Technology at Issue

Edward Tenner raises some intriguing points about sports' high-tech impact.

by TOM KOUROS

IT WAS one of those typical chilling and overcast midwestern March mornings. I had just taken a hearty gulp of Folger's finest when the phone rang. "Mr. Kouros," said the voice, "my name is Edward Tenner and I'd like to talk to you about technology as it relates to bowling, if you have a minute." Here we go again, I thought... another zealous bowler who wants to average 220 through the black magic of axis weight, et al.

But I soon learned that Mr. Tenner was quite erudite and a genuine scholar. Though he'd served as executive editor at Princeton University Press, as a former junior fellow at Harvard and a visiting fellow in the Department of Geological and Geophysical Sciences at Princeton, what most captured my high regard for this man was his perceptive analysis and well-grounded conclusions.

Subsequently, Mr. Tenner was kind enough to send me several essays he'd written. Because he is now finishing a book on the unintended consequences of technology, an essay titled *The Technological Imperative* caught my attention. I found it intriguing for the following reasons.

First, it relates so well to bowling. Second, it supports strong views I have held for many years. And, finally, it is beautifully written. Rousseau once argued that "The greatest failure of the human race was the ability to communicate." If that is the case, then Mr. Tenner is a notable exception. Here are some excerpts from that essay. Judge for yourself.

"It is true that coaches have been analyzing film since the days of moving pictures, that video cameras now start at only a few hundred dollars, and that mobile lifts probably have some value... for the athletic department. And one would have to be Rip Van Winkle not to know that schools and colleges are working harder at sport and spending big money on new athletic technology.

"It is often said that the infiltration of big money, especially in such high-profile intercollegiate sports as football and basketball, is killing off the amateur ideal. But nothing is doing more to undermine the distinction between amateur and professional competition than the rise of sports technology... including not only athletic gear, but training and conditioning techniques and professional management... and its spread to all levels of sport.

"At Princeton, the bronze statue called 'The Christian Student,' a memorial to a high-minded football captain named Earl Dodge... had stood unmolested for decades. By the 1920s, this statue of a handsome youth in a turtleneck football uniform... had become a provocation. Undergraduates vandalized and travestied it so often that it was finally removed. It was not athletics that had declined, but heroism. In its place there was instead... stardom.

"The decline of the heroic ideal is reflected in the history of protective technology.

"Athletes today do push the limits of protective technologies to gain an edge. Helmeted batters crowd the plate, linebackers and linemen risk paralysis and death by illegally 'spearing' their foes with their helmets... Technological change may not have been directly responsible for the decline of the heroic ideal, but it was the driving force behind the new model of sport that challenged and ultimately replaced it.

"Sports scientists have also produced enormous quantities of new equipment over the years. Sporting goods is a $45 billion industry. The impact of all this new gear varies from sport to sport... New technologies have drastically altered certain sports: the fiberglass pole transformed pole vaulting during the 1960s; echolocators have given tournament bass fishing the quality of a video game.

"Some critics fear we are taking the play out of play; some players seem happier than ever, though, with the latest oversized golf club or tennis racket. Will this continue, or will there be a traditionalist counterrevolution as part of a more generalized reaction against professionalism in society?

"Some modern sportswriters speculate about the coming of a new age of cyborg athletics, pitting genetically...manipulated superathletes against one another. Their predictions may turn out to be correct. But no technological change is inevitable. Change is shaped by the law, by politics, by public opinion, and by many other diffuse influences.

"As a rule, the biggest sports stars are still those who, like Michael Jordan, are capable of breathtaking feats that are prized precisely because they would be impossible without some great gift of nature."

Supported by the pillars of wisdom and fact, Edward Tenner speaks unrefutably from a strong platform. The question is, *"Who's listening?"*