

Saints marching with digital data IdentityMine edge: Video with detailed player profiles

BY SEAN JENSEN Staff Reporter

INDIANAPOLIS -- In a league in which teams are constantly looking for an edge, the Super Bowl-champion New Orleans Saints have begrudgingly divulged one of their secrets.

A company called IdentityMine, based in Tacoma, Wash., last season developed a system for the Saints that merged player records, reports and charts with videos to streamline the team's personnel department. Northbrook-based STATS Inc. provided specialized content, and Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard provided the touch-screen technologies.

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The system is called ICE, which stands for Interactive, Collaboration & Evaluation.

"They're ecstatic about it," Saints general manager Mickey Loomis said of his scouts. "But they hate this because now it might be available to other teams."

The days of curmudgeon scouts hand-writing player reports are numbered as NFL teams transition from the Stone Age to the Digital Age. It's not surprising that Loomis is at the forefront. He started his NFL career in Seattle, where Microsoft has a dominant presence.

"We always took pride in having the most cutting-edge stuff," Loomis said of the Seahawks. "We were one of the first teams that took advantage of computer technology to manage our information."

In 2007, John Pollard of Microsoft created an interactive lounge, featuring Xbox and computers, for Saints players. Then, Pollard, after joining IdentityMine, discussed ways he could help Loomis and his staff. In January 2009, Pollard interviewed coaches and scouts to gauge how they could use technology to become more efficient. In October, STATS signed on to provide access to their X-Info, highly specific statistics (such as yards after catch or how often a cornerback has been burned for a touchdown).

"We were excited because we'd never seen X-Info tied to a video catalog," said Nick Stamm, the associate director of marketing and communications at STATS. "So it's increasing the value of the data, and it's more user-friendly!"

Hewlett-Packard provided different monitors and computers, including a touch-screen tablet.

"It's all about innovation, where the tools help personnel make better decisions in half the time," said Manvir Sandhu, a marketing director at HP.

Now IdentityMine is prepared to expand its service to other teams -- on a first-come, first-served basis.

Pollard said his company is able to implement the system for the entire 2010 season for 13 NFL teams, including the Saints. The cost is just under \$250,000, with an annual maintenance fee thereafter.

Along with Stamm and representatives from HP, Pollard is showcasing his system to NFL executives and coaches at the scouting combine. Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank and Minnesota Vikings vice president Rick Spielman are among those who already have seen ICE.

"It really unlocks the knowledge and intelligence teams have available to them," said Pollard, IdentityMine's director of business development for sports and entertainment.

For instance, the Saints' grades of incoming rookies are on a magnetic board in the team's personnel room. But IdentityMine's system will digitize the draft board, automatically updating the ever-changing grades and allowing the information to be displayed on other platforms.

With the system, players can download "homework" onto their mobile phones via a USB cable, and coaches can more easily package information for meetings.

"I think this technology will help our coaches more than it'll help our personnel department," Loomis said, noting that the game plans could be automated.

Scouts can compare dozens of players simultaneously, organizing them in any number of ways, from team-assessed grades to height to a specific statistic.

Asked if any scouts were resistant to the technology, Loomis said, "No, because I'm driving the bus on that.

"This is what we're doing."

Although ICE saved the Saints time, the club didn't get to access all the tools during the entire 2009 season. Loomis said they missed the window to get coaches up to speed, but he leaned on his pro personnel scouts to serve as the guinea pigs. Scouts used the system to help evaluate upcoming opponents.

"To do reports, you have to go to the specific source," he said. "Now, we touch it -- and boom, boom -- it's right there at our fingertips.

"I see the potential."