

Pirates/MLB

Baseball Tech: A whole new ballgame, or is it?

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By Robert Dvorchak, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Mike Morizio attends a baseball game, he sits back with a hot dog and a beverage to appreciate the timeless charms and uniform dimensions of the game.

"I go to enjoy it," Mr. Morizio said. "I have to focus on technical issues all day long. When I go to the ballpark, the old me comes back. Baseball has always been in my blood."

Away from the park, however, Mr. Morizio is at the forefront of a revolution applying 21st century technology to the countless numbers and statistics that the game generates.

It's part of a continuing revolution that has made iPods and PDAs (personal digital assistants) as much a part of the game as peanuts and popcorn. Baselines of pristine white chalk now co-exists with baselines of computer data.

Mr. Morizio's company, ScoutAdvisor Corp. of Tampa, has created a computer program to manage information in a sort of one-stop shopping center for the gathering and interpretation of baseball data. Thirteen major league teams, including six of the eight teams in the playoffs and both World Series participants last season, are among his clients. And he has been a fixture of baseball's winter meetings for the past six years.

"A software program does not a World Series winner make," Mr. Morizio said. "But it's safe to say that teams that use it are making the best decisions. Technology has collapsed the amount of time between gathering information and making decisions. Decisions are being made more and more quickly."

Scouts and laptops

Gone are the days when a sun-tanned, leather-skinned scout would jot down observations in a notebook and phone the information to management.

Scouts are more likely to use laptop computers to file encrypted reports to their general managers, who also have access at the click of a mouse to daily game reports, box scores, injury updates, transactions, contact information for player agents, and grading systems for players in the minor league or amateurs who may be draft worthy.

Baseball is still a game of 60 feet, 6 inches from the pitching rubber to home plate, 90 feet between bases arranged in a diamond pattern and nine players on a side -- except for the designated hitter. But baseball is now a \$5.5 billion a year business, and teams are competing with big-spenders like the Yankees and Red Sox.

"What's changed is the money," said John Mozeliak, assistant general manager of the Cardinals. "ScoutAdvisor helps the St. Louis Cardinals make the right decisions on players."

If you minimize the risk on your investment, you get the most on your return."

The first team to purchase ScoutAdvisor was the Oakland A's in 2001. Now on board are the Braves, Orioles, Red Sox, Tigers, Astros, Angels, Mets, Yankees, Padres, and Mariners.

Just about every team is computerized to some degree. The Pirates, for example, have worked with IBM through the years to develop an in-house system.

"Like any competitive industry, we're all looking for an edge," said Dave Littlefield, the general manager and director of baseball operations for the Pirates. "We want as much information as we can get, but you have to be sure the information going in is correct."

Video has been part of the game for years, but is light years away from the days of the Padres' Tony Gwynn lugging his own VCR on the road to study his at-bats.

With computerization, every pitcher can study every pitch thrown to check on such details as release points. Likewise, every hitter can study every swing.

Does anyone really have an advantage? It still comes down to the human factor.

"You do have to perform with a clear mind. If a hitter is thinking too much, or has too many things on his mind, he can't do the things he has to do, like get the bat off his shoulder," Mr. Littlefield said.

A hand-held iPod can hold five seasons' worth of at-bats for a particular player, and Todd Helton of the Colorado Rockies has every one of his hits since the 2000 season condensed into the palm of his hand. The Rockies are so hi-tech they are called the Pod Squad.

Hanging onto the old ways

The whiz-bang gizmos aren't for everybody. Old-school players like Jason Kendall, formerly of the Pirates and now with the A's, keeps his thought process as simple as possible without gadgetry: "See the ball. Hit the ball."

A computer like IBM's Deep Blue can be programmed to beat a grand master in chess. But no computer can throw a called strike by Jason Bay, can it?

Actually, there is a device called the ProBatter PX2 pitching simulator. Using patented technology, the machine projects a DVD-quality image of a real pitcher onto an 8x10-foot screen, either throwing from a windup or from the stretch. At the moment of release, an actual ball is fired through a small hole in the screen simulating fastballs, sliders, sinkers, cutters, curves and change-ups. The top speed is 100 mph.

The Yankees have purchased the system for their big league and minor league clubs.

Luddites of the world can take heart that not everybody embraces the high-tech age. A device called QuesTec was developed from the technology used by the military to track missiles and was used to evaluate the accuracy of umpires calling balls and strikes. When he was with the Diamondbacks in 2001, pitcher Curt Schilling was fined \$15,000 for wielding a bat to demolish a camera connected to QuesTec. Umpires everywhere rejoiced.

From a fan's point of view, baseball has embraced the new age and profited from it.

"Ballparks used to look like the eighth wonder of the world before the new ones went back to some traditional roots. Technology has kept right on growing," said Dinn Mann, executive vice president of content for Major League Baseball Advanced Media.

"People once wondered if baseball would lose something when games were first broadcast on the radio and then were broadcast on TV. Now every game is on the Internet. It has all served to make the games more popular and relevant. Technology only enhances the desirability of the product," he added.

Every game played by every team will be captured on video for broadcast on the Internet -- for a cost of \$89.95. In 2002, the computer video was the size of a postage stamp. Now it's full screen and matches the quality of a standard TV broadcast. The video can also be downloaded and can be accessed on demand through a wireless device.

"It causes the world to shake a little bit. We're passengers on the technology train," said Mr. Mann. "This is going to be a breakthrough year for fans in terms of choice."

There are subtle variations for rotisserie league geeks who can identify a list of individual players they want to track on video. If, say, you have Freddie Sanchez on your fantasy league team, the computer will flash an alert on the screen to say he's on deck so you can watch him bat. Too bad it wasn't around when Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle were chasing Babe Ruth's home run record in 1961.

For fans who just want to listen -- and remember the days when an ear plug for a transistor radio powered by a 9-volt battery was a quantum leap forward? -- the audio feeds of every game played by every team are available. Options include listening to the home or away announcers.

Not only does Major League Baseball have its own web site, all 30 teams have their own sites offering features, statistics, streaming video, audio, and more. On an average day during the season, there will be 8 million hits on those sites.

"Fans of this sport keep track of new developments with a zeal that borders on the religious," Mr. Mann said. "This sport is as much a part of American life as any sport you can name."

For now, at least, rules ban computers from the dugout, and the phone from the dugout to the bullpen is not yet wireless. But in an age where fans can second-guess managers in chat rooms while the game is still going on, the good old days were the years before radar guns measured pitch speeds and programs kept track of pitch counts and pitch types.

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