

# In pursuit of the perfect game

North Shore bred umpire rises to top of international softball officiating organization.

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North Shore native Tonya Ribalkin, 31, is the youngest umpire ever to become certified by the International Softball Federation, making her a good bet to officiate the Olympics, if softball is someday reinstated after taking a curtain call in Beijing last summer.

But surging to the top of her field, as a rare female in the world of umpiring no less, is not really her prime motivation.

"I've never worked a perfect game," Ribalkin, a Grade 8 teacher in Coquitlam, says in an interview. "The day I do I walk off the ball diamond for good."

Ribalkin was urged to give umping a try in 1991, aged 13, by her father John Ribalkin, also a high-level ump.

She was grounded at the time, so she figured she had not much to lose.

"I thought it was a good way to get out of the house," she recalls, with a laugh.

Umps catch ample abuse, and even as a young teen, Ribalkin was not spared. In fact she didn't really find her groove until '94, sometimes pleading with her father to miss games. But he pushed her to fulfill her obligations, and Ribalkin eventually developed the chops needed to quickly rise up the umping ranks, achieving her Level V certification in 2005 and winning certification with the ISF in 2008.

She says she's never had a coach kick dirt at her, but she's had her run-ins, and had to run some coaches out of games.

"You have to have a strong backbone," she says. "(Criticism) has to be like water off a duck's back."

Calling the perfect game is actually an unattainable goal, she says, since even if you make perfect calls by an objective standard, there are still endless different perspectives on a play, meaning someone will always be unsatisfied, be it player, coach or fan. That's where game management and people skills come in. When you make a call, you have to be able to explain it if necessary, and get the game back on with minimal disruption and complaint.

"It's a work in progress," Ribalkin says. "Whenever people leave the park and can't remember who the umpires were, you know (you've called) a good game."

Along with the confidence to make a call and stand by it, a sense of humour is a great personality trait for an ump.

"You have to be able to laugh at yourself," Ribalkin says. "Sometimes we're wrong – not often."

Ribalkin has called plenty of big international tournaments, and will be Umpire-in-Chief for the Canadian bantam girls' championships in



**FAMILY BUSINESS** - Tonya Ribalkin poses with her father John Ribalkin, also a high-level umpire, after gaining her International Softball Federation certification. *Submitted photo*

Oakville, Ont. this summer. She's also an instructor for Softball BC clinics and is chairperson of Softball Canada's Women in Officiating forum.

Ribalkin says she's particularly interested in recruiting women and young officials, and she likes to get the message out that besides two teams on the field, the third team, the officials, get to enjoy the sport and camaraderie, just like players.

She adds not many students know they can earn credits for umping, along with cash and tangible life skills.

"It's a great source of confidence in knowing when you do something well," she says. And not surprisingly, learning how to control a game crosses over into Ribalkin's other 9-to-5 job.

"It certainly helps with class room management," she says, chuckling.

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