



McGuffey, Lauch hop aboard TV history with 'Go-Pro' camera

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By now, Ryan McGuffey and Sarah Lauch are used to being honored for chronicling the annals of baseball, not for actually making history themselves.

The co-winners along with David Kaplan of the Jerome Holtzman Award, given out by the Chicago Baseball Museum at the annual Pitch and Hit Club's Banquet, proved themselves worthy of a video feature themselves a few weeks after receiving the honor for their work advancing the cause of the city's baseball history.

McGuffey and Lauch, Comcast SportsNet Chicago's two top producers, put their heads together, and now they're on a par with every groundbreaking WGN baseball-TV advancement going back to the dawn of video in the 1940s. They have brought the viewer closer to the action than ever before – in fact stationing the homebound fan at home plate – via a “Go-Pro” camera affixed to the catcher's mask and helmet.

The marriage of camera and catcher took place on back fields at the White Sox's Glendale, Ariz. spring training complex when John Danks threw batting practice to catcher Josh Phegley. Adorned with the “Go-Pro” camera, Phegley gave viewers the image of standing in the batter's box to see pitches boring into the plate.



Josh Phegley with helmet, mask and Go-Pro camera affixed to the package (top). The image the viewer gets from the camera is shown (below) with the ball boring in faster than any non-pro can imagine.

The groundbreaking arrangement was part of an even bigger historic Chicago baseball development – the first two commercial-free baseball telecasts in the city’s history. CSN Chicago aired the Saturday, March 15, Sox and Sunday, March 16, Cubs games with no paid spots. Instead, several dozen features McGuffey and Lauch had already produced in Arizona were scheduled to air in the two-minute breaks between half-innings.

CSN Chicago had more than doubled its spring training telecasts, from seven in 2013 to 15 this spring. So the regional network’s management, led by GM Phil Bedella, figured the promotional value of the game without paid spots would draw attention to the network and highlight the personal side of new and existing faces on the Sox and Cubs.

Historical line started with CF camera

But the idea of the camera affixed to the catcher is in true Chicago baseball TV tradition. McGuffey and Lauch now are part of a long line that began with the center-field camera, invented for WGN-TV’s Little League telecasts at old Thil-lens Stadium, being moved to the big leagues in 1958 at Wrigley Field and old Comiskey Park. The pitcher-batter shot from center soon become a big-league TV staple.



Ryan McGuffey (left) and Sarah Lauch flank David Kaplan right after the trio won the Jerome Holtzman Award for service to Chicago baseball history. McGuffey and Lauch conceived of the "Go-Pro" camera angle affixed to the catcher to show pitches boring into home plate.

The historical timeline advances to a hand-built crank device to prevent the screen from going dark when the ball was hit into the shadows when WGN converted to color for games in 1960. Two years later, WGN pulled off a first by televising two games at the same time. The station did not miss a run scored in airing a Cubs game from Wrigley Field and a Sox game from Comiskey Park on a Saturday afternoon. Weeks later, a short segment from a Cubs-Phillies game at Wrigley Field was fed to Europe on the first commercial satellite telecast via Telstar.

Advances in lenses by the early 1970s brought “tight” shots of pitcher’s and batter’s expressions as they readied for action. Later, more portable cameras and increased replay machines brought viewers into almost every corner of the ballpark and showed different off-air angles of plays.

A style, not technical achievement, was soon seen via WGN director Arne Harris’ “hat shots,” as colorful, if not outrageous, headgear got highlighted in breaks in the action.

Now, the viewer got to see the same view of pitches as the catcher.

TV is steadily encroaching on the sidelines and dugouts of sports events, as coaches and managers are interviewed in games. Now it might be possible to take the viewer unobtrusively into the action itself by attaching a camera to the catcher. The Sox gave a quick blessing to the McGuffey-Lauch idea. Phegley immediately jumped on board. He wore the “Go-Pro” camera for a half hour as hitters stood in to face Danks.

’80 mph...looks like 120 mph’

“Anybody who thinks they can get in the box against John Danks is out of their mind,” said McGuffey. “When you see the video of (pitches coming in at) 80 mph, it looks like 120 mph. It literally looks like you’re getting into the batter’s box.”

The next step, obviously, is using the camera in a live game. Given the sudden movement of Major League Baseball to institute widespread video replay, that notion is hardly far-fetched. MLB knows it is playing catch-up ball to the other pro leagues in using technology to enhance a product amid a hyper-competitive environment.

McGuffey and Lauch did not stop with the batting-practice session. They employed Go-Pros attached to Sox center fielder Adam Eaton on his fishing expedition in nearby Tempe and “Sodfather” Roger Bossard as he worked on the fields in Glendale.

The “Go-Pro” isn’t even the smallest camera available to slip onto a field. So the possibilities are unlimited in showcasing the game in high definition from views never seen before. Put on the typical big-screen TVs at home, the use of such equipment can only enhance and re-popularize our oldest pro sport.

Now, if only our two producers, so adept at hopping aboard the historical trend, could only reverse the clock, peer into the future and craft a segment on when either Chicago team will next play in a World Series. That kind of news would blow anything else out that has come before.