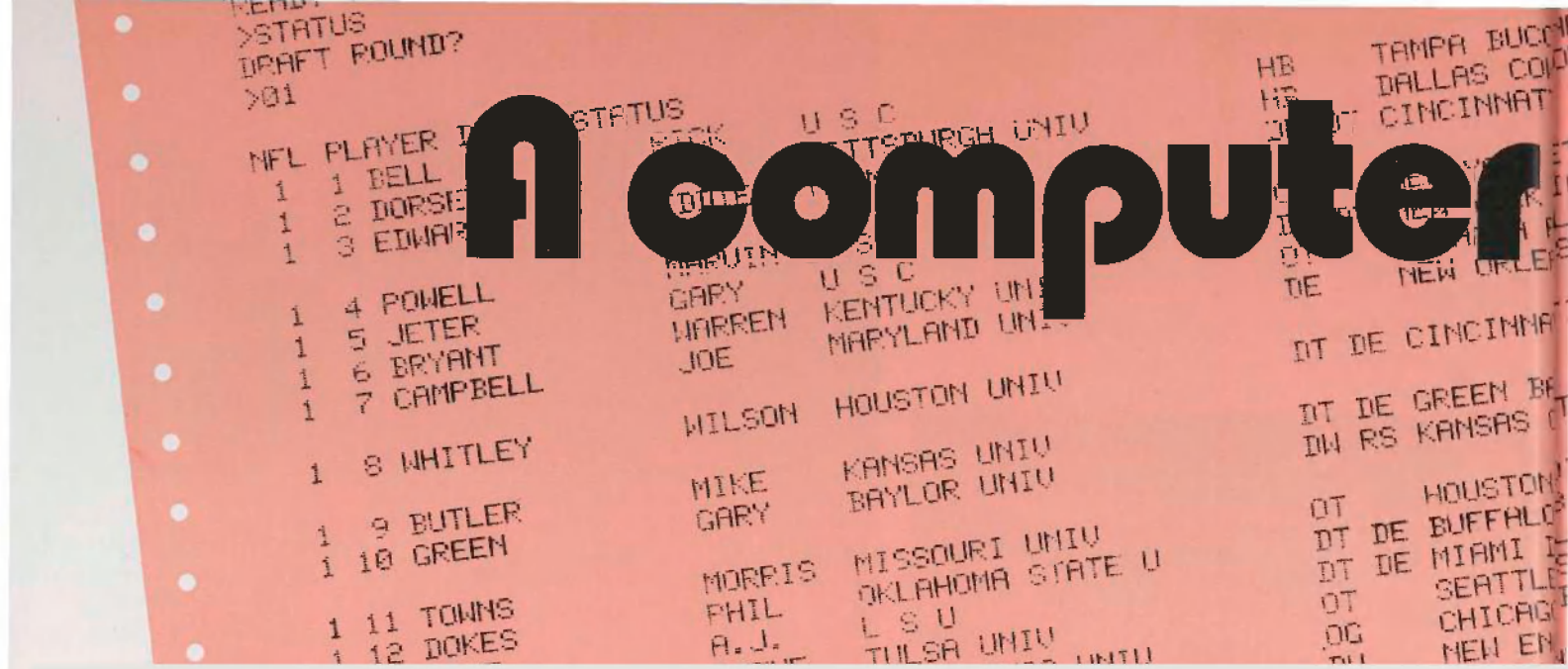
1978

Computer at the NFL draft

Robert Parker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NFL PLAYER
1 1 BELL
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1 9 BUTLER
1 10 GREEN
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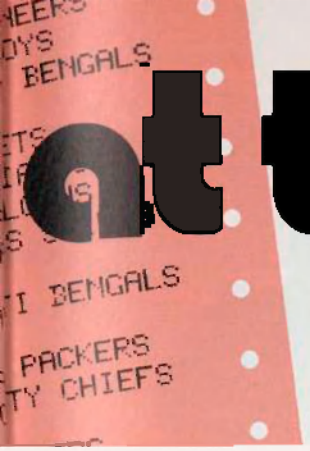
A computer



at the NFL draft

by ROBERT PARKER/Editor

"Tampa Bay selects Ricky Bell, running back, University of Southern California."

