

Numbers game: From NFL to World Cup, STATS keeps teams, fans captivated with ever-flowing sports data

BY DAVID SWEET

When a blizzard struck the Chicago area Feb. 1, some shops shut down until plows removed 20 inches of snow.

STATS, a 24/7 company supplying sports data across the world, couldn't afford even one snow day. Web sites from Yahoo! to CBSsports.com demanded real-time scores; leagues such as the National Basketball Association yearned for data. Though its spacious one-floor operation a bunt away from freight-train tracks in Northbrook closed for about 36 hours, employees logged in from home to keep the operation running.

"We didn't miss a beat," said STATS CEO Gary Walrath. "Our clients didn't know anything (out of the ordinary) was going on in Chicago unless they checked the weather report."

STATS -- originally called Sports Team Analysis and Tracking Systems -- was launched 30 years ago by John Dewan, a baseball statistics aficionado, in his basement. Today, the firm -- co-owned by News Corp. and The Associated Press since 2005 -- boasts more than 300-full time employees worldwide, along with a handful of part-timers and hundreds of sports reporters who attend games and record data.

Its selection of services is wide. Aside from fantasy sports offerings and updates on mobile devices (it collaborated with The Times of London Web site on a World Cup iPhone application last summer), STATS is the official statistician for more than 300 leagues from soccer to auto racing around the globe and provides statistics for more than 4,000 broadcasts a year.

Before Super Bowl XLV -- whose 111 million U.S. viewers on Feb. 6 made it the most-watched television program in American history -- STATS provided 23 pages of game notes for Fox Sports announcers Joe Buck and Troy Aikman and their broadcast crew. Nuggets ranged from franchises which have won Super Bowls under three different coaches (Dallas and Pittsburgh before the game; Green Bay after the 31-25 win) and the number of teams reaching the Super Bowl after starting 8-6 (the 1979 Los Angeles Rams, 2008 Arizona Cardinals and this year's Packers). A STATS employee also plopped down in the production truck with Fox programmers during the game to pass along any statistics relating to records set and more.

Drew Brees
NEW ORLEANS SAINTS
3 - QB Rating: 90.9
 Yards: 4620 TD: 33

Height: 6-0 Born: 1/15/1979
 Weight: 209 Birthplace: Austin, TX
 Exp: 10 years College: Purdue
 Draft: 1st pick, Chargers '01, 2nd Round

INCOMPLETE PASS INFORMATION 2010

Pass Attempted	Type	Number	% Inc	% of Overall Attempts
658	Pass Droppout	32	15.3	4.9
	Poor Throw	66	31.4	10.0
448	Pass Defensed	63	30.0	9.6
	Pass Hit at Line	13	6.2	2.0
	Other	14	6.0	2.1
210	Intercepted	22	10.5	3.3

STATS offers a variety of statistics on pro athletes.

JASON KIDD #2
DALLAS MAVERICKS - PG
 Height: 6'4" PPG: 15.5 RPG: 4.7 APG: 8.2
 Weight: 210 lbs

JASON KIDD PASSING DISTRIBUTION

	Passes	Assists	FGA	FGA%	FG PTS
Jason Terry	767	52	196	26%	0.469
Dirk Nowitzki	549	69	168	31%	0.625
DeShawn Stevenson	359	25	74	21%	0.378
Caron Butler	341	45	133	39%	0.474
Shawn Marion	258	31	75	29%	0.52
Tyson Chandler	205	23	40	20%	0.625
Other	449	29	96	21%	0.625
	2928	274	782	9%	0.504

JASON KIDD PASSES

- 19% Nowitzki
- 12% Stevenson
- 12% Butler
- 9% Marion
- 7% Chandler
- 7% Other
- 26% Terry

STATS expects big things from SportVU.

Game review

Unearthing unique information is crucial to the company's growth. One division, STATS Content and Licensing Group, creates X-Info, which stands for Extra Information. Data is collected off game videotape review by more than two dozen employees in a glass-enclosed area, who pause and rewind countless plays off the television sets at their desks. "We have various levels of detail. With the NFL, we dig really deep," said Allan Spear, who works in the STATS operations area. Information teams pay for can include yards gained after a catch and how many defenders have been burned.

STATSPass is another example of proprietary information available to clients. For NFL teams, it includes 10-play drives, yards after catch and other important data. For Major League Baseball clients, the number of broken bats and throws to first base by a pitcher to check a runner are posted at a secure Web site.

"We create unique insights in sports you can't get anywhere else," Walrath said. "We create it once and repurpose it."

WGN Sports broadcasts hundreds of Chicago pro team games each year. Bob Vorwald of WGN Sports says STATS' contribution to telecasts from the Bulls to the Cubs is crucial.

"They help us tell stories by providing interesting statistical information along with supporting numbers for comparison and relevance," he noted. "STATSPass allows us to look up just about any baseball and basketball stat under the sun."

At the Big Ten Network, STATS data feeds are utilized in its iPhone application to provide real-time play-by-play for football and men's basketball games. Michael Calderon, vice president of digital and interactive media for the Big Ten Network, appreciates the insights the company provides.

"We utilize STATS Pass and the STATS research hotline to come up with nuggets such as this one: Of the last five teams to win back-to-back games vs. Top 10 teams, Purdue is two of the five," he said.

STATS also measures sports positions which previously had defied measurement. Think of football's offensive line, where players can't be quantified by, say, interceptions and touchdowns scored as other positions can. STATS and New York Life created a New York Life Protection Index for protecting the quarterback in December.

"They asked us to come up with a formula to assess offensive line pass blocking. We used quarterback knock-downs and quarterback hurries -- data points no one else has," explained Nick Stamm, senior manager for communications at STATS.

Hardest hit

STATS also developed the McDonald's Pounder, which measured the hardest hit each week in the NFL, in 2005.

"One of the things we've been aggressively pursuing is working with Madison Avenue in branding stats," Stamm said.

Creating and running sports fantasy games remains a mainstay for the firm. STATS has developed basic games involving March Madness and salary caps, but it has also hosted some unusual ones, such as for the American Idol television show and another program, Design Star, dealing with interior decorating (both games focus on guessing which contestants will survive).

"Any results-driven event, you can make a game off of it," Stamm said.

STATS can help modernize team information. For example, when he worked at Microsoft, STATS' John Pollard saw that the New Orleans Saints managed player data by moving magnets on a wall. He started working with STATS on an application where player information is digitized in one spot. Anyone looking up quarterback Drew Brees today, for instance, would find his scouting report, medical history and more.

Since Walrath arrived in 2003, STATS has grown dramatically. The company has scores of new employees, and revenue has jumped fivefold. The bevy of international offices, from Tokyo to Mexico City, all opened since the Lincolnshire resident joined STATS after working as executive vice president of operations for the STAR Group in Asia.

Walrath pointed out the privately held firm is solidly profitable. Looking ahead over the next five years, "We will grow in new markets and keep core competencies here," he said. "Our intent is to fill every profitable sports niche below live video."

And if a disaster beyond a nearly 2-foot blizzard hits corporate headquarters in the future? Walrath isn't worried. "If something catastrophic happens, we have a plan to open the next day," he said. "Everything here is fully redundant."