

Cords, Chains and Bibs

From baseball to track and field, the world of sports takes too long to catch up to the world of technology



BOB LATHAM

One of the highlights at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas this year was the announcement by T-Mobile and Major League Baseball that they were embarking on a project to actually do something about the dilapidated and outdated dugout-to-bullpen telephone lines in major league stadiums. To which I say, "What on earth took them so

long?" The sight of managers going to a dugout phone with a cord to get a reliever in the bullpen to warm up has become almost comical in how old-fashioned it is. I have a hard time believing that allegiance to the landline was motivated by security concerns—the fear that an opposing team might be able to access a mobile communication. For one thing, bullpens operate in full view of everyone in the stadium and the opposing team. When a relief pitcher starts to warm up, we can all see him. Thus, it is hard to imagine what classified information is being transmitted from the manager to the bullpen coach. But even so, President Obama has used a Blackberry for the last four years, and "Get the southpaw up and throwing" is not exactly akin to "Send in the SEALs" on the national security level.

I think it simply takes too long for the world of techies and the world of sports to meet. But we have to foster continued mating of the two. If only Steve Jobs had been a major league manager or a football coach. Surely there is a better way in football to measure for a first down than a sideline official using his eye-crometer to randomly put down a stake at what he thinks is the line of scrimmage, then stretching a chain 30 feet long to another stake at the first-down distance, then having to run with that chain all the way across the field and use a chalk line—which itself may or may not be straight (particularly in high school football)—to try to determine whether a first down has been achieved by a quarter of an inch. When the TV audience watching an NFL or a major college game has a better idea of whether a first down was made based on the virtual yellow line used in almost all major football broadcasting, something should clearly be done. Simply adapt the television technology so that it can be used on the field.

In track and field, Usain Bolt can run faster than any human ever has, with the latest technology in shoes that weigh less than a feather and form-fitting, aerodynamic track gear that is designed to make sure there is not even

1/100th of a second added to his time. But he still has to pull out safety pins and put a paper bib on his chest. Really? We are still doing that?

There are signs of hope. For instance, on a ski trip in March, I was pleased to see that ski resorts are doing away with the very burdensome wire that you had to put through a zipper on your ski jacket and fold the sticky sides of a tag together, one that generally stays on your jacket until the next ski season. Rather, they are moving to a smart card that can be read by a scanner as you go through the ski lift. And in tennis, of all sports—old-school, staid tennis—the professional ranks use what has become reliable technology to quickly and authoritatively determine whether a ball was in or out. The tennis eye-in-the-sky lets viewers at home, the crowd in the stadium and the players all see what happened, almost in real time, which has eliminated many distracting debates and frustrations. Nevertheless, I am still pleased that it came along after John McEnroe's career ended, or we would have been deprived of many a memorable outburst.

THE SIGHT OF MANAGERS GOING TO A DUGOUT PHONE WITH A CORD HAS BECOME COMICAL IN HOW OLD-FASHIONED IT IS.

However, too many sports cling to outdated traditions like the Vatican, with its primitive method of communicating that a new pope has been chosen. Even then, the tradition of white smoke or black smoke coming out of the Sistine Chapel from the burning of the ballots of the cardinals had to be reconsidered when the smoke for Pope John Paul II's selection came out gray (the papal equivalent of Jerome Bettis calling "he-tails" in a 1998 NFL game, which referee Phil Luckett insisted was "heads" and Bettis claimed was "tails"). In an ever so subtle nod to technology, the College of Cardinals now burns chemical cartridges to produce white smoke or black smoke. Why Twitter would not be a more efficient way to communicate the news awaits explanation.

We can only hope that all Cardinals—including those of St. Louis, Phoenix, Louisville and the Vatican—embrace the digital age with a bit more gusto and imagination. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and an International Rugby Board member. A compilation of his best columns titled "Winners & Losers: Rants, Riffs and Reflections on the World of Sports," is available in the Media Zone at SportsTravelMagazine.com.