From the 482 names that paper the right wall, a BLESTO scout lifts the strip with Bell's name from the halfback column and transfers it across the room to the Tampa Bay heading on the opposite wall. The 1977 National Football League player draft has begun, and by the following night 336 names—defensive players in red, offensive in black—will be transferred across the room to the 28 NFL teams which selected them.

It is May 3, 1977, at Veterans Stadium, Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Eagles are hosting the nine NFL teams which belong to BLESTO, one of the league's two major scouting combines. At a long table in the center of the room sit BLESTO scouts who have seen the players perform, while adjoining rooms house assistant coaches of the nine teams, each linked by phone to his NFL city.

To fans of non-playoff teams, the build-up to the NFL draft is as suspenseful as are the final games of the regular season. For a club's fortunes are directly linked to how it uses its draft choices over a three- to five-year period.

"We have a trade. The Seattle Seahawks send their first-round pick to Dallas . . . and the Cowboys take Tony Dorsett, halfback, University of Pittsburgh."

The room buzzes. Who got the edge? How do you evaluate a player? How do you match his speed, size, intelligence, and desire to your own needs? And how do you compare his position and his level of competition with that of 1,000 other seniors to decide which man's ability, which man's position is most important to your team?

Pro football personnel people tackle such complex data the same way it is done in business: on a computer.

Thus, one "civilian" also sits at the long table. He is Jim Renouf, a stocky, deep-voiced computer specialist from Western Publishing Company, which sells computer services to BLESTO. In front of Renouf sits a 29-pound computer terminal with a keyboard and printout. The phone piece tucked into its back provides BLESTO a direct line during the entire draft with a mineload of information stored in a Univac 1110 computer in Racine, Wis.

The scouts sit facing the wall of players' names, recording the order in which they are selected. (A fan would face the wall with team listings, to see who selected whom.) "Allllright," says one, "the first seven picks are players BLESTO rated best in their position."

At the head of the long table sits the director of BLESTO, Jack Butler. A former Pittsburgh defensive back who had 52 interceptions during his 9-year career in the 1950s, Butler has the square jaw and bright eyes of a man who was strong against both the run and the pass. Both here and in his two-room headquarters in downtown Pittsburgh, he is continually sought for advice, and his gentle voice does not conceal the toughness of his opinions.

Origins of BLESTO

BLESTO was organized in 1963 as the Bears, Lions, Eagles, Steelers Talent Organization—it was later joined by the Bills, Chiefs, Colts, Dolphins, and Vikings—but its scouting reports were rather primitive when the owners hired Butler in 1966 and suggested he look into the computer.

"I didn't know what computers, what programming were all about," he says. "One consultant asked

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exactly what was it I wanted. I didn't know—exactly! And there were language problems, such as when they talked of core storage and down time and COBOL. I decided to go to night college."

That first year's printout was equally primitive. Butler describes the four categories of speed: excellent, good, average, and slow. Good men could be spotted—Ron Yary, still a Viking tackle, was the top-rated of 977 athletes—but "general comments" was the catch-all heading for most information.

Today, BLESTO records a man's speed in hundredths of a second and the conditions, the weather, the time of day, the track surface, and who did the timing. It also records height, weight, injuries, a dozen abilities based on position, and if ratings are based on coaches' comments or personal observation of practice, games, or film. Each player's record is filed under a combination of the code number of his school and his jersey number.

Butler sends one of eight area scouts to see a potential pro in the spring and fall. The better of these seniors are also observed by one of three regional scouts and possibly BLESTO's national scout. Copies of their written reports go to each BLESTO team, but the material is also key-punched in Racine, Wis. and entered on a computer disk.

