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Taylor volunteer umps one World Series, announces the next

When Dan Watkins commits to something, he fulfills that commitment.

Even if it means finishing an even bigger commitment and driving half a day to get to the other one.

Watkins, a Taylor resident and area school teacher, was selected to work the Senior League Softball World Series August 8-15 in Lower Sussex, Delaware. The Senior League is for 15- and 16-year-olds, one age group higher than the Junior League (13-14), which is the age group of the baseball World Series in Taylor.

Watkins was the only Michigan umpire selected to work the Senior World Series. He called balls and strikes in 11 games over the course of a week.

The tournament ended about 2 p.m. Saturday. Watkins said he jumped in his car and drove 11 hours back to Taylor, arriving about 1 a.m. He changed shirts in the morning and showed up about 10 a.m. at World Series Field at Taylor's Heritage Park – ready to fulfill his commitment as one of the field announcers for the Junior League World Series.

Watkins, 54, may be the only person to volunteer to work at two World Series in different capacities – that's two separate World Series in two days.

Working a World Series is many umpires' dream, but announcing the first two games of the Taylor World Series was important to Watkins as well.

"I just enjoy doing it," he said. "I committed from the get-go. When I first got selected (to ump the World Series), I thought there might be a conflict in the dates and I thought I'd have to turn it down. Then I found out I'd only have to miss the opening ceremonies and I have no official duties there."

If Watkins was somehow forced to be late, his son Jim was ready to fill in as announcer. That's nothing new for the members of the Watkins family, who are among hundreds of volunteers that make the World Series work.

Wife Marcia and sons Jim and David generally assist "Chef Barney" Sprague, who prepares meals for the players and volunteers. Both younger Watkins are substitute announcers who also work the consolation games held later in the week.

For the last three years, Watkins also has served as the "red hat" timing coordinator for ESPN, which broadcasts the final game of the World Series.

As for the umpiring, Watkins has been calling balls and strikes for 12 years this go-round. He umped about 10 more years before his sons were "sports age," then took time off to coach them.

Now, he's back and he's experienced enough to umpire a World Series. Since about 95 percent of the games he umps are fast-pitch softball, it was only natural that the invitation to ump a World Series came from the softball tournament in Delaware.

The fact is, the entire Watkins family has been or is into umping. Wife Marcia is a former umpire. Once she injured her Achilles tendon, she switched over to scorekeeping.

Oldest son Mark, age 30, has gotten back into umping near his home in Lynchburg, Virginia. Jim, 29, just worked the Big League softball regional tournament in Kalamazoo – his second regional – and has been recommended to work a World Series. David, 24, just worked his first state tournament in softball in Lincoln Park.

Watkins said he has had the opportunity to ump with all three of his sons.

"Having all four of us was kind of a neat moment," he said.

Watkins said hurrying back from Delaware to Taylor was a no-brainer.

"People say thanks for volunteering, but I feel I get more than I give," he said. "I get to watch the kids play as an announcer or an umpire. There is a lot of relaxation and you get to meet a whole community of people."

"I drove back here because it was fun," he said. "We enjoy what we do. It's hard to beat the fun you have."

-- Dave Gorgon

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