

Honec makes the call

JMU grad takes the plate as pro baseball umpire BY DAVID DRIVER

The High Desert Mavericks and San Jose Giants, two minor league baseball teams that had already played a 140-game regular season, earned a spot in the Class A California League championship series in 2009. **Tom Honec ('05, '07M)** also was rewarded with a berth in the title series, though the JMU grad was not a player, coach or athletics trainer.

Honec, from Manassas, Va., was an umpire last season in the California League and was one of four umps selected to work the finals. By total coincidence San Jose won the title with a shortstop named Brian Bocock, a Harrisonburg native and the son of former JMU infielder **Tom Bocock ('82)**.

"It is a good reward," Honec says. "The thing about the finals – you have worked 140 games, and at the end they select umpires to work it. It's an honor to work those championship games. It is much cooler to see the development of the players and your colleagues from that first series, back in April, to game 140.

"It is really more of a treat," adds Honec, who was joined on the finals crew by Spencer Flynn, Nathan Thompson and Tim Eastman. "You get to spend time with co-workers. I would say each of them is a close friend of mine."

Honec, who earned his M.B.A. from JMU in 2007, has made a rapid rise as a professional baseball umpire. He started umpiring baseball games around the age of 12 in Brentsville Youth Baseball, a league that his mother helped to run in Northern Virginia. He eventually umpired in the Rockingham County Baseball League and the Shenandoah Valley League while attending JMU.

He attended the Jim Evans Baseball Academy of Professional Umpiring in 2007 and did his first season of pro ball that year in the rookie Gulf Coast and Appalachian leagues. He moved up to the full-season low Class A Midwest League in 2008 and was promoted to the high Class A California League last season. Honec begins the 2010 season in the Class AA Eastern League, which includes teams in Richmond and Bowie, Md.

Flynn says Honec has a strong field presence as an umpire. "You can't walk all over him, that is for sure," says Flynn, who has

been a pro ump since 2006. "He knows why he is out there. He is out there to get better. He is working on something every day. After the game we talk for at least half an hour on how we could have done things better."

Eastman adds, "Tom works hard and wants to get everything right." Eastman worked with Honec in the Gulf Coast League in 2007. "Tom strives for excellence. He never takes a play off. He has a dry sense of humor. He is cool, calm and collected" as a home plate umpire.

During the 2009 season Honec worked a 21-inning game that lasted more than seven hours and called games that featured Major League veterans Manny Ramirez and Vladimir Guerrero, who were working themselves back into shape in the minors. Honec and Flynn drove about 23,000 miles to and from games. During regular-season games at the Class A level there are two umpires for each game, while the Cal League uses four for the championship series. That is the same number used for every regular-season game in the Major Leagues.

"There are two or three [other umps] out there and 50 to 55 team personnel on the field," Honec says. "They ride in packs. They don't travel individually like we do. There is a lot of emotion out on the field, and you have to look beyond that and guide the game and have control of the game. When people are in slumps, reactions can be overdone. You have to be on your toes and think calmly and quickly and act decisively. That is a tough aspect of the game. You

have to be that consistent model out there for the entire game."

Does Honec have a goal for himself as an umpire? "I don't think you can set a goal at a certain level," he says. "You have to set the goal of development. Once that development slows, is that the level? Is that goal the Major Leagues? I don't know. I have never worked in the Major Leagues. It is not a job where you can say I want to be the CEO of the company. You want to practice excellence at every level you are at. Wherever that takes me will help me develop as a person." ■



"You're out!" Tom Honec ('05, '07M) works home plate during a game in the Class A California League during the 2009 season. Honec was one of four umpires chosen to work the California League championship series last season.