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Sanity within the madness

Comerford's software revolutionizes hoops coaching

BY TODD SLISS

The NCAA Division I Final Four took place last weekend. March into April Madness was brought to you, in part, by Ross Comerford.

Though Comerford is highly qualified to give advice to the best pro and college basketball coaches in the nation — and he does — his impact comes not by running their Xs and Os, but by helping them keep their Xs and Os in order.

The 1997 Scarsdale High School graduate, a standout in both high school and Division III college basketball, has spent the last 11 years developing software that is now used by all 30 National Basketball Association teams, over 90 percent of Division I basketball programs and in more than 70 countries. The 35-year-old no longer has to fight to get clients — now he has to work to keep them by staying ahead of the curve that he's created.

Pushing the envelope in the technology and business worlds with FastModel Sports has been a grind for Comerford, who sleeps four hours per night, but he's enjoyed every minute of the journey. "It's all about attention to detail," Comerford said. "That's my personality and my DNA. Good enough is never acceptable. That's how I was as a player and that's how I am as an entrepreneur and an executive."

At Nazareth College, where he was a starting point guard, Comerford studied economics and business administration. The 2001 grad taught himself to be a programmer and product designer, too, all of which came in handy when he started his business at his parents' kitchen table with a dial-up modem, a laptop, a flip phone and his vision.

Comerford's original goal was to work for an NBA team, but after impressing the New Jersey Nets president of basketball operations Rob Thorn with his analysis of the Nets' previous two seasons, Comerford went to an interview, visited the team's training camp and realized it wasn't for him.

"I wanted to start my own business," he said. "Now it's en vogue to want to be a founder and an entrepreneur. I kind of fell into this. It wasn't something I planned to do. My passion always has been sports and technology and I wanted to do something different."

Comerford's first program in 2003 centered on advanced analytics, which is about inputting stats — even in real-time during a game — and getting reports on your team's and your opponent's tendencies.

Thanks to his friend Hilary Howard (SHS '95), Comerford got in the door at Duke. Howard graduated as Duke's all-time assists leader, led the team to the national finals as a senior in 1999 and was a potential WNBA player until injuries sidelined her. Comerford's 10-minute meeting with Duke coaches Gail Goestenkors and Mike Krzyzewski turned into two hours and they became his first client. Comerford started off by asking the coaches questions, and by the end of the meeting they were the ones asking the questions. (He has used their input and the feedback and questions from other pro and college coaches to further his business throughout the years.)

Next up was Syracuse's Jim Boeheim and Mike Hopkins. Then it was Frank Vogel of the Boston Celtics, now the head coach of the Indiana Pacers. "They were my first three clients in literally two days," Comerford said. "I had a business now."

Instead of taking 10 hours Googling information, rewatching videos to compile information and writing down that information, the job now took seconds with Comerford's FastStats. That extra time could be used to spend with



STEPHEN J. SERIO/CRAIN'S CHICAGO BUSINESS

Ross Comerford's basketball drawing app for iPad from FastModel Sports further revolutionized the coaching industry.

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one's family, sleep, recruit, develop players, you name it.

"The essence of the business was to allow somebody to do what they are already doing, but to do it in a fraction of the time," Comerford said. "We were able to build four products to do that from advanced analytics to play-diagramming to scouting reports and game-planning to practice management, all things they are doing every single day, all day long that are core functions to their job throughout the entire season."

FastModel Sports' second and third products, FastDraw and FastShare, came out in 2008. FastDraw allows coaches to create a digital playbook and FastShare allows the sharing of those plays. The next year FastScout was introduced, allowing coaches to create scouting reports. Paper and drawings on napkins became a thing of the past in the coaching world.

"I was selling all day long and I was writing code all night long," Comerford said. "I did that for six years. For those six years I brought on one more programmer because I needed some help and I brought in a kind of operations guy. It was a very small team, but within six years we captured all 30 NBA teams. It was one team at a time, selling them our solutions."

In 2010, the little company that could acquired Data Representations and renamed itself FastModel Technologies. The next few years Comerford was on the fast track growing his business, working with new investors and branching out to include products not just for the pros, but for the rest of us, too.

Scarsdale connection

Howard was a big piece of the puzzle that not only helped Comerford as a start-up, but connected him to another '95 Scarsdale graduate, Lindsay Gottlieb, who in 2003 was an assistant women's coach at Richmond. Howard figured that Gottlieb would be able to give Comerford more insight into a coach's wants and needs.

