



NJSIAA TRAILBLAZER

The dream of every pro baseball player is to climb the ladder of various minor leagues and some day reach Major League Baseball.

For the umpires calling those games, the hopes are no different, and the odds of making it to the majors are even tougher than they are for the players.

One umpire from New Jersey is coming closer to achieving that goal, and that person happens to be a trailblazing woman.

Jen Pawol, who graduated from West Milford - where she was an All-State softball catcher - in 1995, became one of the few women ever hired to work affiliated minor league games in 2016. She started in the lowest level that year, and has been on a steady climb ever since. This year, she has been assigned to the Double A Eastern League, which means she is two levels away from becoming the first woman to umpire a major league game.

To put that in perspective, when she debuted in the rookie-level Gulf Coast League six years ago, she became the first woman to work an affiliated minor league game in 10 years, and was just the seventh all time. She's now closing in becoming only the second to reach Triple A, and the first since 1989.

The best part about it is that if you attend a game that she's working, you might not even notice, unless you see that one ump has a slight ponytail.

Her interest in umpiring traces all the way back to West Milford, where she was a star catcher who was known for her intensity as much as her



hard hitting and strong arm. Off the field, she was also known as an expressive artist, which is an interest she has also carried into adulthood after earning a bachelors degree at Hofstra, where she was a three-time All-Conference softball player, and a masters in painting at Hunter. She became a certified art educator, and she still maintains a studio, paints, and exhibits her work.

Although she was a softball player in high school and college, the sport that really intrigued her was baseball, which is what she played growing up. And as her playing career was ending, she wanted to stay involved. But she wasn't really interested in coaching. Instead, Pawol was interested in umpiring.



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“I first thought of umpiring when I was a freshman at West Milford,” she told the NJSIAA for a 2019 profile. “Our third baseman, Lauren Rissmeyer, invited me to umpire with her at Bubbling Springs (a park in town) over the summer. She was a senior with a drivers license and a car. Lauren picked me up for the games and drove me home. I remember enjoying umpiring because the action behind the plate felt a lot like catching. The following summer she had graduated and started college. I wish I had followed up with umpiring that next summer, but I wasn’t old enough to drive. Looking back, umpiring or officiating sports would have been the ideal job for me as a student-athlete to make money and fundraise for travel ball expenses. There aren’t many other part-time jobs out there for high school students with flexible hours where they can make \$25-\$35 an hour.”

Pawol always paid attention to the job of the umpire at her games, never taking their work for granted. It also helped that as a catcher, part of her own job was to maintain a dialogue with the plate ump. Eventually, she started to umpire again herself.

“Officiating was something I could do to earn extra money while putting myself through college,” she said. “The more I umpired, the further I fell in love with it as a career choice. Umpiring was more attractive to me as a career over coaching, because umpiring felt a lot like catching, but better. The umpire, like the catcher, is in the game from the first pitch to the last pitch. I missed playing the game and was looking to satisfy that missing piece. It helped a lot as a former catcher to be not afraid of getting hit by the ball. That’s vital to becoming an umpire. As a catcher, I was also used to seeing



the strike zone from that end of a pitch, just like an umpire.”

You might not think of it, but umpiring can be a very strenuous activity, particular in the pro ranks. You are on the field for every pitch, and when it’s your day to work the plate, you’re generally calling at least 250 pitches in a crouched position wearing protective gear, often in hot weather. In addition to the wear and tear on your back and knees, you are also subject to foul balls off all parts of your body. And as a pro, you can be on the road for months at a time. It’s no wonder that at any given period in the major leagues, a number of umpires are on the injury list.

“Umpires also have to train physically, just like athletes do,” Pawol said. “Umpiring requires a tremendous amount of athleticism and I enjoy that as an athlete. Umpiring additionally presents a bigger challenge than playing. Hitters can maintain a .300 batting average and be considered good, but umpires need to bat 1.000 on their calls. They can’t miss any pitches or plays. The competitor in me really enjoys that challenge every day.”



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There is no guarantee of being re-hired after each season, but her work has been solid and her rise has been steady.

This is Pawol's sixth year in the minors (there was no season due to Covid in 2020). It all began when she was first noticed at clinic by two major league umpires, was offered a chance to try out at a MLB umpire camp, and from that, was sent to compete with 30 others for eight scholarships at the MLB Umpire Training Academy. That led to her being hired as the first female umpire in a decade.

Prior to that, she worked as a baseball and softball umpire at all different levels, including college.

When she was hired to work professionally, the National Baseball Hall of Fame took notice. Her first mask and the cap she wore during the Major League Umpire Camp program became part of the "Diamond Dreams" exhibit in Cooperstown.

During her off-season, she's busy with her business, Evolve2Excellence, that offers training to baseball and softball catchers, hitters and umpires. Getting young people involved in officiating is very important to Pawol, which is why in addition to her instructional work, she travels as a speaker to tell her story and pass along the message to students that officiating sports can be a fun, fulfilling experience.

"Playing lots of sports and being under pressure during high school laid a foundation for me to continue to build on as a competitor," she said. "I experienced true competition. Not everyone wins. Working hard to climb a ladder is a powerful

mindset. These lessons have traveled with me through my life. I believe I learned how to apply drive to a disciplined work ethic and not give up on my goals. The amount of work we put in as individuals and as a team to get to those big games wasn't easy. I learned to get better, it took extra practice on my own, outside of team practice, to improve my performance. I learned to struggle through failure or difficulty to improve and achieve goals. All of these lessons learned in high school were extremely valuable while I was competing in umpire school, then in the Gulf Coast League, and over the past years in professional baseball."

As one who grew up as a beneficiary of Title IX, the federal legislation passed in 1972 that created unprecedented educational and athletic equality for women, Pawol's umpiring career has become a source of inspiration for young women in an age where it's difficult to get people interested in officiating sports.

"It's really fun and enjoyable to be a role model for girls and women," she said in another interview. "It's a great job."



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