Twice each year, complete computer printouts on the seniors are sent to each BLESTO team (supplemented by semi-annual meetings in which the scouts talk directly to the coaches of BLESTO teams). Many lists are printed:

—Alphabetical by name.
—Alphabetical by school.
—Overall athletic ability, all positions, nationwide.
—Ranking by ability for each position, nationwide.
—Overall ability, all positions, in each scout's area.
—Ranking by ability, for each position, in each scout's area.
—Ranking by position, nationally, according to speed.
—Ranking by position, nationally, according to size.
—A name and address listing.

Each athlete's combined statistical information is printed out in one line in these listings. In addition,

—A history file, a two-page printout on each player includes as well the written comment by each scout.

Grading of Players

In the first 30 minutes of the May draft, 11 players are chosen. At about this point in any draft, the blue chip players are gone, and each team begins to use more of the 15 minutes it is allotted for the balancing act between its needs and the best athletes remaining. Thus, the key to BLESTO's service is the grading it gives to each player.

Ratings range from .4 to 3.1. Very few players are rated from .4 to .9; such an athlete could start his first year for any team in the league. Most high round draft picks rate from 1.0 to 1.5, the lower the number the earlier the pick; these are eventual starters. Above 1.8 means an athlete may have size, speed, and talent but not all three; these will be free agents, with a potential to make the club.

The first round has ended after three hours. Watching closely is the Steelers' Art Rooney, Sr., whose son, Art, Jr. originated BLESTO. He is a short man, with white hair and a cigar stuck into the side of his mouth. He says little, but the affection he has for the draft process is clear, as is the affection that these football men have for him.

"That was a tough first round, Mr. Rooney," says Jack Butler. "Some teams really took a gamble."

A scout always has questions. He knows he is judging another human

being. He also knows his rating may differ from the computer's, which is programmed to interpret cold statistics: the school's level of competition, the quality of its coaching, the player's size and speed relative to his position, an injury record, his performance record.

Thus, scout and machine complement one another.

"How can the computer evaluate the performance of a defensive end who is projected as a pro linebacker?" asks Butler. "He has never played linebacker, and it will reject him as a lineman because he is too light. Another thing," he taps his heart, "how do you put this on a computer?"

Jim Renouf agrees that emotions are difficult to quantify. But the close to 40,000 lines of instruction he has given to the Univac 1110 cover everything from body and leg structure to home telephone numbers. Last year, operators at Western Publishing keypunched 3,500 separate reports on 1,004 seniors.

Renouf has set up the computer so that information may be retrieved in 15 seconds or less. This is a far cry from the 25 hours it sometimes required under the original system in 1966. That was an alphabetized sequentially batched system using a scientific computer language, FORTRAN, explains Renouf. "It just wasn't geared to BLESTO's needs. Jack needed a random access system, so he could ask for the 10 fastest players, over six feet six inches, or whatever criteria he had, and receive a response quickly. He also needed COBOL, a computer language better suited for file manipulation; and it was clear that identifying players by a code number would increase the computer's efficiency."

Renouf worked 16 hours a day for six months in 1970 to set up 20 basic programs for BLESTO's needs. Not only did he set up an "online, mass-storage-oriented, random access system," he also had to design a report form that would be simple for not only the scouts to follow but also the key-punch operators.

The highly sophisticated system is key-word driven. Thus, Renouf enters the word "draft" when a player is chosen. He types the name on the keyboard, and the computer files the player under the proper round and team and is able to print his basic scouting statistics on request. Once a player is selected, he is coded ineligible for the draft; his name is not purged, since the online system is designed to print an up-to-the-minute status of the draft by position, by round, or by team.

In order to answer requests for the top remaining players by such categories as BLESTO rating, speed, weight, or position, the player master file is randomly organized according to an interlocking coding system. In coding the retrieval criteria, for example, defensive corner back is position code 16. When this retrieval code is matched to a table code that provides access to the data stored in the computer, the information on a player is ready for printing. All information remains in the computer so that draft choices by round and by team can be printed in subsequent years.

Team Criteria

The selection process has slowed to a crawl. Like certain recent Super Bowls, there is more excitement in the buildup than in the event itself. And the NFL draft also prompts more second-guessing, for the process is not actually over at the end of two days. Which team chose better players? Which team better filled its needs?

