



Covering the bases (and basics)

GROWING UP IN NORTHERN INDIANA, I was a faithful fan of the Chicago Cubs. Some of you may remember first baseman and outfielder Dave “Kong” Kingman who played for them in the 1978 to 1980 seasons.

Kingman hit a lot of home runs. But he also struck out. A lot. Bless his heart, no matter what inning it was, what the score was, how many outs there were, or how many men were on base and on what bases, Kingman always swung for the fences.

I found myself thinking of Kong as I spent last weekend in Florida with my dad to celebrate his 60th birthday. Part of the reason was that, in Dad’s presence, I reminisced about all those fun times as a kid when we drove or took a bus to Wrigley Field to sit with the rest of the “bleacher bums” and cheer on our beloved Cubbies. Another reason I was reminded of Kingman was because the birthday present I bought my dad and his reaction to it reminded me of Kong’s approach to the game.

Dad and his wife both watch a *lot* of television, a trait that I don’t share. My wife, though, loves our time-shifting PVR (personal video recorder), so I thought I’d get my dad one as a gift. Dad doesn’t share my passion for technology and is loath to crack open an instruction book. I explained to him—and he patiently listened to—all the benefits of the toy I’d bought him over the VCR it would replace: no tapes to wear out; near-instant access to any point of any show; an always-current on-screen program guide; and the ability to skip commercials, pause programs for bathroom or kitchen breaks, or replay Tiger Woods’ spectacular golf shots.

I explained that we’d have to connect the PVR to a spare telephone plug, so the shiny new box in his entertainment cabinet could download software and program guide updates in the middle of the night. Then, I disconnected the VCR and wired up

the PVR in its place, connecting the cable-TV coax line to the PVR’s RF input and the PVR’s RF output to the television. I handed him the remote, sat back, and watched to see what would happen next.

Dad’s eyesight is poor, so he first grumbled about the small print on the PVR’s user interface displayed on the TV screen and on the PVR’s remote control. Strike one against the PVR. Then he wanted to know if he could record one program while watching another, which he can do with his VCR by toggling the TV/VCR button to bypass the VCR and

BUNT SINGLES AND HOMERS BOTH SCORE RUNS.

changing channels using the TV’s built-in tuner. I eventually figured out that satisfying this request was possible by turning the PVR “off.” In this mode, it would still record, but it wouldn’t output a video signal. But he ended up with moderate interference “snow” on some of the channels. The VCR didn’t create this interference. Strike two.

Next, he complained that it took too long for the PVR to change channels, compared with the tuners in the television and the VCR. Mr Technical Guy (me) knew that this delay was caused by routing the signal through the PVR’s sequential tuner, video decoder, compression, decompression, video encoder, and other function stages, but these whiz-bang circuits didn’t enthrall Mr Everyman (Dad). He just wanted near-instant response to the PVR remote control’s channel-up-and-down buttons, like his television and VCR remote controls gave him, thank you very much. Foul ball.

Finally, we discovered that, for reasons that remain absolutely baffling to me, when the PVR tuned in

Channel 4—and only Channel 4—the result looked like a blown-up, low-resolution MPEG-1 distortion of the original signal, complete with huge, blocky artifacts—even when I *wasn’t* recording Channel 4. Channel 4 is the local Fox affiliate. Fox broadcasts some of my Dad’s favorite shows. Strike three, and the PVR was outta there. It’s now headed back to Amazon.com, and my dad is happily watching television through his trusty VCR again.

The PVR now is sort of like Kingman—rich in talent and perpetually swinging for homers. With my house as its Wrigley Field, the PVR does well. As a loyal fan, my wife is willing to overlook the occasional strikeout (the frenetic frame-stuttering style of 24 that confuses the commercial-skipping feature). As the trainer, I massage the star’s sore muscles, unafraid to pull the plug

and cycle power on the PVR when the audio inexplicably shuts off or to wade through arcane setup menus and manually acquire a new DHCP lease when the PVR forgets its IP address. Heck, tack on a cable, satellite, or terrestrial-DTV tuner, as today’s PVRs do, and you’ve got a set-top box even more complicated than the one now in my living room.

My dad’s house, in contrast, is a far less slugger-friendly stadium. It includes a tricky pitcher (the Bonita Springs, FL, cable system), which tosses the PVR video signals with curves and twists that the PVR was not expecting. And, as a more pragmatic fan, my dad prefers hitters who, although they may knock fewer balls out of the park, also have a much higher batting average. Dad was lukewarm to most of his new toy’s fancy features. Any well-rounded team includes both stadium-filling, quirky stars and lesser known, dependable colleagues. What the PVR market, and many others like it, needs are variants with fewer features but that reliably deliver the basics. Batter up, anyone?