

Beep! Beep!

Pacific-10 grabs free offer for electronic clock system

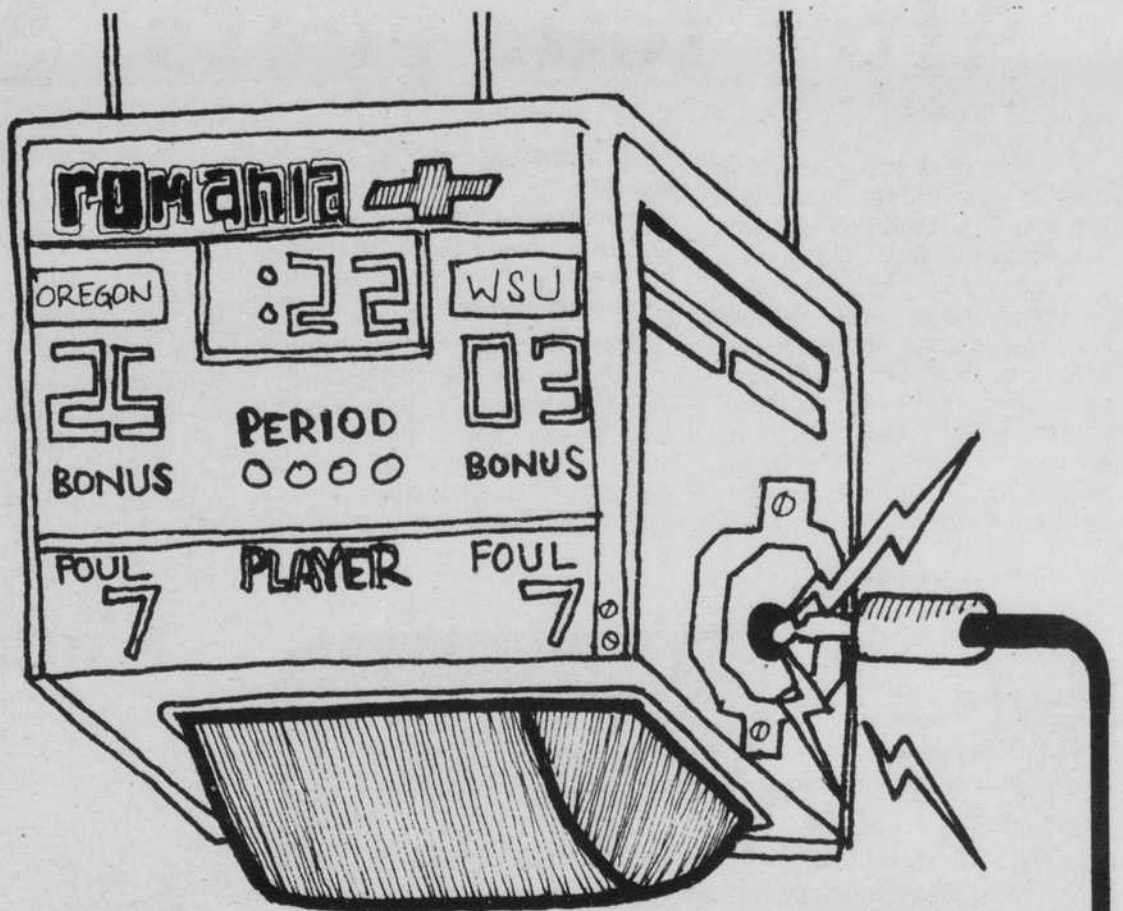
A master's degree in electronic engineering isn't necessary to be a sports referee these days.

But it sure helps. It started five years ago, when the National Football League wired their officials so everyone would know whether Dave Dalby or Art Shell was guilty of holding.

The tradition continues this season in the Pacific-10 Conference. All three basketball referees have been outfitted with special whistles that will stop the game clock the moment it is blown.

The system is called the Whistle-Stop Timer, invented by TCM, Inc., a little thinktank in North Carolina. A likely place for basketball gadgetry to appear. As a matter of fact, the Atlantic Coast Conference was the first to try the system last year.

The new referee's helper begins with a special whistle. When the ref blows it to stop play, the air travels through a rubber tube attached to the whistle's side. The tube travels down his shirt to a transmitter on his belt. The transmitter in turn sends a message to a



receiver attached to the scoreboard and the clock stops.

The transmitter also has a button which the referee pushes to restart the clock.

The Pac-10 isn't paying a cent for the system. It's on a one-year free trial. But if the schools agree to go with the Whistle-Stop next season, it'll cost them \$1,500 each for a clock receiver, three transmitters and 24 whistles.

By now, many officials have worked several games and can offer some opinions about this new stride into the electronic age.

"You have to be very careful and think about what you're doing," says Mack Lai, who has worked three games, including Oregon's contest with Nicholls State. Lai feels the system works best in situations where the gym noise becomes unbreachable, breaking down communication between referee and scorer's table.

"The funniest thing," says Lai, "is the beep." The scoreboard emits two beeps when the clock is started or stopped to tell the referee the system is working. "It takes a while to get used to that."

Ron Labetich, an official since 1966, thinks the Whistle-Stop is a "step in the right direction."

"It's great because there's no loss of time," Labetich says. "Usually the timer has to watch for a referee's arm movement to stop the clock."

Labetich agreed the system shines under a screaming din and cites Mac Court as a thunderous example.

"When you're working the Pit, it gets so loud that you can't hear the whistle unless you're 10 feet from the scorer's table."

Last Friday, Labetich worked Arizona State's triple-overtime win over UCLA.

"It was the loudest game I've ever heard. My ears were ringing two hours afterward." He says the special whistles made the game easier to officiate.

None of this is meant to imply Whistle-Stop has been the miracle cure for scorers with slow or itchy button fingers. There have been some instances where the ref would blow until he was blue, but the clock wouldn't stop.

The scorer is the backup system in this case. If he sees the whistle blow and the clock keeps running, he stops the clock himself.

One who feels this has happened a bit too often is Pac-10 Public Relations Director Jim Muldoon.

"From our point of view, it doesn't seem to be working out," Muldoon says. "I was just talking to some of the timers in Arizona, and they had some problems over the weekend."

Will the Pac-10 blow the whistle on Whistle-Stop? Only timers will tell.

Story by Jody Murray
Graphic by Ken Babbs



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