

Between Feasibility and Relevance

AI tools have long made the leap from demo reel to regular operation in sports production. But the real challenges lie not in the technology itself, but in the question of how investments pay off – and who has the capacity to figure that out.

The promise sounds enticing: AI recognizes plays, tags scenes in real time, generates graphics on the fly. And yes – it works. No longer just in demos, but in regular operation, in Bundesliga broadcasts as well as amateur football. The technology has delivered. But anyone who thinks the transformation is complete overlooks where the real pressure is coming from.

The Real Disruption Is Sitting on the Couch

The disruption isn't coming from the data center – it's coming from changed viewer behavior. Attention spans are shrinking, second-screen usage is standard, and expectations for personalization rise with every Netflix session. Young fans no longer want to consume ninety minutes linearly; they want highlights in seconds, statistics in real time, perspectives of their choice.

In this logic, AI is a tool, not an end in itself. It can help prepare content faster, deliver smarter recommendations, automatically analyze usage data. But it doesn't answer strategic questions. Which rights are still worth acquiring? How do I reach audiences who no longer know linear television? Where is the line between personalization and fragmentation of the sports experience?

Between Cost Pressure and the Promise of Innovation

A pattern that runs through many conversations with production managers: AI is positioned as an efficiency lever. Fewer staff in editing, automated subtitling, AI-assisted camera work for amateur sports. That saves money – but it doesn't change the product. Anyone producing the same broadcast more cheaply has improved the margin, not the relevance.

On the other side are AI applications that actually create new possibilities: more dynamic storylines, real-time analysis for commentators, personalized feeds for different viewer groups. But these tools cost – development, integration, training, ongoing operations. The crucial question is therefore not what is technically possible, but what pays off. What added value on screen justifies what effort behind it? This trade-off is rarely as clear-cut as product brochures suggest.

Innovation Requires Capacity

But who should answer this question? In practice, the bottleneck is rarely the technology itself – that's available. The bottleneck is the capacity to engage with it. Someone has to evaluate new tools, accompany pilot projects, learn from mistakes and carry that knowledge into the team – while day-to-day business continues, while the next event is being prepared, while the broadcast deadline won't wait.

Anyone who treats innovation as a side task to be handled alongside everyday business will fail. Not because of the technology, but from exhaustion. AI projects need dedicated attention – people who have the space to try things out without an immediate ROI requirement. This isn't optional, it's a prerequisite for figuring out which investments are worthwhile and which are not.

What Counts Is Judgment

Everyone who bears responsibility for media production knows this dilemma – whether in sports or elsewhere. In my daily work as a trade journalist for broadcast technology, I face the question every day: Which of the countless new tools deserve real attention? Which solve actual problems, which only create new ones? No data sheet provides the answer. It requires judgment that grows from experience – and from the willingness to also say no.

Because not everything that's possible makes sense. Not everything that impresses delivers reach or viewer retention. And not everything sold as innovation withstands the stress test of a sports broadcast where every second counts.

In the End, It's About Attitude

Perhaps the key lies less in the technology than in the attitude: honestly examining with every project what it's supposed to achieve – and what it's not. AI can take over routine tasks and create space for what machines cannot do: dramaturgy, context, the story behind the game. And it can become a lever for genuine innovation if you're willing to invest in new formats. Both have their place. But both require a conscious decision rather than reflexive bandwagon-jumping. Anyone who chases every trend loses focus.

And that's exactly why attending events like Sports Innovation is worthwhile: not to be dazzled by the next demo reel, but to look closely. To talk with colleagues facing similar challenges. To learn from their experiences – what worked, what failed, and why. These conversations at the booth, over coffee, between sessions: they have always been the real value of such industry gatherings. AI hasn't changed that.

Niklas Eckstein