



SPORT | Issue No. 13 | *What is the future for referees and umpires?*

November 2015

Referees and umpires are a much maligned group of individuals, but a group that sport can not do without.

Digital disruption is a popular topic for business management, consultants and experts. But if the digital world is disrupting traditional business, certainly the digital world is disrupting sport and the role of referees and umpires.

Imagine in how many games of sport over the last few hundred years the result would have been different had there been an action reply on a massive score board, a TMO, a Snicko, a HotSpot and Hawk-Eye.

One of the strangest sights in sport surely has to be a referee standing on the field directing what camera angles he wants to see on the big screen and looking at the replays at what he is being asked to referee.

Increasingly the decisions of referees are being scrutinised. Referees and umpires are being told to go to the third match official or the third umpire or the video screen or assistant referee or someone else to assist in the process.

Watching a game from the 60's or 70's (of just about any sport) appears almost farcical as we see the game move quickly with referees and umpires making decisions without assistance and the game going on. No doubt many of these decisions were wrong, but the game went on.

The question that I ask is whether or not with this enhanced digital assistance the game is actually enhanced?

Clearly the intention of using technology is to assist in getting decisions right, but the technology has to be

supported by the Rules. There are lots of situations where technology could arguably assist but is not allowed to.

Despite the intention being that technology will avoid the really terrible decision, that is not necessarily the case. Rules have been provided to define in what circumstances certain aspects of the technology or assistance can be used. There have even been limits placed on how many times technology can be used to review decision, such as in cricket and tennis, where there are a limited range of opportunities if you get it wrong.

Ironically in tennis the technology known as Hawk-Eye has enhanced the game as it brings heightened excitement to the audience to watch the replay and showing the ball miss or hitting the line by millimetres. The other thing technology has shown is how often the umpires (dealing with balls travelling at often well over 140km per hour) get it right.

However in other sports, where the game stops for an interminable length of time whilst replay after replay has been watched, this is not, in the minds of many supporters, enhancing the game.

Another serious by-product is the fact that technology can prove after the event that an umpire got it wrong. Surely that doesn't advance anyone's interest, particularly the sport and the team. Part of the magic and mystery of sport was the opportunity for supporters after the match to argue about whether their team was duded by various decisions.

There are certain opportunities such as the tennis balls hitting a court where digitalisation may well be able to

bring certainty, but there are lots of other circumstances where they can only assist and there is still a margin for error.

A classic example is the pileup in a rugby game where simply because there is no vision, the referee or the third referee is unable to determine whether a try was scored, but it may well have been very very likely a try has been scored. There are other situations where a player may be given or deprived a try by a millimetre because vision is available.

One of the great aspects of sport is its unpredictability. Whilst we would like referees and umpires to get it right all of the time, that is never going to happen. There was a time where we thought that technology would ensure that umpires and referees get it right all of the time, but it is becoming very clear and certainly with the current levels of technology, that is not possible.

There has been great focus on the referees in the Rugby World Cup. Rugby is a very fluid game with many rules, which are open to arbitrary interpretation. Many penalties awarded in rugby could arguably not be awarded, or in many cases awarded to the other side. There are countless instances of times when a penalty should have been awarded and simply isn't. That is the nature of the game.

Penalties given in the last minute of the game seem so much more important or significant than penalties given in the first minute of the game, but clearly purely mathematically, all penalty goals kicked are of equal value!

It seems remarkable to say but perhaps it would be better to return to simpler times, but the technology genie is out of the bottle and cannot and will not be returned.

Perhaps in the future we will see in goal areas for rugby league and rugby union created in such a way that when the compound of the ball makes contact with the ground in the in goal area the computer will award a try, even if it is under a pile of a dozen very large sweaty men!



John Mullins

Partner

Mullins Lawyers

t +61 7 3224 0210

jmullins@mullinslaw.com.au

