THINKING DATA, ANALYTICS & SPORTS

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What do you know about analytics?

What do you want to know about analytics or launch angles or CORSI statistics or plus and minus numbers?

Today's sports world provides fans with the ability to break things down like never before as fans are able to track things daily, identify trends, talk in comprehensive detail with fanciful new terminology about the games we watch in more compartmentalized ways than ever before. I guess this is a good thing?

Or, is it?

Look it, I have no issues with many of the things that allow people to explore these games while being able to dissect so many things today that were never even thought about in years gone by, in fact, I'll concede that sometimes I find myself taking part in these things as I try to obtain what is supposed to be a truer reflection of the things I'm watching on the field, on the court, or on the ice. I find much of the new statistical information about the world of sports to be interesting and even somewhat entertaining in its own right.

On the other hand, I'm not sure how important many of these things are to the average sports fan, or, why these things should so *personally* factor into the games we all watch. In fact, one could make the argument that as we pay so much attention to things like WAR in baseball (if you even understand it) or CORSI in hockey (ditto), can it be suggested that these things prevent us from simply enjoying the games through the eyes of a fan — and that it can possibly diminish the overall satisfaction we get as spectators of the games played if we think too much about it?

Asking in yet another way; is it possible for sports fans to have information overload while being spectators of the games we relish?

Speaking for myself, I know that I'll sometimes be watching a game and find myself trying to remember and pay attention to so many of the statistical aspects which are now so prevalent and talked about — that I find myself missing many of the *'pure sports'* moments, or, the entertainment features of the games, things that I would normally be content with, but now, some of these things are taking a backseat to the wide-ranging minutia cluttering my brain during a telecast. If I'm not careful and don't pull back from the wide-assortment of statistical mumbo-jumbo inside my head, I sometimes feel like I'm studying for a test instead of simply watching the games and enjoying them on their own merit as I have done for years.

I'm not claiming that much of this 'new' information isn't interesting, or even needed, on the contrary, as I mentioned in a paragraph above, I find much of it to be enlightening and there can be no question that it opens up entire new thought processes to how the games are played and won or lost as we look back at contests in retrospect.

But do I really need to be interested or pay attention to the 'spin-rate' of an individual pitcher as he's making his way through the 4th inning to make up my mind as to whether or not he's pitching a good game or not? No more so than I don't need the exit velocity of a 450-foot home run to know that the hitter got all of the pitch, right?

While some people, average fans, are into this kind of stuff and can watch the games while still including these things in the forefront of their minds (and I have NO idea how they do this) while also finding the games entertaining, I, on the other hand, find that if I'm too cognizant of this statistical baggage within the moment, that it then reduces my enjoyment of the games in a very big way.

The statistical revolution that sports have found itself in over the last decade-plus is something that I think front office executives throughout the sports world are mindful of and much more concerned about on a daily basis than the average ordinary fan, and with good reason. You may throw in player-agents as well, what with there need to dig in deep to show how their clients are contributing (or not) below the surface, down to levels where the average person never goes because rarely is there a reason to.

I guess what I'm saying is that I get the sense that more and more it is becoming increasingly difficult to simply turn to the games while enjoying them as fans with rooting interests absent any of the disparate and multi-tiered maze of statistics and underlying analytics that can distract and take away from pretty straight-forward reasons as to why we're sports fans in the first place and why we savor and appreciate the world of sports to begin with.

So far as baseball is concerned, there is now a litany of things that we're routinely programmed to think about as we watch the games. If we're watching games on television, it's impossible these days to not be bombarded with one element after another to the point of forgetting that we sat down to watch a game because of the game itself and for no other reason. The game, and only the game, the game we *thought* we knew.

I also get the feeling in some quarters, and geeky seam-heads are probably more responsible for this than anyone else, but I get the feeling that if we're *not* watching the games on several different levels all having to do with the sabermetrics angle of the sport, then we're to be discounted as fans who aren't nearly as enlightened or as knowledgeable as today's more sophisticated guardians of the games.

Whereas in the past we were satisfied with the back of a players baseball card that told us a players home run totals along with RBI's and batting average, now, we're over-indulged with a slew of other statistics that it's almost hard to believe they can print all of the information on the back of a single baseball card. Wait a second. Who the hell collects baseball cards anymore…or even knows what a baseball card even is?

I digress.

