitress to bring Eanes -- a short man from Virginia who bears a striking similarity to Ernest T. Bass from the "Andy Griffith Show" -- a booster seat and his drink in a child's cup.

"This is the tightest umpire crew I've been with," said Zuckernick, who is from Virginia.

Watching the broadcast of another Little League regional game on ESPN2 in the lobby of their hotel, the men don't watch the action on the diamond.

As the cameras pan to where the ball goes, this crowd comments on other umpires -- their moves, what color pants they are wearing (gray or charcoal), how close they stand to the line and the list goes on.

After their television debut Wednesday during the semifinal games, all eight said their phones, Facebook pages and e-mails were crowded with people from all over who saw them on ESPN2.

Combined, these umpires have 59 years experience calling for Little League games.

The sacrifices don't come from just this tournament -- where they've had to provide their own transportation and time off from work -- it has come from years of many missed suppers, lawns not being mowed and late nights. Umpires are not paid for their time.

Family support is invaluable to all eight.

Collins credits his father, whom he watched umpire as a child. Once he could no longer play, Collins still wanted to be around the sport and decided to try umpiring.

Lenas, of Florida, got involved through his son. Many of the men have children who started playing, and they felt the need to continue to volunteer with their local leagues.

To be eligible to umpire a regional tournament, volunteer paperwork has to be filled out almost a year in advance. Umpires are selected from an evaluation form each person submits. Then regional staff select the eight.

Letters go out in March.

Vilt, of Florida, who never seems to be at a loss for words, said he was when he opened up the letter.

“I was pretty darn speechless,” he said.

Each of them said the first Challenger exhibition game for special-needs children Aug. 7 was the hit of the tournament for them.

McKinney, of Virginia, admits he shied away from Challenger games in the past but now has a better understanding and respect for what goes on.

“It’s the best experience I’ve had,” Vilt said.

There were a lot of firsts for these umpires.

“We got to see Alex (Fulmer) pitch, our first Challenger game and the largest crowd outside of Williamsport,” he said, referring to the Pennsylvania site of the Little League Baseball World Series.

Alex Fulmer, of South Carolina, is the first girl to ever pitch in a Southeastern Regional game.

Now the main concern is Friday's championship game.

"The important thing is that we send the right team" to represent the Southeastern Region, said Collins.

"We're just eight average guys who come from all over, and tried to do it properly."

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