"First of all, you have to pick a player that fits your system, even if other players are rated higher," points out Herman Ball, Eagles' director of player personnel. "Then, you can't really evaluate a draft for three years, until you see how a player matures. Is he contributing more each year? Does he make it more difficult each year for another player to make the team?"

If recent Super Bowl appearances are any criteria, BLESTO teams, which represent but one-third of the NFL, are breaking in the right

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players. "The key," says Dick Haley of the Steelers, "is judging a player's potential development. For you need new players each year, even if you have won the Super Bowl. And each team will go at it with different standards. The Steelers, for example, don't require defensive linemen to be as tall as some teams do. We've had success with men 6-2 or so, and other teams won't consider that height."

The Steelers, of course, built themselves through wise draft choices in the early 70s. They enter the draft with 300 men on their list and a room full of information. They begin with the BLESTO reports, then follow up with their own scouting reports on players or positions in which they have an interest. "At any point in the draft," Haley says, "we know pretty much the size and speed of everyone who is left."

Other teams acknowledge a greater reliance on BLESTO's computer during the draft. Les Miller of the Kansas City Chiefs describes how his office of player personnel often calls after a round for both the top 10 athletes remaining, and the top offensive linemen, and then checks the information with its own records. "The round in which you draft a player is vital. You don't take a player in the second round who will still be there in the fifth round, but you do take a player who will be gone before your third round turn comes."

Thus, Jack Butler says, "for all the information we have stored, we don't deal with facts and figures only. We are making judgments. We can time a player exactly, but when a scout says, 'this man is quick,' what the hell is *quickness*? It's subjective. So the computer is a great tool, and without it we would need 200 clerks to keep track of our records—if we could—but I don't want to overemphasize its role. Because when you get down to it, what matters is how well a player fills a need and how well we have judged the intangibles, like quickness."

Future Applications

Between the slow rounds on the second day of the draft—when one team is not requesting the name of all linemen who are 6-4 and 240, with 4.9 speed, or another is not asking for all players with 4.6 speed, whatever position—Renouf occasionally needles Butler on the further use that could be made of the computer. Why, for example, cannot the same data be entered for pro players?

In all competitive situations, there is a certain secretiveness—as TEMPO faced when it agreed not to publish BLESTO ratings of specific players—and one wonders if coaches would release such vital information as weight and speed. But Butler has obviously considered the question. For he would like to add minutes played as a pro to such a record. But he is obviously working under budget constraints. At the moment, the next practical step, he believes, will be to review a scout's work—to see how well he has predicted pro potential and if he is more accurate with certain types of players.

You cannot quiet a creative computer man easily, however. Many NFL teams use computer systems for ticketing, budgeting, personnel, and some teams use the machine in formulating their game plan. They analyze the tendencies of their opponents as well as themselves. What does an offense (or defense) tend to do on third down, when the ball is on the 40 yard line, when there is one minute to play in the half, when the team is ahead (or behind), when five yards are needed for a first down? If a given tendency can be found, the defense (or offense) can attack somewhere else.

Knowing this, Renouf has a vision of himself on the sideline with his 29-pound computer terminal. "There is no question that I could call every play in a game based on past tendencies, and I bet I would win more than my share." But, alas, the NFL has a rule prohibiting such machines on the sidelines. "They want to keep the human element as part of the game, and I have to admit they're right," says Renouf.

"The Oakland Raiders choose Rolf Benirshke, kicker, University of California at Davis."

The last of 336 selections has been made. It is early evening on May 4. It has been a long, slow two days, spiced by the speculation over certain picks. The BLESTO scouts are leaving.

But the assistant coaches from each BLESTO team remain. As they wait, the computer terminal is chattering away. The machine is printing BLESTO's rating of the top 25 unselected athletes in each position. These seniors are now free agents, and some of the scouts will be hopping planes to their university in hopes of signing them.

From now on, BLESTO teams are once again in competition.