I guess that some of my thoughts on this stuff have me showing my age in some respects. However, the last thing I want people to think is that I'm reluctant to embrace some new aspects of the sports world or that I'm unable to be pliable when it comes to new ways of thinking on some things – I certainly can be. But when *pure sports* starts to feel more like a video game and when the texture of sports begins to become too impersonal and cursory — this is where I start to recoil a bit.

I fell in love with sports because of the unscripted natural theater that took hold of me and wouldn't let go. I fell in love with sports because of the unbridled spontaneity it regularly possessed. I'm not saying that these features are no longer a part of the sports climate, they are, but what I am saying is that with the oceans and oceans of data being presented so consistently, I find myself wondering if sports is being stripped of its fundamental and organic aesthetics in exchange for an environment that sometimes feels like the games have been moved inside a laboratory and under the observation of people wearing white coats.

In terms of some specific sports, is what we're seeing in regard to some sweeping changes in styles and strategies the direct result of the deep analytical culture that has taken root?

Baseball has become, in many ways, decidedly one-dimensional in the minds of many long-time fans who yearn for a time and place when the game was more well-rounded and diversified. Today's game has at its core, two main ingredients. The home run and the strikeout. Along with defensive shifting, baseball, it may be argued, has become a more predictable game than ever before, and let's not forget that its almost impossible to predict baseball!

The intricacies of baseball, the subtle yet crucial little things, have become so less common within in the sport, and, in this person's opinion the game is less as the result of these changes.

The art of bunting, the hit and run, hitting the ball the other way, the stolen base, not to mention an abundance of players with a seeming abhorrence to master the basic fundamentals of the game, has made the game far less resonant with many people. Has the introduction, if not the overemphasis on stats and data been the cause of all of this?

I love the NBA and have been a fan of the league since the early 1970's, but I'll admit, today's NBA is a game I'm trying to adjust to as best I can in the midst of a changing environment that is pretty unrecognizable from only 3-4 years ago.

I wouldn't blame anyone if they told me that watching today's NBA game too often resembles an NBA skills-shooting competition. Let me ask you, at what point does the NBA introduce the 4-point line?

Much like baseball is identified by two central themes these days, the home run, and the strikeout, similarly, the NBA game primarily features dual factors as well, the 3-point shot, and the layup.

If you watch a lot of today's NBA, you will see very little of anything more than those two elements. Defense? Forget it. The mid-range jumper? All but eradicated from teams playbooks. But points scored over 4-quarters of play? I see more games now with teams scoring more points today than I did while watching an ABA Spirits Of St. Louis versus Kentucky Colonels game back in 1976. Is today's NBA the result of the statistical revolution as well?

The NFL? How much time do you have? Quickly I'll just mention that in the NFL playing defense is *thisclose* to becoming a felony crime these days. Balance on both sides of the ball? A rarity, I'm afraid. However, if you like scoring, if you enjoy lots and lots of points, one touchdown after another, passing touchdowns one after the other and more passing yards than you can shake a stick out, this new *Arena League National Football League* will be right up your alley. Running backs? An endangered species. The role of the safety? Let's just say that position isn't the one Ronnie Lott knew.

I think another thing to consider with all of this is today's I want it now society.

People are different these days from 15 and 20-years ago and so too are the way people consume their sports…and the average sports fan, particularly the younger fan within the ages of 18-35 is a much different, and in my opinion, a less knowledgeable fan today than years ago.

The emphasis on Fantasy Sports and the growing popularity of gambling has given rise to the instant gratification generation of sports fans who have no appreciation for the intricate aspects of sports, be it the perfect executed stunt in football or a great backdoor pass under the basket that scores 2-points, or a terrific penalty kill, or even something as mundane as the ability for a right-handed batter being able to hit the ball the other way and allowing the runner on second to move up to third base.

While I can appreciate and get excited about a deep post pattern that goes for 6-points, I am equally appreciative of fullback who takes out a middle linebacker at the point of attack with precision, allowing a running back to squeeze his way into the end zone for a well-orchestrated touchdown run.

But these days it seems that all that many care about are long balls, 8-touchdowns scored per game (preferably all of them through the air), a final in the NBA of 142 to 139, and don't bother to tell them the final of a game played between the Maple Leafs and the Devils unless a least 10 goals were scored between both teams.

Despite the defects in the games I've noted, we'll still watch, we'll still root, we'll still exhaust ourselves emotionally feeling as though we care more about the games won or lost than the participants.

Sports has changed, sports will continue to change, and I guess that no matter what kind of a fan we consider ourselves to be, we'll change along with things no matter what.

I think?