Digital Transformation in Sports Officiating – Current and Future State

With the explosion of Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), Mobility, (apps for streaming), Digital Media (You Tube, Facebook Live, Streaming), and Wearables (Google Glass, Smart Watches**)** a large "**Big Data**" explosion and Digital Transformation has been introduced to our society. Digital transformation is defined as the use of new technologies to drive significant business improvements, taking into account the ever-changing nature of fan/customer demands. While this sounds like something reserved for high-tech businesses, digital transformation is, in fact, crucial for all sports/business adventures.   Conferences and athletic teams are trying to investigate this data in relation to fan behavior, player performance, ticket sales and concessions. Fan engagement has been a major focus on how to keep fans more engaged at events due to more games being televised and streamed LIVE.   Why is fan engagement important to the future of college baseball? **Revenues**.

How does this Current Digital Transformation affect Collegiate Umpiring?

More collegiate games are being televised and viewed due to the expansion of conference networks.   Most college baseball institutions (not just the power 5) today are streaming games live for a greater fan experience. Last season, the Big South Network streamed over 900 live events and surpassed 550,000 unique views that were delivered to their viewers.   With the amount of games being televised and streamed LIVE, it is our responsibility to self evaluate after each game and review plays as needed. Subscribe (invest) in these services and do not rely on a CD ONLY or a phone call from your coordinator in regards to a play or pitch. It should be our mission as umpires to make our profession better and be a leader in Digital Media by entering into the world of technology. The next generation of umpires will embrace these technologies at a higher rate.

We need to create our own personal score card for training. Implement your own means to obtain and evaluate game performances via video or other media means and then take notes and "look" for ways to improve your individual performance.   What can we learn from a personal plate job "scatter chart" of your last plate job? In the 300 plus pitches how many did you get correct? Is 95% a good or bad score? How many did you miss outside, down or up per video?   What pitches are you missing on video and why? Plays at first base, are you calling the close play OUT when he is safe after 10 reviews in slow motion?   If so why-- timing, position, judgment? Why are we not calling the high curve ball a strike when it looks perfect in review on video? By establishing a means to use the media information, we can better our individual performance.
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Virtual Reality and Wearables in Umpiring:

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Replays on the Field: Will digital transformation ever be efficient enough to make use of it on the field?   How can digital transformation change our present process? Example, with Google Glass, as umpires we could have access to an endless amount of footage to determine a play or rule after only a few seconds of delay. Combine this with instant replay, and we could have better officiating in sports. It could also help speed the game along since umpires, for example, don't have to spend an eternity reviewing a play.

More Efficient Training: Instead of running the same old drills at camp and watching film, umpires could use Google Glass for training purposes. As previously mentioned, we could simulate plays, work on situational rotations and have rule interpretations in VR (virtual reality).   Could the new testing be done on VR? Furthermore, umpires could film themselves at a game and make adjustments as needed from a 3D perspective for post game training on position on plays, timing, and angles. Smart Watches are being implemented for players and why not umpires? You could track your scorecard as you go, communicate with crew members, track your hydration levels, umpire performance is key as well on the on the field These are all current and future technologies that we will need to embrace as the game evolves to the next generation of technology for players, fans and umpires.

There is already a movement to implement technologies to replace the home-plate umpire calling pitches by judgment only. An umpire would only be used for safes and outs? Individuals in the booth would communicate whether it's a ball or strike. Are we to that point in umpiring?   Only time and our ability to improve will answer that question.

I hope as your career progresses- that you embrace the Digital Transformation Era in umpiring. Use technology to your favor and improve the quality of the NCAA Baseball Umpire Program as you advance in the postseason.

Good luck in the 2017 Season

Scott Erby