

Tech firm QuesTec looking over ump's shoulders in assignment for MLB

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It's 102 degrees at Shea Stadium as the New York Mets battle the Milwaukee Brewers. Home-plate umpire Bill Welke is sweating, but the heat is only part of it. His balls-and-strikes calls are being monitored; he'll find out later how many he's missed.

Ensnared in an air-conditioned room inside the stadium, Curtis Carrasco stands in front of television and computer screens, measuring Welke's performance with the Umpire Information System.

Carrasco works for QuesTec, a six-employee company hired by Major League Baseball this season to help ensure that home-plate umpires call the strike zone according to the rule book.

Thirty minutes after the game, Carrasco hands Welke a compact disc. Information on it includes video clips of each call from television's center-field camera and two black-and-white photos taken from QuesTec's on-field cameras, which are embedded in Plexiglas near the dugouts. An accompanying chart notes a half-dozen details of each called pitch, including the speed, the inning - and a judgment as to whether the umpire got the call right.

Major League Baseball, which also receives a CD of every game QuesTec tracks, is paying the company a minimum of \$1.1 million over five years to implement and operate the Umpire Information System. At the moment, Shea Stadium, Fenway Park and Bank One Ballpark are equipped; the contract allows baseball to order all 30 parks and some minor league stadiums to be fitted.

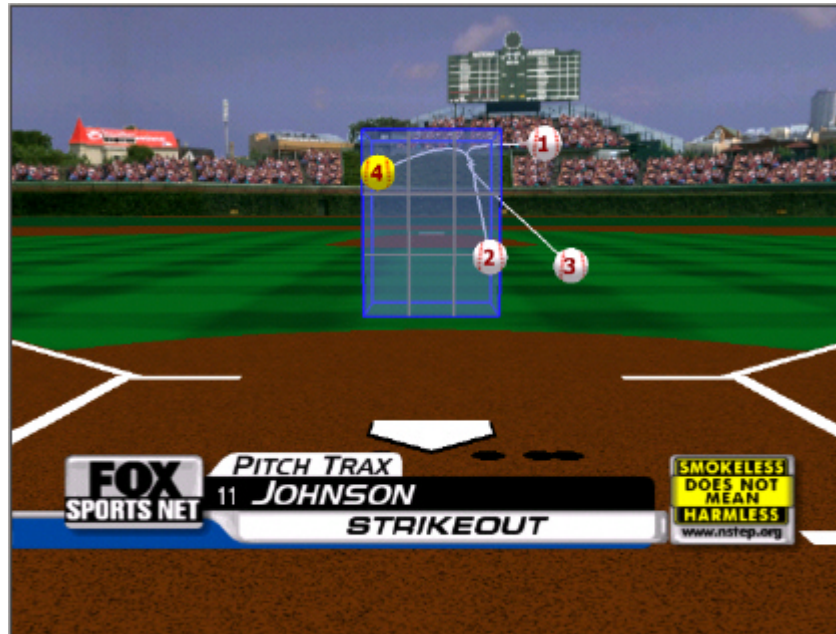
Installation costs range from \$30,000 to \$50,000 per park.

The system, which records each called pitch within a half-inch of its actual location, is based on technology taken from a

missile-tracking system used by the military.

"We've modified it to track balls through space," said Ed Plumacher, QuesTec's founder.

It's the first time home-plate umpires, who were given laptop computers by baseball to watch QuesTec's CDs, have enjoyed an objective monitoring system.



QuesTec also does the PitchTrax 3-D system the FOX Sports uses.

According to Plumacher, the only feedback they received before came from a supervisor sitting in the stands "who had a worse vantage point than they did."

Thanks to the Umpire Information System, Plumacher has uncovered a trend in home-plate umpire calls.

"You'll find major league umpires are very consistent, whether they call the rule book or not," said Plumacher, whose company also operates PitchTrax, the 3-D system that shows pitch location for Fox Sports broadcasts.

Before this season, Major League Baseball ordered that the strike zone, which had been shrinking in recent

years, should be called according to the rule book. Essentially, the sport's 68 umpires were told to call the high strike.

Once it became public last month that MLB was monitoring pitch counts to evaluate whether home-plate umpires were following the dictum, QuesTec was deluged with calls.

The company and MLB, however, insist that the Umpire Information System is a tool for training, not evaluating,

home-plate umpires.

Ralph Nelson, vice president of umpiring for Major League Baseball, said umpires still need to figure out the system's uses.

"They're still a little bit unsure of it," he said. "But I think it's a very helpful training tool."

QuesTec folks still aren't sure when an umpire might take offense. During one Mets home stand, Carrasco was gone from his station for about 20 minutes after the game ended. His co-workers were concerned.

"They thought the umpires had taken me and chopped me up," he said.

