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Guest Column: A swing & a miss for this new-fangled baseball

By Rich Westcott, Times Guest Columnist

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What is happening to our old game of baseball? The answer is, some new kind of game has replaced it, and the results are extremely discouraging.

The old game of baseball has been taken over by the young upstarts, who seemingly not only know little about the way the game is played on the field, but who are turning it into something that bears little resemblance to the way the national pastime was once played. Yet, as the Phillies have amply demonstrated, the numbers troops are the only ones getting jobs these days.

Call me old school if you want, but in the more than 40 years I've been writing about baseball – prior to which, my dad took me to my first major league game when I was 8 years old – the game was always played pretty much the same way. Hit, run, throw and catch. Those were the basics of the game. That's what made the difference between a winner and a loser.

Now, among other distractions, you have something called analytics. Off-the-wall numbers that those who buy into the system claim is how the game should be played and what strategy to use. It's a so-called science that is changing the way the game is played.

Most of them seem pointless. They're like saying, "What does a blue-eyed, lefthanded pitcher from South Dakota throw when he's facing a righthanded batter who wears size 10 shoes from the Dominican Republic when it's 8:23 p.m. and the wind is blowing in from left field at six miles-per hour?"

Analytics – or sabrmetrics as they were originally labeled – also evaluate players. What percentage of times does a hitter drive in a runner from second base? How many hits and walks per inning does a pitcher average? How does the ballpark factor into the outcome of a game? Questions like these are used to show how good (or how bad) a player is or what kind of strategy should be used.

All of which takes away from the real game. The only things that truly matter when evaluating a player are: what's in his brain, what's in his heart, and what kind of talent does he have? In other words, how well does he deal with situations that require thought? How much guts does he have? And what ability does he exhibit when he's on the field?

Of course, analytics are only one of the growing monopolies that are changing the game. Can I add "pitch

counts" to that group?

Pitch counts. What a farce. A pitcher is throwing a three-hit shutout after seven innings, and good heavens, he's thrown 98 pitches, so we've got to take him out.

Hall of Famer Warren Spahn, the winningest lefthanded pitcher in baseball history, once told me that some statisticians went back and learned that he often threw 200 pitches in a game. Sometimes, he even threw 250. Yet, he never had any arm trouble in 23 years of pitching.

And how about this? In 1920, there was a major league record 26-inning game in which the pitcher from each team went the distance. How many pitches did they each throw? 400? 500? Yet, Joe Oeschger and Leon Cadore both survived and their careers continued onward.

Of course, many current pitchers throw harder than did many of yesteryear, thus there is more wear-and-tear on their arms. But there are also players known as relief pitchers dominating the landscape now. Prior to the 1950s, full-time relievers were almost nonexistent.

Relievers enter games now at the drop of a hat. Take out a pitcher who's doing well and bring in a reliever. He usually pitches one inning, then has to be replaced. Or, if he's righthanded and a lefthanded batter is coming to the plate, get him out. Bring in a lefty to pitch.

Let me point out that the Phillies once had a relief pitcher named Jim Konstanty who in one game hurled eight innings. Moreover, in 1950 he was the starting pitcher in the first game of the World Series.

The recently concluded World Series is a classic example of the way the game is being mistreated. Relievers entered games by the truckload. In the 11-inning second game, for instance, the Dodgers used nine pitchers. Nine. And one threw one pitch before he was taken out, another threw four, and one other chucked five. Another game, high-scoring though it was, lasted five and one-half hours, partly because there were so many changes in the lineup.

There are way too many other differences between today's and yesterday's game. Players now dance, shout, wave, and carry on with the same unappealing frequency as the showoffs who play football. Would Richie Ashburn ever have done that? I don't think so.

Reviews that always extend the length of a game are becoming far too frequent (even though they often overrule umpire's calls, a suggestion that today's ump's aren't too good).

Then there are the one-handed catches. Nearly every ball hit in the air is snared with only the glove hand, which is often held on the side. True, the gloves and their webs are bigger these days, but that's no guarantee that a ball will be caught. Add to that, ball caps with wide brims that are tilted when they are worn, not to mention pantlegs that wrap around the shoes. And beards. They're becoming increasingly common. How can anybody play effectively, especially in hot weather, while wearing a beard that often goes below his shoulders?

Well, at least you can say one good thing about the current game. It was good to see the Houston Astros win the World Series (with former Phillies players as the manager and the winning pitcher in the deciding game). Like the Boston Red Sox did when they won the title in 2013, the Astros' victory should go a long way in restoring a city that is badly in need of help.