

STREET & SMITH'S SportsBusiness JOURNAL

From The Field Of

Effective digestion of information can elevate a GM's game

Published July 30, 2007 : Page 14



**MATTHEW
MAROLDA**

Ever wonder why general managers in professional sports typically make a ton of money? Consider the range of responsibilities they have:

- They have to handle local media and fans who watch their every move and may skewer them for not bringing home a championship every year.
- They have to build a team that is successful now and in the future.
- They have to negotiate multimillion-dollar contracts with superstars and rookies.
- Their team has to win enough games to generate enough revenue to satisfy the team's owner.

- They have to scrutinize every batting average, free-throw percentage, rushing yards per season, goals against average and countless other minutiae of every player, prospect and opponent.

By the numbers

That last point is critical to a GM's success, yet analyzing player performance is tricky business. Aside from the obvious skills evaluation, GMs have to sift through volumes of data not only to better understand the performance of all-stars, but also to uncover the hidden gems.

For example, which 22-year-old first baseman out of the hundreds in the minor leagues has the same characteristics as Albert Pujols at the same age? What is the probability that kid will become a superstar?



Assembling an efficient database can help GMs keep abreast of player and league information.

Complicating matters for the GM is the fact that critical information (such as game-performance statistics, health histories, contract details and personal background) is often found in diverse areas that are not easily mapped together. This means the GM has to deal separately with each set of data and try to synthesize the information.

Now imagine tracking all of this with an antiquated system that forces the front office to resort to using huge boards with hundreds of magnets representing each potential draft pick or player in the league.

GMs ahead of the curve might have a patchwork system involving statisticians who collect, collate and study data in Excel spreadsheets.

The GMs then must work the data to put it into a format they can use for study and comparative analyses. It's a time-consuming, frustrating process that limits detailed analysis and hampers an ability to build an effective team.

A different approach

GMs can be more effective by borrowing a page from the sophisticated data analysis that financial markets professionals use. With the right data assembly and the latest data visualization technology, GMs can integrate myriad and complex facts and figures into digestible formats that make it easy for them to scrutinize player performance.

The information can be shown on large, high-definition screens in the office or on laptops. With Internet access, the results can be updated easily, often and automatically as the information or its availability changes.

Here's what a front office staff can do:

1. Break down the disparate data and unify all the information coming from scouts, the league, news wires, in-house statisticians and other sources.

A sophisticated, well-designed database is the key for allowing GMs to cull information electronically from different sources. The data in one repository enables GMs to assemble and analyze it more effectively.

With this information at their fingertips, GMs can then react in real time when one of their peers calls soliciting a trade or when a player agent e-mails a contract request.

2. Create custom, in-house statistical models built from league-provided data. With this capability, teams will conduct analyses that match the philosophy of the front office and will not have to rely on third-party, online sources that may or may not have accurate data.

3. Use technology to dramatically accelerate the process and make the analysis accessible anywhere. (The common approach for most professional teams to obtain more useful analyses is to hire more staff.)

By collecting and analyzing data primarily with technology, the up-to-date GM creates a process that uses existing computer hardware, networks and human resources more efficiently to obtain better information — without having to hire additional staff.

Scouts can enter vital data from the field so that GMs can view up-to-the minute information. GMs traveling to away games, owners' meetings and prospect workouts can access information on the fly, which is vital with player negotiations or trade discussions that take place on the road.

Having this kind of meaningful data and powerful analysis at their fingertips will elevate GMs from the tired magnet system or scattered Excel spreadsheets and Web-site data to on-demand information.

GMs should capitalize on existing Internet capabilities that will help automate real-time data collection and assembly and present the information they need in graphic formats they can use.

That's how the progressive GMs of the future will make sense of a now-chaotic process. As a result, they will increase their chances of fielding winning teams.

Matthew Marolda is CEO of Cambridge, Mass.-based StratBridge Inc., which provides data analysis and visualization products and services to the financial services industry as well as to more than 100 professional sports teams.