

Umpiring: Humans vs. Technology

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By Stan Walker

South African all-rounder Jacques Kallis has gone down in the record books as Courtney Walsh's 500th Test wicket, adjudged leg before wicket for 0 in the South Africa second innings of the second Test of the recently concluded series by Australian umpire, Darrell Hair. However, replays showed Kallis got a big inside edge before the ball slammed into his pads and that the appeal should have been turned down.

This was just one of a series of recent incidents that has strengthened the call from cricketing quarters throughout the world for the increased use of technology in international cricket.

Because of umpiring errors brought to the forefront through the use of television replays in the Sri Lanka and England, India and Australia and nearing home, the recently concluded West Indies and South Africa series, the International Cricket Conference (ICC) has committed itself to review and restructure the system used for the appointment of umpires and match referees.

Flawed umpiring led to "bad blood" in the Sri Lanka/England Test series and it is no secret that the James Adams-led West Indies team endured more than its hare of umpiring errors in Australia where they went down 5-0.

The ICC's cricket committee met last month to review playing conditions for the next three years and it is understood that a discussion on the use of technology was a major topic. The feasibility of more reliance on technology as well as greater use of neutral umpires were also assessed.

In a recent report coming out of Jamaica, Johnny Gayle, Jamaica Cricket Umpires Association president and former West Indies player and now vice-president of the Jamaica Cricket Board (JCB) Easton McMorris, called for the increased use of technology to reduce umpiring errors in international cricket.

It is their opinion that the umpiring errors being shown on television replays was bad for the game.

"There is no doubt that it (technology) has to come," said Gayle. "We wouldn't like to get to the stage where there is a complete blackout of the human element, but the events of the last year or two have shown clearly that we have to go more and more to use of the technology . . . there are too many decisions being given that are not correct."

"I think that it is time we use it (technology) since it is available," said McMorris, the former West Indies and Jamaica opening batsman and former Jamaica captain. McMorris contended that in every case in which the on-the-field umpire cannot be "absolutely certain" there should be consultation with the third umpire and available technology.

Currently the third umpire is called on by on-the-field umpires to determine run-outs, stumpings and cases where there is uncertainty as to whether the fielder completed the catch before the ball hit the ground.

"They already have two-way communication, so let's say in the case of a leg before decision: the presiding umpire could quickly ask the third umpire, 'Did it touch bat?' or 'Did it pitch in line?' before giving his final decision," said McMorris.

Though many may support these arguments, the introduction of technology in the game is the main cause of the controversy surrounding the umpires' decisions. To get all parties to accept it means that we may even have to bend the rules. Before television, the standard practice of the players was to abide by the umpires' decision. Even if there were any doubts, it was generally accepted by the players under the old adage "in the opinion of the umpire."

Any move to improve the standard of umpiring will be more than welcome. However, we should bear in mind that if technology is used in all the areas suggested, it could well serve to slow down the game even more. If we are not careful how it is implemented, technology could prove to be yet another nail in the coffin of Test cricket which is presently struggling to pull back the crowds.

