

News

Football TV's final frontier

Super Bowl tech is some of television's most cutting-edge

|Joseph Wilson

Tim DeKime must be stressed. As the point person for NBC's television coverage of this weekend's Super Bowl, DeKime needs to make sure his team covers every conceivable angle on every single play. This year, NBC has won the rights to broadcast the Super Bowl for the first time in a decade, scooping the coverage from Fox.

Covering a Super Bowl is tough, especially now that the NFL relies on replays of the broadcast feed to make decisions and challenge controversial calls. TV directors trade horror stories about being unable to provide helpful camera angles to the refs.

In his recent book, *The Billion Dollar Game: Behind The Scenes Of The Greatest Day In American Sport*, Super Bowl Sunday, sports writer Allen St. John spends time with Artie Kempner as he prepares for Fox's coverage of last year's Super Bowl XLII.

Kempner, the director of Fox Sports' A-Team, spends hours analyzing the past games of the Patriots and the Giants, trying to anticipate where they'll need cameras and when to switch angles.

From behind the scenes, Kempner barks out commands, orchestrating the coverage of the game by editing shots in real time.

This Sunday it's DeKime's turn to feel the weight of applying cutting-edge technology to ensure proper coverage. When the Steelers and the Cardinals meet on Sunday, they'll be playing under the watchful eye of no fewer than 55 cameras, orchestrated from the NBC truck compound just outside the stadium.

The game is broadcast in 1080i high definition (HD), the highest quality yet for a Super Bowl. Since 9/11, the Super Bowl stadium's been a designated a no-fly zone, so in lieu of plane-cams, look for shots from the Cable Cam zipping over the action. Just hope the camera doesn't have to make an emergency "controlled descent" onto the field, as it did during a 2007 Seahawks-Saints game.

Though the advent of the god-cam, as some call it, is a boon for "looking over the quarterback's shoulder," it also changes the way the other cameras cover the action. It's sometimes a challenge to shoot riveting wide-angle shots of a football game with a 100-pound camera hovering 12 feet above the turf.

For all DeKime's high-tech expertise gained via his Sunday Night Football gig, he's got some pretty big shoes to fill. Fox's Kempner is a legend in the field and has a shelf full of Emmys for his innovative game coverage. Often eschewing on-field action to show the close-up reaction of a coach or a player behind the play, Kempner has a director's eye for the narrative sweep of game day.

He pioneered the use of the "pylon-cam," the field-level camera literally stuffed into a pylon on the sidelines. Kempner's team also developed the technology that marks the first down marker with a projected yellow line. This technology has its roots in the ill-fated Fox Trax system, which Kempner developed to make NHL hockey pucks glow blue, making them easier to see.

In response to this weighty history, NBC Sports has been aiming to position itself at the vanguard of sports coverage. In December 2008, it broadcast an NFL game in 3-D in theatres in New York, Los Angeles and Boston as closed-door events for team owners and journalists. 3ality, a company in Burbank, California, is convinced that this is the future of sports coverage. Team owners, already stuffing all their extra money into the conversion to HD, aren't so sure.

NBC is testing the waters this year by broadcasting the first-ever 3-D Super Bowl commercial, for the upcoming DreamWorks film *Monsters Vs. Aliens*. Whether this is enough to wow fans accustomed to Fox's Super Bowl coverage remains to be seen.

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tech@nowtoronto.com