"When I first started coaching, we drew up plays by hand," Gottlieb said. "We inputted things for scouting reports by word processing. You think about it now and it's crazy. You wouldn't think about writing papers for school by hand. If you have a 25-page thesis you're not doing it in longhand, but for plays I would stay up all night recopying plays by longhand. I remember Ross had this very simple but genius idea to ask, 'That's really how you draw plays?' He asked a lot of questions and his ideas would flow from that. I knew right away he had some great ideas."

Gottlieb, who last year made the NCAA Division I Final Four as the head coach of the Cal women, has been a big Comerford pusher ever since and the two bounce ideas off each other, Gottlieb about Xs and Os, Comerford about his growing business. "We talked basketball," Gottlieb said. "He taught me the Princeton offense — he's just a guru of basketball."

By having a front-row seat since the inception of FastStats, which she still uses, Gottlieb has been ahead of her peers in the coaching world, but she also shared that knowledge with others. Being on the cutting edge of coaching technology is one of her calling cards.

"I've brought his products at every stage of my career because they were good products and I needed them to do my job well, not because I was friends with Ross," Gottlieb said. "To Ross's credit, his products have literally become part of the nuts and bolts of every day for every college basketball coach in America ... It doesn't tell anyone how to do Xs and Os or how to have relationships with their players or what to run, but it makes your life easier."

Yanni Hufnagel, a 2001 SHS graduate, like all of his peers, knew of Comerford, who starred for the basketball team. Comerford the basketball player was legendary.

"Basically any kid who played basketball in Scarsdale knew who Ross Comerford was when Ross was playing at the high school level," Hufnagel said. "I'm talking elementary and middle school kids. He had a little bit of a mystique about him because of his shooting ability."

Hufnagel, who just finished his first season as an assistant coach with the Vanderbilt men, became reacquainted with the legend when Hufnagel was a graduate assistant with Oklahoma from 2007-09.

"I was on board with Ross at Oklahoma even before the days of FastDraw and FastScout," Hufnagel said. "I was on board from the days of FastModel, which would be now quite primitive, but Ross came up with a software that tracked basically plus/minus live. That was very ahead of the curve five or six years ago."

FastDraw came out during Hufnagel's second of four years at Harvard.

"By year two, it was so omnipresent across basketball that I told Coach [Tommy] Amaker that we can't sit on the sidelines any longer, we've got to sign up for this," Hufnagel said. "This is a game-changing tool for basketball coaches."

"If there is a team out there not using FastDraw and FastScout right now, they're doing themselves a major competitive disservice. It's really starting to permeate the high school level as well."

This year Comerford introduced his first mobile playbook app, FastDraw Basketball Pro for iPad, allowing coaches to draw up plays anytime, anyplace, including during a timeout. Dry erase boards? Fast fading.

"It's digitized what coaches have always done, which is sit around and talk basketball," Gottlieb said. "If you were sitting at a restaurant with your coaching buddy, you'd pull out the salt shakers and the sugar packets. Now you pull out your iPad and you save it. It's made things more accessible to coaching nerds like myself who want to be thinking about basketball wherever we are."

The little web that has been woven with this Scarsdale connection is more than a footnote to the story.

"There's a Scarsdale attachment there that's very meaningful for both of us," Hufnagel said. "I think he's kept close with Hilary Howard and Lindsay Gottlieb. The circle of us that have had some success in the basketball world have all really quite honestly been connected and stayed very close with Ross. Ross and I probably talk on the phone or through text once a month. We are very, very connected. I think that connection was cultivated and remains strong just because both of us feel such a significant attachment to Scarsdale and what Scarsdale did for us."

Gooroo guru

Gooroo, an app for youth coaches, was a serendipitous revelation for Comerford. When he was living in Greenwich in 2011 before moving to Chicago in 2013, a friend asked him to help out with his son's youth basketball team. He had volunteered to coach, knowing Comerford's expertise of the game. Sure, no problem!

"Some of my close, close friends are NBA head coaches and I talk strategy and tactics with these guys and they call me for information all the time," Comerford said. "I thought being able to understand the NBA game and being able to do what I do, this would be a great community service, great for the kids."

"I get to practice and within the first 10 minutes I was like, oh my god, this is a complete nightmare. We had one kid crying, one kid on his iPad, another kid faking an injury. My friend and I literally made eye contact and knew we were screwed."

