

C1-C2 Worksheet: AI Referees And The Future Of Sport - 28 May 2026

Article

The NBA's plan to bring in artificial intelligence for objective calls marks another step in sport's uneasy move towards automated decision-making. Commissioner Adam Silver said the league wants to use AI and court-side cameras to speed up decisions such as out-of-bounds calls, where technology can identify possession more quickly than a referee review. The idea is to cut down on disputes and interruptions without asking machines to take over the entire game. For supporters, this looks like a sensible attempt to sort out clear factual questions while leaving subjective judgement where it belongs: with officials.

The difficulty is that sport rarely draws the line neatly between objective fact and human interpretation. A ball may be either in or out, but contact, momentum, intention and advantage are far harder to work out in isolation. If AI is brought in only for tightly defined decisions, it could help referees and restore trust. If it gradually starts to step in wherever controversy appears, it may erode the authority of officials and change the rhythm of games. Fans often say they want accuracy, but they also want flow, drama and decisions that feel intelligible in the moment.

Other sports have already shown both the promise and the tension. Tennis has largely accepted electronic line-calling, while football's experience with VAR has made many supporters push back against delays, microscopic judgements and the loss of spontaneous celebration. Basketball may therefore become a test case for a more selective model of automation. The broader question is not whether sport should rely on technology at all, but how much judgement it is prepared to hand over before the human contest begins to feel over-managed.

True/False

Decide if each statement is True (T) or False (F).

1. The article says the NBA plans to use AI for every decision in basketball.
2. Silver's proposal is presented as focusing on objective calls such as out-of-bounds decisions.
3. The writer suggests that reducing disputes and interruptions is one reason for using AI.
4. The article says the boundary between fact and interpretation in sport is always simple.
5. The second paragraph suggests that contact and intention are harder to judge than whether a ball is in or out.
6. The writer argues that fans only care about perfect accuracy and never care about flow.
7. The article compares basketball's possible AI use with tennis and football.
8. The final paragraph suggests that the key issue is how much judgement should be handed over to technology.

Phrase Match

Match the phrases (1-10) to the correct definitions (A-J).

Phrases (1-10)	Definitions (A-J)
1. bring in	A. to reduce the amount of something
2. speed up	B. to decide where one thing ends and another begins
3. cut down on	C. to become involved
4. take over	D. to introduce or start using something
5. sort out	E. to give control or responsibility to someone or something else
6. draws the line	F. to solve or organise something
7. work out	G. to resist or oppose something
8. step in	H. to make something happen faster
9. push back against	I. to understand or calculate something
10. hand over	J. to gain control of something

Synonym Match

Match the words (1-10) to the correct synonyms (A-J).

Words (1-10)	Synonyms (A-J)
1. objective	A. interpretative
2. disputes	B. unplanned
3. interruptions	C. disagreements
4. subjective	D. weaken
5. momentum	E. chosen
6. erode	F. understandable
7. intelligible	G. factual
8. spontaneous	H. force
9. selective	I. mechanisation
10. automation	J. stoppages

Use the new language

Please choose 5 words or phrases and make your own sentence using the new word or phrase.

Discussion Questions

Student A

1. Do you like technology being used in sport, or does it slow the game down?
2. Which sports need technology the most?
3. Have you ever seen a terrible refereeing decision change a match?
4. Do you trust AI more than human referees for simple calls?
5. Is it better to have a fast decision or a perfectly accurate decision?
6. Does technology make sport fairer or less emotional?
7. Which sport has handled technology best so far?
8. Would you enjoy watching a sport with no human referees?

Student B

1. Where should sport draw the line between objective calls and human judgement?
2. Does automation protect fairness, or does it risk hollowing out the drama of sport?
3. Why has electronic line-calling been accepted in tennis more easily than VAR in football?
4. Should fans accept more interruptions if they lead to more accurate decisions?
5. Can referees remain authoritative if technology increasingly corrects them in public?
6. Could AI make sport less biased, or simply introduce new forms of technological bias?
7. Is the emotional imperfection of human refereeing part of what makes sport compelling?
8. How might sport look in 20 years if more decisions are made automatically?

Answer Key

True/False: 1=F, 2=T, 3=T, 4=F, 5=T, 6=F, 7=T, 8=T

Phrase Match: 1=D, 2=H, 3=A, 4=J, 5=F, 6=B, 7=I, 8=C, 9=G, 10=E

Synonym Match: 1=G, 2=C, 3=J, 4=A, 5=H, 6=D, 7=F, 8=B, 9=E, 10=I

Example sentences with the phrases

1. The league wants to bring in new technology before next season.
2. Automated systems can speed up decisions that used to take several minutes.
3. Better cameras may cut down on arguments between players and officials.
4. Some fans worry that technology will take over too much of the game.
5. A video review can help sort out who touched the ball last.
6. Every sport has to draw the line between fairness and entertainment.
7. It is difficult to work out intent from one slow-motion replay.
8. Referees still need to step in when players lose control.
9. Many football supporters push back against long VAR delays.
10. Leagues should not hand over every decision to machines.