

On the Ball and Off the Wall: Noise Pollution: The most annoying illusion in sports

This column is for non-sports fans who would like some enlightenment and hopefully humor beyond being sports fanatics.

Vuvuzelas!

No, that doesn't mean go off yourself in Afrikaans. But it might as well convey that message.

At the 2010 soccer World Cup finals in South Africa, vuvuzelas nearly eclipsed the play on the field. They are a traditional long-stemmed horn instrument with some historic legit in the country. If you haven't heard children blowing their little brains out into plastic trombones and trumpets with cheek-splitting fervor for two hours straight, you haven't experienced the vuvuzelas in full cry. By that time, if you have any sense, you'd already have the Glock at your temple and a good-bye note on the kitchen table.

The roar of the vuvuzelas at the games in South Africa overwhelmed both the radio and TV broadcasts. This was not appreciated by the many big-money sponsors of the event. But due to their indigenous South African tribal legacy, the sanctioned blare went on, every game, every hour and every minute, with soccer officials and media having to nod to the country's honored heritage ... even if it meant covering their ears and shrieking. (Note: Vuvuzelas are now banned by nearly every stadium in the world.)

Flash forward 10 years, and our new COVID-19 techno version of *faux* crowd noise is now being electronically controlled and fed into TV coverage of games with no one in the stands. Now this is very clever. But like most clever things, it is absolutely game-changing, or, and that's a big or, a monumentally annoying and stupid party trick.

What happens is that the techno geek in the control room feeds recorded sounds into the play-by-play, trying to give the illusion of real people reacting in the vacant stands. It's actually done quite well, until you see either vacant seats or cutouts of people occupying the seats. Hey, I'm stupid, but not quite *that* stupid.

Real is real. Nothing can successfully imitate the roar of the Fenway crowd when Big Papi Ortiz stepped to the plate against the Yankees in extra innings. Or when in past years Knicks fans essentially invented the "Dee-FENSE!" chant. Or when the end zone fans at Gillette Stadium scream loud enough when another team is first and goal to completely disrupt the opponent's snap count. And studies have shown that the home crowd can influence referees' calls. And there is no guessing involved that at Liverpool's Anfield stadium, the full-throated sound of 60,000 people singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" in unison inspires their club while intimidating the opposition.

That bitching aside, the worst part of this manufactured noise is that the way the networks have set up their electro-tech is that it overpowers the commentary and play-by-play. The various crowd noises, fake as they are, make it near impossible to hear what is being said by the announcers. That may not be a bad thing, but it becomes extremely irritating over the course of a two-hour-plus broadcast. Yes,

commentary may be superfluous because if you're a real sports fan you don't need some dickhead in a blazer telling you what your eyes are already seeing. But it does bring on a vuvuzela distraction when you were eager to hear about how Player X is facing criminal domestic abuse charges that may have gone unnoticed by the casual observer.

So let us please get back to muted crowd noise, and there is a special place in hell for those announcers who try to convince you there are actual fans in the stands who can make more noise than someone opening a packet of potato chips. To paraphrase a now popular phrase, "Shut up and play."