A bottle of wine that night and a week of clarity later helped Comerford realize that there was a business opportunity somewhere in this situation, which he called an "epidemic." He could help overworked, under-qualified volunteer parent-coaches by having practice plans from an NBA or college coach available on their phones.

"[Miami Heat coach] Eric Spoletta is one of my closest friends and I can stand on the floor with him and go through things with his players and talk strategy at the NBA Finals, but I had no idea how to communicate with a 10-year-old," Comerford said. "No idea. It took 20 minutes to start up one drill."

Comerford spent the last two and a half years working on Gooroo, which in the next few years will expand from basketball to include other team sports like baseball, softball and soccer. In addition to the business missions, Comerford sees this as a way to help give youths a better athletic experience and hopefully keep them active longer. Everything he uses in the business world came from his athletic background.

"We believe if you can create a fun and engaging environment for kids it changes the whole paradigm," Comerford said. "They want to be active. They want to come to practice. They want to stay involved in sports. We're creating products through games, through simulators, through 3-D models where all of a sudden they can take home things from practice and practice at home. You use the medium they grew up with."

Gooroo features 150 plays and drills from George Karl, who was the 2013 NBA Coach of the Year, and Hall of Fame women's coach Tara Vanderveer. That product will open up the door for continued prosperity.

"At one point when we put our drawing product out, we were getting 2,000 emails a day," Comerford said. "It was insane. It was actually when Lehman went under, the stock market was tanking and our business was hockey-sticking. It was remarkable how quickly we were going up with our revenues and with our market share. Really the core focus of everything we do is that we're a product-centric company, we're a user-experience company and we want to develop relationships with our clients. At the end of the day that's what it's about."

As much as Hufnagel respects Comerford's athletic prowess, he recognizes the game-changing business model that his friend has created.

"Ross has separated himself so far from anyone else in the field," Hufnagel said. "I couldn't even tell you what the competition is and I don't think any college coach could. He's created a monopoly in this sector of the basketball world that will never be broken up. As smart as he is and as innovative as he has been in our field, he's also a very, very sharp businessman. He's got it all working for him right now. As I've watched his company soar, I've had a big smile on my face. I root hard for Ross."

Comerford is used to having a large cheering section. As a senior at Scarsdale it was, he said, "one of those magical seasons where everything just comes together." In 1996-'97, the Raiders were 20-2, including a trio of wins over Mount Vernon. The third victory came in the Section 1 semifinals. To this day, however, Comerford can't drive past the Westchester County Center in White Plains without getting a "bad feeling." The Raiders fell to Ramapo in the finals 51-35, despite trailing only 20-16 at halftime. (A photo of Comerford by Ira Toff accompanied the article in the Inquirer.)

Comerford was All-Section that year under Jack Kaminer, with whom he still keeps in touch. But he wasn't always a star.

"I was much more of a student of the sport," Comerford said. "I was really into the offseason of what I needed to improve. In high school I was like the 13th man on the freshman team and the first 10 games of my JV year I didn't even play. Then I was All-Section, All-County my senior year. It was all about working toward being the starting point guard on a college team."

Comerford also played for the now defunct but well-known Riverside Church team that featured eight future NBA players during Comerford's two years on the team, including Elton Brand and Lamar Odom.

"I think sports cuts across socio-economic, race, gender, everything," Comerford said. "I used to take the train from Scarsdale to 125th and I had my Riverside bag on. If you had that bag on, that meant you could play. And if you could play — and I was the only white kid on the team — you were accepted. That's just sports. Looking at it from that perspective we want to give kids the ability to stay involved."

Mark Zuckerberg may be Westchester County's most famous computer geek, but Ross Comerford is definitely the coolest. What Zuckerberg is to social media, Comerford is to basketball technology. He's a household name to the best coaches in the country.

Comerford likes to say that he took "the road less traveled," which is not always easy in a place like Scarsdale. He didn't need the Ivy Leagues or the M.B.A. from Stanford like many of his peers, whom he still keeps in touch and networks with. (Ironically, basketball coaches Gottlieb and Hufnagel are both Ivy Leaguers, Gottlieb a Brown grad, Hufnagel, Cornell.)

"I hope somebody, a 10-year-old, a 12-year-old, a 16-year-old, somebody at Scarsdale High School picks up on this," Comerford said. "I was a C student. I wasn't in AP classes. But you're not going to outwork me, you're not going to outthink me. To be able to create your own path in life and for everyone every step of the way who hears 'No, no, no, no, no, no, no' and continues to succeed and overcome, I take a lot of pride in that."

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