Stay Ahead of the Game with Data Analytics

If you think the world of sports is purely about adrenaline, fitness, and talent, think again. It is also about brains, data, and analytics. Just a couple of decades ago, most sporting decisions were driven by the gut, or on the basis of a coach or agent's personal evaluation. Much of this has changed today with instinct being supported by data, helping players and teams make strategic decisions such as which player to acquire or what should be the next move during a game.

While there may have been pockets where predictive analytics was applied to sports during the early years, one case stands out in particular. A hard-hitting book by Michael Lewis titled, 'Moneyball: The art of winning an unfair game', highlights the incredible story of sporting successes driven by data. The book, later adapted into a movie starring Brad Pitt, narrates how Billy Beane, the general manager of Oakland Athletics, challenged the status quo by making unconventional decisions with the help of data. The team went on to win twenty consecutive matches, even though they had to work within a tight budget.

How did an underdog team with a small budget achieve this monumental feat? Beane used statistical analysis to recruit team members with better on-base and slugging percentages as opposed to the traditional choice of speed and contact factors. This smart, but unique strategy put the team on its front foot. Since Oakland Athletics, many sports teams have used analytics to drive their decisions. Today, analytics is not just an exception in the sporting world but more an integral part of the game itself – both on and off the field.

Make Better Decisions on the Field

On-field game strategies are the probably the most visible of all analytical applications when it comes to sports. It is not just about using static data captured over the years, but also the use of motion capturing technologies recording images and videos of the game to help strategize the next game plan. For example, SportsVu has six cameras placed in any NBA game, collecting data on movements 25 times per second.

Wearable technologies such as miCoach have made it possible to collect real-time statistics about players' health, fitness, and performance. This can help evaluate who needs to rest and who is ready to play. Based on every individual's body conditions, the coach can come up with an appropriate fitness and training routine. Real-time monitoring also eliminates injuries since one can pro-actively respond to an impending health condition.

Millions of sport enthusiasts across the globe have traditionally relied on the keen eyes of umpires and referees for accurate decisions on the field. Analytics is now lending a helping hand to the umpires. If you are a cricket fan, you may feel a sense of relief that technology is able to unambiguously decide whether a batsman is out for leg before wicket. Factors such

as length and angle of the ball, and the batsman's movement and response to it are evaluated to provide an accurate judgement.

Improve Fans' Experience off the Field

Off the field, too, data analytics firms are changing the way fan experience is managed. For example, fans have a strong presence on social media making it possible to gauge their sentiment with real time data analytics. Such insights can help increase the engagement between the franchise and the fans which can help franchises monetize new opportunities. Media companies can also use these insights to create new campaigns.

Data analytics also creates personalization opportunities, helping sporting businesses earn many loyal customers in the process. For example, activities such as sending information on traffic conditions around the stadium, providing discounts on souvenirs, or recommending food options for pre-order are some features that can attract fans to the stadium boosting ticket sales. Analytics can also be applied to accurately price tickets. Using multiple data sets, it is possible to forecast expected ticket sales performance, right down to the specific match, row and sections.

Break New Ground

Analytics has changed the way decisions are made in sports, much the same way it has impacted businesses such as manufacturing and retail. Skeptics might claim that sports is not just about numbers, but also about individual motivation and desire to perform. That it is not just about recruiting high-performing individuals but the ability of a team to function together as one unit. Can analytics compute these subjective, qualitative, and emotional factors? The instinctive reply may be a 'no', but analytics firms would contend that this is possible too, given sufficient data and the right set of techniques and technologies to complement the data.