



# Runaway Idea

The twin inventors of electronic monitoring still have regrets.

IN THE US DISTRICT COURTHOUSE in Los Angeles, a casually dressed businessman is showing his supervising officer where his electronic ankle bracelet injured his skin. He's been wearing the band for nearly two years, awaiting trial in a cigarette tax-stamp forgery case. "The new one can be worn over your sock," the officer says, helping him pull the fabric up through the plastic ring and folding it over so that the tracker nearly disappears. The alleged tax evader is pleased with the new, less bulky design. "When you're doing business and somebody sees that you're wearing a device," he explains, "they think they're being taped."

But for Robert Gable, the co-inventor of electronic monitoring technology, who is standing nearby, the scene is disheartening. Seeing how monitoring is used today, he says, "is like watching a child grow up retarded because of being misunderstood." Gable, who at 73 retains the bluff friendliness he relied on during a long career as a psychologist and researcher, asks the accused man how the technology could be improved.

"Does it come with a car charger?" the man asks.

Identical twins Bob and Kirk Gable were grad students at Harvard in the early '60s when they came up with the idea of using radio transmitters to track youthful malefactors. Bob was studying behavioral psychology with B. F. Skinner. Kirk's academic adviser was Timothy Leary. "Our idea was,

gosh, if you can train pigeons to play Ping-Pong," Bob says, "you ought to be able to get kids to show up for therapy on time."

"We wanted to apply operant conditioning to human social problems," Kirk adds.

The Gables described their invention in the journal *Behavioral Science* in 1964. They envisioned a system that would automatically track young offenders as they moved around a city. The kids could be rewarded for showing up at the right place at the right time—behavior modification in the form of a game. That's not how things turned out. With its roots in psychology forgotten, electronic monitoring became just another legal sanction.

Bob provokes an impromptu hallway debate with several officers he knows from his years of work in the field. He asks them

why the monitoring system can't be used for positive reinforcement instead of punishment. One of the officers smiles. "If it got out that offenders were getting rewarded," he says, "that would cause a huge stir."

Later, Bob and Kirk sit down with matching Cokes and talk about what went wrong with their idea.

"It's become a mutant," Bob says.

"An evil mutant!" Kirk says.

"We were trying to find a way to avoid the hostility and judgment that goes with treatment of juvenile offenders," Bob says.

"People still haven't realized that anger and hostility are counterproductive," Kirk says.

The inventors are linked by a sunny idealism that seems both old-fashioned and ahead of its time. They refuse to relinquish the hope that technology can make humans better. With mobile phones and satellite GPS, the tools for remote tracking are finally mature; what's missing, they say, is a kind of cultural maturity. We still prefer to punish people rather than help them change.

"Technology could facilitate normal human desires," Kirk begins.

"And foster tender shoots of new social growth," Bob finishes.

I ask the brothers to pose for a snapshot in front of Kirk's house in the San Fernando Valley. When I look at the photograph the next day, I notice that they are holding hands. —GARY WOLF