

Ice Hockey's New Televised Surveillance System



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Ice hockey is a cruel game. Unlike other international sports involving a projectile of some sort, at no point in a hockey game are you guaranteed possession of the projectile. After every goal in soccer, touchdown in football or basket in basketball, the rules stipulate that the other side get a chance to do something with the ball. In tennis, volleyball, and other net and racket sports, this even-handedness actually mandates that it is only after you have delivered the ball to your opponent, and it is clear that no response is forthcoming, that you are deemed to have scored. Even baseball—whose disregard for time and scoring limits allows that every game has the possibility of going on forever—is nonetheless structured around alternating possessions regulated by set numbers of innings and outs. Change of possession is the fundamental punctuation of most major sports, providing each with its sense of drama as well as

demonstrating its particular concept of fairness.

In hockey, on the other hand, the puck is brought back out to center ice after every score for a free drop between two players, one from each opposing team: the face-off. In theory, if a hockey team had an indomitable face-off artist, errorless puck handlers and an expert scorer, they could play an entire game within the rules of the sport with their opponents ever touching the puck, save for the goaltender fishing each goal out of his net. (And he isn't even required to do that, although he usually does.) No other sport that I know of allows for such utter dominance and frustration.

And if this frustration is the reason why there are so many fights in ice hockey, then it is also the root of why the game is not popular from a purely visual standpoint. Fringe observers and media experts have said for years that hockey is as frustrating to watch as it is to play, that it suffers from erratic and irregular "possessions" of an object that is either too small or moving too fast to be seen. This is certainly true if you're concerned with following the puck—a black, solid rubber disc measuring about three inches in diameter that frequently approaches speeds of 90 miles per hour—but this obsession with the ball, endemic to other televised sports, is not so relevant in hockey. Hockey players may be the only professional athletes who will admit that often even they don't know where the primary object of their game, the puck, is. They'll also tell you that this confusion is part of hockey, something to be seized and made use of. I'm not much of a hockey fan, but I've always liked this aspect of the game, the thrill of momentary loss of content, of possession, of vision. You see these people racing around and yet you can't see the point of it all, the subject of their desire—the puck. To be a fan or player of hockey you have to develop an absurdist's resolve, acquire the ability to continue watching or skating even when the objective is unclear. In such moments your only recourse is to scan the ice and figure the common vector of all of the player's gazes, dabble in Cluster Theory and analysis, or as a shortcut, check the goalies. A goalie's posture will always tell you where the puck is, and if it doesn't, then he is about to be scored upon. Either way the game's objective will be made clear.

Unfortunately, American television networks haven't been interested in televising such non-productive ambiguity since they stopped broadcasting hockey in the early 70s. Such programming tends to make viewers uncomfortable with their sets, gets them thinking about how they might spend their free time better, what's for dinner, when they will die. National Hockey League commissioner Gary Bettman blew the issue wide open recently when he revealed that the reason hockey hasn't worked on television is that the dot matrix that comprises a video image is absolutely incapable of depicting a puck that is moving at more than seventy miles per hour—which happens about fifty times a game. As he described it, the puck virtually "disintegrates" within the system, like an image halftoned into oblivion or a comet entering our atmosphere. This was a disheartening realization for viewers who expect a lot from their television sets, not to mention those who need people to believe in the medium's omniscience.

Enter Fox Television, the new network provider of professional hockey, who does not share my

enthusiasm for formlessness and ambiguity. With the commencement of the NHL playoffs, Fox unleashes a video imaging technology known as FoxTrax, which promises to eliminate the anxiety of watching hockey on television. The system works by first embedding twenty miniature, high impact, infrared-emitting diodes around the circumference and the top and bottom of the puck. Second, an impermeable surveillance grid of infrared sensors is installed on the walls and overhead structures surrounding the ice rink, the information from which is linked via computer system to the video output of the game. When the new “cyberpuck” is put into play, its exact location is tracked out on television screens by a surrounding blue “aura,” an aura that penetrates players, goalie pads or the near boards, like the “you are here” indicator on a subway map. Whenever the puck exceeds seventy miles per hour in the course of the game, the computer automatically converts to a red “comet tail” indicating its speed and direction. When the puck drops back below seventy miles per hour—reintegrates, so to speak—the blue halo returns. Thus there is not a single moment in the life of the puck that goes unmonitored, not even when it is hidden or “disintegrates.” Its only escape is to leave the playing surface altogether.

Having broadcast the system as a trial run during the NHL All-star Game, FoxSports tells me that it received an enormously favorable response. I believe them. In a country where seven year-olds routinely wave at bank security cameras, where prisoners are detained by electronically monitored bracelets, where you can dial a 900 number to find out if any convicted sex offenders have moved into your neighborhood, where a detailed computer image of your building is readily available on the target screen of every jet fighter in the military (and isn't that great), always being able to know the location of the puck is a disturbingly trivial thought. Americans love being monitored, and they rely on their television sets to fulfill that task more than any other component of their lives. Whether watching or appearing on talk or home-video shows, or filling out Nielson Ratings forms, people believe—have seen proof—that they are integral to television's existence, not only by sitting home and watching but also by providing it with content. Before FoxTrax, the loss of the puck in televised hockey revealed a fatal flaw in the medium's coverage that threatened to undermine the confidence of viewers, implying that they were still people and things in the world capable of moving through the system without a trace. Now the once dazzling inanity of computer technology has staved off pangs of insecurity and death, at the same time annihilating the most subtle and admirable aspects of a minor competitive sport.