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by Jonathan Berr

The wizards behind those amazing World Series statistics

When Don Zminda was the statistician for ESPN's Sunday Night Baseball in the 1990s, he spent most of his Sundays calculating reams of data that were written onto a stack of note cards for announcers Jon Miller and Joe Morgan. That was the state of the art back then -- not now.

"It would take me hours and hours," said Zminda in an interview with DailyFinance. He's vice president and director of research for STATS LLC, which is providing the statistics for Fox's broadcast of the World Series. "The technology advances are pretty amazing," he added.

The native of Chicago traveled with the ESPN crew during the baseball season. Now, most of his seven-member staff working the Fall Classic are based out of the company's office in Los Angeles. One staff member will be in Philadelphia for Saturday's Game 3 between the Philadelphia Phillies and New York Yankees. Budget constraints don't allow for more people to travel to the game.

But STATS stays in constant contact, fielding questions from the Fox broadcast crew of Joe Buck and Tim McCarver, and their staff, via phone and e-mail. STATS gives the Fox team about 15 pages of notes on the games, which the company doesn't expect will all be used.

Its employees are constantly on the prowl for interesting factoids to share with millions of baseball fans. Occasionally, their intuition pays off, like in Game 1 when a STATS employee pondered the fact that Phillies left-handed-hitting second baseman Chase Utley had walloped two home runs off a left-handed pitcher. Sure enough, a quick search of the company's Oracle Corp. (ORCL) database found that a left-handed hitter named Babe Ruth was the only other player to accomplish that feat -- in 1928.

"Sometimes, you get lucky with things like that," Zminda said. "That's one that people will remember."

Staying Fair and Balanced

But for every home run STATS hits, the company also strikes out. Before the Yankees scored their only run of Game 1, in the ninth inning, off of Phillies ace Cliff Lee, Zminda and his crew had dug up such useful nuggets that the shut-out would have been the most lopsided for the Yankees in its long World Series history. The Yanks' last-inning run ruined that one.

STATS was acquired in 2000 by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. (NWS) and is now a joint venture with the Associated Press. The company, which began in 1981, also covers other sports, including the NBA, NHL, and the NFL. Though the technology has vastly improved and has taken the spotlight, STATS still depends on human employees to make detailed observations of the game. Some of the more detailed statistics of things like pitch selections are done with the aid of video tape. Otherwise, the observations are done live.

"Our job is to find stuff that will illuminate the viewer," said Zminda, who adds that STATS double-checks its facts before they go on the air, which keeps errors to a minimum. "You have to keep yourself unbiased."

About the only time Zminda says his objectivity was challenged was in 2005, when his favorite team, the Chicago White Sox, won the Series. Still, he considers himself lucky that he gets paid to watch baseball: "My hobby has become my job."