

New scouting technology could give teams an edge in NFL draft

By Pete Dougherty

When it comes to technology, scouting and competition in the NFL, one question almost answers itself.

“What would a team pay for one more win?” asked John Pollard, general manager-sports solutions at STATS LLC, a company that provides statistical analysis and information technology for sports teams.

The answer is plenty.

NFL teams looking for the latest edge are turning to sophisticated computer technology to help compile, organize and access scouting information. The latest is STATS' ICE platform, which stands for Interactive Collaboration and Evaluation.

The system fully computerizes a team's draft and pro scouting boards, and allows almost instant access to everything from a player's scouting report to his physical testing to his medical report to game videotape.

If the system proves successful and popular, the scouting war room in its current form — magnetized name cards literally comprising a draft board on the wall — could become obsolete in several years. In its place, rankings will show up on large computer monitors in the war room, as well as personal computers, laptops and even cellphones. Every draft prospect's name is listed with his grade, and with just a touch of a screen or click of a mouse, scouts and coaches can access all his information, with statistics often linked to their specific plays.

Same for the rosters of every NFL team.

“So instead of (only) a raw number,” Pollard said, “they can look at burned defender (statistics) and look when (Packers safety) Nick Collins was burned on a pass play and see was it actually Nick's fault or did the receiver have his hands on him or did Nick slip? What was his responsibility?”

The idea for ICE came in 2008, in discussions between Pollard, a former Microsoft software designer, and New Orleans Saints General Manager Mickey Loomis on ways to better organize and access the overwhelming amount of information NFL teams accumulate on draft prospects and pro players. Teams have relied on computers to store scouting information for years, and they have digital access to game videotapes of all kinds. But there was no way to bring it all together in a convenient, efficient way.

By 2009, Pollard had a version of ICE for the Saints' pro personnel department. Then for last year's draft the Saints used the ICE system to run parallel with the name-tags-and-magnets draft board they'd been using for years. They'll do the same this year, and Pollard thinks it will take a couple more years before the system can stand alone without the traditional manual draft board as a fallback.

More important than the actual war room, the system allows scouts to access ICE from their offices and take thumb drives on the road to plug into their laptops and cellphones. When scouts are on the road looking at or

testing players, they'll have all the information they'd have in the office, with the same comprehensive access to each player.

"I'd say over the next two years I'd expect to see much more of a prevalence of digital technologies in those (war) rooms," Pollard said. "But in the first part we are seeing the war room is portable and can sit on the desktop of every executive and scouting director in the organization."

Pollard said anywhere from 12 to 15 teams, including the Packers, have talked seriously about upgrading their college scouting systems to ICE, and he estimates that in two years close to half the NFL will be using it.

The value of ICE isn't so much on draft day — all the grading and ranking of players is finished by then, so during draft weekend the best feature is the easy removal and re-sorting of players on the board. But when scouts are in draft meetings or grading prospects on their own, they can quickly compare two players, including game video-tape of specific game situations, with minimal time and effort. Tap or click on one player's name to access his workout numbers and game tape, then do it with the other. In a room with multiple monitors, you can compare them side-by-side.

"Depending upon the culture of the organization, how they use the analytics and the information and stats that we provide, you can use it in player evaluation in both free agent market on the pro side and on the college level," Pollard said. "Some organizations will use the technology even further as far as game planning and strategic insights for a game."

STATS also is developing ICE for major college football, the NBA and Major League Baseball. It's part of the fast-growing business of sports analytics that started with the sophisticated analysis of baseball statistics and has spread to the other major sports.

STATS is one of several companies that provide detailed, nontraditional statistical data on the NFL, NBA and MLB.

In a sign of how much sports analytics are growing, MIT in early March hosted the fifth annual Sloan Sports Analytic Conference, which expanded to a two-day affair from one day the first four years. The event featured best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell as a speaker, 20 panel discussions with titles such as "Gut vs. Data: How do coaches make decisions?" and the submission of more than 100 academic papers with titles such as "Flipping Coins in the Draft Room: Skill and Chance in the NFL Draft."

It's the next step in sports scouting, not only to accumulate nontraditional statistics but also to make sense of them.

"The growing presence of technology in evaluation and game planning, it's here," Pollard said. "The MIT conference had twice as many attendees as it had last year and it continues to grow. It's an interesting time, an exciting time for us in information services."