TENNIS:
No Longer A Data Dinosaur

Match "tracking," as it used to be called, and now referred to as "analytics," has been around since coaches had paper and pencil. Yet, until only fairly recently, tennis lagged far behind mainstream sports' long embrace of statistics as an integral part of their cultures, including fan appeal.

So what's all the noise about now that tennis has caught up, and, as it turns out, then some?

It's the development of specialized computers interfacing with 10 overhead court cameras all linked to an extensive back-end database. This current state-of-the-art Hawk-Eye system, now in use in all the big events with the exception of the French Open, where balls leave indisputable marks on the red clay, does far more than just make the close line call decisions. It also spews out a multitude of match-player information, especially when compared to making rudimentary notations on paper by hand. And, most importantly, it provides real-time access to this data, all of which the human eye cannot collectively absorb quickly enough.

We've also taken for granted announcers now being able to inform us, on the spot, about first-serve percentages, second-serve points won, break chances converted, successful forays into the net, court positioning regarding both shot-making and defending for both players, to augment what we're seeing unfold on the screen.

Anyone who has ever attempted to track both players manually – or particularly all four players in doubles – already knows that it's an impossible task. You're so completely absorbed in writing the key stats down you will most likely miss the important feel and flow component of the match itself.

Interestingly, in today's post-match interviews, professional players are often surprised when made aware of these hi-tech driven, difference-making statistics. I'm betting that even Roger Federer, in his four set losing effort to Novak Djokovic at this year's US Open final, would have been startled to learn, right at the match's end, that he made more than 50 forehand errors!

Led by the WTA at this year's Bank of the West Classic in August, a brave new world of player information became available to coaches and players alike, who were able to use data-loaded iPads to glean important peripheral knowledge. Even players' situational tactical tendencies are now within reach.

So exactly when did tennis take its first few baby steps into this new world, and who had the vision?

That would be Bill Jacobson, a one-time South African journeyman player with advanced degrees from Stanford University, who founded Sports Software, Inc. in 1980. The idea for the world's first tennis analysis computer, the CompuTennis CT120, began to take shape.

Like other early coaches, Jacobson was manually tracking his 10-year-old son's matches when the epiphany came. He noted, "In the process of teaching him, I was watching other juniors. I could see things most coaches were missing, because I was looking at patterns [of play], which I began to code by hand."

The development of the CT120 was instrumental in ultimately providing commentators to weave in all the on-court data now at their fingertips. And coaches, led by the legendary Dick Gould of Stanford – John McEnroe's college coach – realized they could now improve players with the benefit of hard statistical feedback.

I first met Jacobson in 1983 at a Fort Myers tournament, back in my junior coaching days. Curious, and always looking for an edge, I had been in contact with him previously and arranged a hands-on CT120 trial during his Florida promotional tour.

Personal computing was still in its infancy. But I was already the proud owner of an Apple II+ that I used for accounting purposes and did not view myself, at the time, as a complete computer dummy.

But even after Jacobson's effortless demonstration and encouragement, and with other curious coaches looking over my shoulder, I quickly realized that it would take some time to become adept at quickly inputting the telling match data, a task handled by specialists in today's tennis world. I ended up missing the match I was watching, just like I did when trying to manually track opposing players by hand.

Women tour players have been able to call for 90-second, on-court coaching visits once per set in designated events for some time now (the ATP men's tour is currently not on board). But this is where it gets tricky in this new age for coaches, increasingly armed with indisputable iPad data and dealing with potentially stubborn, misperceiving players who are paying their salary.

"It doesn't make my job any easier," said Christopher Kas, the coach of German star Sabine Lasicki.

Similarly, imparting information on club lesson courts, a teaching pro has a huge responsibility to prioritize and convey the right information – technical, tactical, and even emotional advice – in the right amount, for the right player. Statistically informed tour coaches are challenged with doing the same but in a mere 90-second time frame permitted only at a set's end.

World #14 Agnieszka Radwanska remains skeptical. "On the court, too much information is not a good idea. All those small details are better for after the match or before the match," she cautioned.

While watching a match this past summer, I witnessed #5 Caroline Wozniacki's father-coach, Piotr, ramble on to her for 90 straight seconds. Both commentators, Pam Shriver and US Fed Cup coach Mary Jo Fernandez, laughed out loud that perhaps that might have been too much information. By the way, Piotr has been quoted that the new data was "very good for coaches," except that he still scribbles notes into a pocket-sized black notebook to scout her opponents.

Jimmy Connors, a product of the 70s wild west era, was summarily relieved from coaching Maria Sharapova a couple of years ago after not joining her on-court for the allowed 90-second coaching chat after she lost the opening set in their very first event together.

Current commentator, Brad Gilbert, author of Winning Ugly, former top 10 player, and coach of Agassi, Roddick and Murray, still primarily believes in the "eye test." He views all the metrics as only a complement for coaches, not a replacement, and that all the previous match historical data may not be nearly as relevant compared to seeing a recent match live in that player tendencies shift over time.

And consider that boatloads of analytics cannot pick up on a service toss that's too low, poor shot selection, under-energized footwork or negative body language, to name a few. Only a "seeing" coach can do that.

In the end, the technological wizardry is a useful, welcome addition and is not going away. But the real question going forward remains: Does the on-court use of analytics, or even on-court coaching itself for that matter, undermine the signature mano-a-mano dynamic of tennis, where players have been traditionally required to sort out difficulties on their own?

I say yes, it does, but what else would you expect from someone who grew up wearing all white playing with a clunky Jack Kramer autograph strung with Bow Brand gut.

Your call. ▌≋

Jak Beardsworth, USPTA Elite Pro, is an Associate Pro at the Twin Isles Country Club in Punta Gorda. He is the author of More Than Just The Strokes, has presented seminars to tennis pros worldwide, and has worked with Grand Slam champions and Davis Cup captains. Non-member coaching available. www. JakBeardsworthTennis.com