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Has the Replay Taken the Fun Out of Watching Sports?

On Sports

By JAY CASPIAN KANG MAY 3, 2016

In recent years, I've caught a rather nasty case of replay anxiety, an increasingly common malady in American sports. The afflicted cannot watch a long touchdown run, a buzzer beater or a no-hitter reach the bottom of the ninth inning without worrying that the unfolding drama will be interrupted by the sight of umpires and referees trotting — always a bit too slowly and dutifully — to the replay monitors to review a call. Sitting on my couch, my eyes darting around the screen, I feel the strain of switching between two parallel realities: what the ref sees and what the machine knows.

I feel bad for the refs, who, for the most part, are company men in an industry that desperately wants to replace their jobs with automatons. Management, in this case, seems determined to put the ref's flaws on full display: Every time the ref makes a mistake — especially one that alters the outcome of a game — it's played over and over again on the giant glowing Jumbotron that hangs over his head, on the television broadcasts and then again, throughout the night, on "SportsCenter." By the time he wakes up the next morning, his gaffe will have been thoroughly dissected by the forensic experts of YouTube, who stretch every suspicious five-second clip into a

meticulously edited short documentary, complete with a menacing violin soundtrack and enraged, caps-locked captions like: “NOTICE NO FOUL WAS CALLED EVEN THOUGH REFEREE X WAS STANDING TWO FEET AWAY!!!”

Even the quants have it out for refs. In 2005, John Ball, a data analyst and rabid Houston Rockets fan, had a fit of referee paranoia. The Rockets had just lost a series to the Dallas Mavericks. Jeff Van Gundy, the Rockets’ coach, had been fined a record $100,000 for insinuating that the Mavericks’ owner, Mark Cuban, had persuaded the referees to call more offensive fouls on the Rockets center Yao Ming. Ball ran a popular Yao fan site at the time, and he later began to compile a database that tracked information on referees’ habits. Along with a small team of fellow analysts, Ball watched hundreds of hours of tape to note all the times when a referee missed a call or ignored a violation. They found that there were roughly 20 to 30 bad calls per game and that each ref has predictable patterns of behavior — some call more charging fouls, others hate to blow the whistle on traveling violations and others give more leniency to superstars. Some N.B.A. teams now use the behavioral patterns Ball tracks to develop game plans around referees. Ball’s data, for example, showed that Derek Fisher, the squat, blockheaded former point guard and recently fired Knicks coach, had an unusual talent for drawing illegal screen calls on his opponents from susceptible referees.

Referee scrutiny now extends all the way to the highest levels of sports. Since Adam Silver took over as the N.B.A.’s commissioner in 2014, the league has gone to great lengths to make refereeing as transparent as possible. The N.B.A. now releases on its website daily “Last Two Minute Reports,” which review the performance of its referees in any close game. These regular inspections appear to have contributed to some improvements: In 2007, a study by researchers from Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania clearly showed that white refs called fouls on black players at a greater rate than on their white counterparts. By 2014, a follow-up study found that the racial

inequity in fouls called had completely disappeared.

But all the scrutiny has also created a hitch in the way we watch sports. When Villanova won the N.C.A.A. men's basketball championship in April on a last-second shot, the announcers and referees, amid the revelry on the court, had to double-check whether the shot was released in time. After nearly every touchdown in the N.F.L., the announcer punctuates his call with a relieved "and there are no penalty flags!" — which then gives the audience permission to celebrate or moan. There's an implicit cost analysis in these moments: We pause or at least hiccup in our response to make sure that the whole thing won't be overturned upon review.

The pursuit of official certainty, in other words, has bred an epistemological uncertainty. I no longer worry that a game will swing on a bad call, but I constantly worry that I will end up cheering for a fiction. The escapism of sports — an alternate world governed by its own arbitrary logic — dissipates, and I find myself switching my attention among the referee's calls, the replays and the TV's corrections. It feels as if some know-it-all child is nudging me in the ribs, reminding me that what I'm watching is a game played by fallible men governed by an arbitrary set of rules enforced by other, fatter fallible men.

Last month, I watched Jake Arrieta, the 30-year-old Chicago Cubs pitcher whose brilliance over the past year should be an inspiration to late bloomers everywhere, throw a no-hitter in Cincinnati. With two outs in the bottom of the ninth, Arrieta got ahead 0-2 in the count on Eugenio Suarez. According to CSN PitchTrax, the updating strike zone in the corner of the screen on the Cubs broadcast, Arrieta's next pitch was a big breaking ball that hit the outside of the plate, but it received no reaction from the umpire. "Wow, he easily could have rung him up there!" one of the announcers yelled, which in turn called forth in me an increasingly familiar neurosis: If Arrieta's next pitch was roped out into center field for a base hit, the no-hitter-that-should-have-been-a-no-hitter would be ruined. I worried,

selfishly, about my own role in witnessing this marginally historic moment — would the 10 minutes I had invested in watching the bottom of the ninth be wasted on account of this no-good umpire?

Arrieta's next pitch was a fastball that nicked the top corner of the CSN PitchTrax and was once again ignored by the umpire, drawing more protest from the announcers. On the fifth pitch of the at-bat, Suarez popped the ball up to right field, Arrieta did one of those sweaty, lumbering half-jump, half-fist-pump celebrations that mark the end of so many no-hitters and the Cubs all gathered in the infield to slap one another on the back. The game was over — two pitches *after* it should have been over, according to CSN PitchTrax.

Fans' relative patience with these rituals of correction depends, most likely, on whether they want the uninterrupted thrill of watching a big play without self-consciousness or the comforting, constantly updating reality of live pitch tracking. The leagues and the networks have chosen the certainty of the androids — and it's hard to blame them, given the incalculable harm that any referee scandal brings down on a sport. But automation only breeds more automation, and more rigid refereeing changes the style of play.

Under the watch of increasingly infallible referees, pitchers who built their reputations as "strike-throwing machines" by continually tricking the umpire will have to become actual strike-throwing machines. Older N.B.A. players who leveraged their reputations to cheat on defense and get to the free-throw line on offense will have to cede their spots to younger, less creative players who can still perform inside the strictures of the official rule book. Nobody, save gamblers and the suffering fans who mortgage their happiness on their team's success, really wants such a stripped-down, efficient game. Nobody wants to lose the edifying and necessary knowledge that in the aftermath of a crushing defeat there is always someone else to blame.

Sports arguments have always been driven by conflicting versions of what

happened, whether Michael Jordan's push-off on the Utah Jazz's Bryon Russell in Game 6 of the 1998 finals, or the infamous 2002 "tuck rule" game between the New England Patriots and the Oakland Raiders, which put Tom Brady on the path to his first Super Bowl when the refs overturned what was initially called a fumble. Review and referee evaluations, in theory, should not kill off this vital part of fandom (the "tuck rule," after all, was invoked only after a referee review), but there is a difference between arguing and rehashing a referee's fallible interpretation and glumly accepting the readout of the machine. Relying on the referee still allows for a fantasy in which the call went your way. The machine's version of reality offers only the hopeless certainty that your team lost, fair and square.

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