

The Poetic Beauty of "In Play, Run"

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Wednesday, May 22 2013 6:00 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, May 22 2013 7:49 AM



Let us, just for a moment, spit in the face of instant gratification.

Pretend - just for the moment, mind you - that you can't reach into your pocket, pull out something the size of a hash brown and access up-to-the-minute stock market updates and read breaking news about why North Korea's pissed off today.

Don't get me wrong - all of that is the schnizzle. If not a reflection of progress, it at least demonstrates a proverbial Lollapalooza for the human experience.

Especially when it comes to sports. And even more especially with baseball.

While you're waiting for the yutz from accounting to finish warming up his leftover casserole in your office break room's only microwave, you can pull up and examine every box score from the previous night's games without burning a calorie. You can check the standings, ponder that night's pitching matchups, watch video clips, and, of course, buy stuff you really don't need.

Sure, the innate abracadabra of the internet and cell phones allows you to tune into the live radio/television broadcasts as well. And while this is certainly the kind of giant leap for mankind Neil Armstrong talked about, it's less practical since: a) cell-phone-battery technology is about 10 years behind the capability of the phones themselves; and b) said technology is completely capable of ending your job and/or marriage.

That's where the electronic simulation feature comes in to save your home and battery life. No matter where you are, you can follow the pitch-by-pitch action of any game - live, in color, and

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with better animation quality than an episode of Scooby Doo.

I'm speaking generally, though not exclusively, of Major League Baseball's much-ballyhooed "At Bat" app. On a purely geeky level, it's better than actually being there or even, in some ways, watching on television.

We're told the trajectory and arc of each pitch - which is classified and tracked for speed - along with that particular pitch's "nasty factor," whatever the fuck that is. And most importantly, we see what the result of the pitch is: whether it's a strike (red dot) or ball (green dot).

But it's not until we see a blue dot that our pulse begins to race like you're at your first junior high dance. For along with the blue dot come two magical words: "In play."

When those words pop up on your tiny screen, your back stiffens and you lean forward with the understanding that somewhere, something has happened. You then skim past the comma that follows to find out what.

With "In play" comes two primary options: "Out" and "No out." Depending on whether your team is in the field or at bat, those words can violently raise or lower your blood pressure in a way that would make milk come out of your doctor's nose.

And then there's the firecracker combination of all the words in the vernacular of this tiny electronic universe:

"In play, run."

These words are why baseball fans get up in the morning. They either send a lightning bolt of raw excitement down your spine or drop your stomach down to your ankles.

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But what's really interesting about the whole experience is what happens next.

After those words pop up on your screen, there's a brief period of mystery. An unbearable seven-second interval in which you know that something happened, but not exactly what or how dramatic the impact is. Like waiting for a deafening thunderclap after a vibrant burst of lightning.

For those who electronically followed the Indians' Manic Monday matinee victory over Seattle, there were plenty of these moments. None more vibrant than the last, when "In play, run" indicated that Yan Gomes had indeed done something good with the Indians down a run in the bottom of the 10th, but we weren't sure quite what.

As the gods high atop Mount Mobile App processed and packaged reality and prepared to deliver it to us at 4G speed, we pondered the possibilities. A bunt attempt that went haywire for an unsuspecting defense? A bloop single that scored Michael Brantley from second? Or - by the beard of Zeus - could it be...

Before we could complete the thought, there it was - a single-sentence explanation that told us everything and sent us into silent delirium.

Yan Gomes homers on a fly ball to left field. Michael Brantley scores. Drew Stubbs scores.

It's almost as good as being there. OK, not really, but certainly better than just seeing the final score posted on the *Plain Dealer* website later in the afternoon.

It's reminiscent of the early days of 20th century baseball, when crowds would gather outside newspaper offices - the hub of activity in those days - to follow World Series games on large scoreboards updated by kids in newsboy hats hanging signs and maneuvering letters according to whatever just stuttered over the telegraph inside.

Bystanders would cheer the news of an RBI single or groan over a strikeout that actually

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happened about 15 minutes ago. But in reality, they were watching nothing. Not a game, but simply the almost-automated reporting of a game.

And then, like now, they loved every second of it.

For as joyous as that moment of revelation is - however delayed it may be - and as amazing as the technology that makes it possible is, it's the intermittent seven seconds that intrigue me.

Each and every time I see "In play, run," I'm transported back to my youth, sprinting down the stairs and into the living room at 9:49 to catch the latest CNN Headline Sports update to see if the Indians were able to hang onto their 4-3 lead over Milwaukee they had at the 9:20 update.

In the 30 minutes between those two updates, my imagination ran wild. I could picture with equal clarity the Indians batting around and blowing the game open in their next at-bat or committing four errors and watching their meager lead be blown to smithereens. For a half-hour, the game played out frantically in my imagination. And was almost always more interesting than what was actually happening.

Some 100 miles away from the closest Indians radio network affiliate, I'd rinse and repeat this exercise approximately five times per night, until the letter "F" appeared next to the score and CNN Headline Sports could dissolve back into the otherwise meaningless landscape of basic-cable blandness.

In the seven seconds after "In play, run," I think of that 30-minute CNN intermission, and how that - and the subsequent :28/:58 posting of scores of games in action on ESPN - made you feel as though you had your fingers on the pulse of the sports world.

I think of family camping trips to the cracker-barrel south, where not even the Atlanta Braves could plant a radio affiliate, and the only updates on the Tribe's progress came via a mid-morning trip to a grimy campground convenience store for a *USA Today* and a bag of ice. Twelve hours after the final out was recorded, I'd read the final score in black ink and either pump my fist or kick the Slush Puppie machine in woefully delayed response.

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And things became truly hilarious in the subset of times in which I was on vacation and the Tribe was on the west coast. With the games played too late to make the next day's *USA Today* deadline, I'd wind up walking down to the store in flip-flops and a sand-caked swimsuit on a Wednesday morning all twitchy and anxious to find out what the Indians had done on Monday night.

Today, CNN and the suspense-filled walks to the campground store are not unlike looking up at the sky on a starry night and realizing that the sparkling pinpricks of light you're now seeing actually originated from their sources years ago.

Clearly, those days are long gone.

Now, old news is created the moment it leaves a broadcaster's lips. You see that a breaking news story online was last updated six minutes ago and frantically begin seeking for a fresher report.

We need to know everything and we need to know it now. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but that's what we've become and it's not going to change. Ever.

And yet, for all its technological juju, "In play, run," is doubly useful. It simultaneously demonstrates the magnificence of lustrous technology while sparking a pang of nostalgia for a pathetically simpler time.

We see who we once were, how far we've come, and why both things matter.

All in an interminable, wonderful seven seconds of mystery.

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