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Buckeyes boot up to get a leg up

Computers and DVDs, not film, help scout opponents

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Scottsdale, Ariz.- Football players don't watch film. All that talk of Ohio State players like Troy Smith or Brandon Mitchell being film rats? Complete lies.

It's not 1977. Jim Tressel isn't in the back of the room scotch-taping together plays for a film strip. Players watch DVDs or a computer screen. Not film, and hardly ever tape.

"But that doesn't sound right," OSU center Doug Datish said, protesting the idea of studying DVDs. "You think of a projector when you think of football film."

That's the romantic idea of bygone days, Tressel pulling down the screen and flipping off the lights as a projector putters into action in a classroom reeking of sweat and mud. The reality, as it has been for about a decade, is far more complex and accessible, and for the first time this year, far more portable.

After switching this season to a company called DVSport, which works with several college and NFL teams, including the Browns, Ohio State brought along a computer server to prepare for the national title game this week. The Buckeyes' video setup in Arizona is nearly as sophisticated as the roughly \$125,000 system they use during the season. That means nearly instantaneous availability of practice replays on the laptops of the Buckeyes coaches.

"In the past when you went to a bowl, it was kind of a step backward," said Brian Lowe, the president of DVSport. "You'd have to go back to using tape and shuttle it back and forth and it was more time consuming. Now they can walk off the practice field and into meetings as if they were at home."

That means a sortable array of plays broken down by every conceivable category available, with the ability to zoom in on a particular player, at the click of a computer mouse.

"I like to look at the guy I'm going against and see what his tendencies are, how he uses his hands, what foot does he step with first, does he seem strong on film, what moves would I do that would work on him," defensive end Jay Richardson said.

That means very few tapes to pop in or rewind, lots of time saved and smarter players.

"A lot more," OSU quarterbacks coach Joe Daniels said. "I remember the days when it all had to be done by hand and we had a guy who did that; he cut up film and spliced it together. Now it's bang, bang, bang."

Said Lowe: "Probably the biggest change in coaching in the last five to 10 years is the ability to take this video and anytime, anyplace have access to this data."

While the Buckeyes studied for Florida, they didn't sit down and watch 13 full games. Instead, in groups and individually, they watched the plays and situations that most applied to them, as they have all year.

Want to know what Florida does on first down with three receivers in the game against a blitz? You can sort out all the plays that apply with a click. Want to refresh yourself on what the Buckeyes offense does at midfield on third-and-10 against the nickel defense? Click and you have it. The Buckeyes who learn the system best consider it almost a form of cheating because focusing on certain scenarios can lead to absolute knowledge on the field.

"You can find keys if you see something over and over," Datish said. "When you see that formation and you know this is happening, I get a sense of deja vu on the field quite a bit."

The system works because OSU video coordinator Mark Quisenberry and another staffer videotape the Buckeyes games from two angles, the sideline and the end zone, and input the video into the computer system. The staff of graduate assistants then labels each play with the appropriate data - down and distance, field position, formation, etc.

Then it's there for players to view in units and alone, though about two-thirds of their "film study" is done individually. The system also allows for a player or a coach to pick out a play and leave it for someone else in the system, much like an e-mail. So if Troy Smith sees a weakness in a defense, he can point it out to Tressel not by saying, 'Hey, remember this,' but by directing him to the exact video.

"There's certain things that might stick out to you that don't stick out to someone else," Smith said. "Then you're able to leave that for them."

During the season, players can show up to view plays on one of 12 laptops available in the football offices, or take different groupings of plays, called "cutups," home on DVDs. Smith's mom remembers him locking himself in his room to watch his DVDs on visits home to Cleveland. Quisenberry said tackle Kirk Barton prefers to convert his DVDs and watch plays on his video iPod.

On a typical road game, the team takes four laptops on the road, and the videotape is so quickly loaded into the system that when the Buckeyes' return flight after a road game at Illinois was delayed earlier this season, the coaching staff spent the downtime studying the game the Buckeyes had just played. Richardson said the day before the game, the defense gathers in a final meeting and each Buckeye gives a report on the individual offensive player they studied the most and how to attack him. After 51 days between games, the reports on Florida should be pretty good.

But it's not because the Buckeyes watched film. They watched something far more valuable, no matter what they call it.

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