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How sports have accelerated the transformation at Zebra Technologies

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Over three decades Zebra Technologies has transformed themselves from punch card manufacturer to a data-focused technology vendor.

Most of us would know them for their continuous roll desktop label & receipt printers. These are heavily used in manufacturing, medical and logistics settings. Over the years these have advanced significantly with the addition of RFID tag printing and in recent years' mobile solutions with batteries.

In 2014 Zebra purchased the Motorola Solutions Enterprise business. This brought on board the Symbol brand which is the gold standard for mobile & handheld computers used for barcode and RFID tag scanning.

Up until then, Zebra sold hardware for producing the labels; the acquisition got them into the business of hardware to scan and track those labels. These have come together to provide solutions that involve both the handheld computer and the printer, for example, a solution for field-based parking meter attendants.

In the last two years, the focus has shifted to data. More precisely what you can do with all this data being collected. Their data strategy is known as “Sense, Analyse and Act”. Referring to the idea of customers scanning, using software to analyse and then notifying or printing things to action.

A practical expression of this has been Zebra’s partnership with the American sports league NFL. Zebra has been appointed as the “Official On-Field Player Tracking Provider”.

This has seen small RFID tracking buttons sewn into both player uniforms and the ball. Then Zebra sensors are set up on the side of the field, and the data is sent back to Zebra’s Sports Network Operations Center in San Jose, California. The data is captured 25 times a second for every play in every game of the 2017 NFL season.

All of this comes together to enable the collection of real-time location and speed data for each player and ball as well as additional rotation data for the balls.

“We’re excited to build on our partnership with Zebra Technologies and collectively further the league’s commitment to innovation. The data gathered by Zebra over the past three seasons has become an invaluable asset to the NFL, and we’re excited to uncover new insights through the tagged Wilson footballs,” says Vishal Shah, Senior Vice President, Digital Media, NFL

“We are thrilled to support further the NFL’s mission to enhance football through cutting-edge technology by continuing to grow the Zebra Sports solutions portfolio. Tracking the football is the logical next phase of our collaboration with the NFL, and we’re eager to continue evolving the game of football for fans, broadcasters and coaches alike,” says Jill Stelfox, Vice President and General Manager, Location Solutions, Zebra Technologies

Zebra is already in talks with other sports codes and teams around the world including various forms of rugby.

The Zebra Sports Solution leverages the same tracking and location solutions technology that Zebra implements globally for enterprises of all sizes in healthcare, retail, manufacturing and transportation & logistics to give visibility to an organisation's assets, people and transactions.