

NFL tackles digital content challenges to build a foundation for growth and diversification.

Overview

■ **Business Challenge**

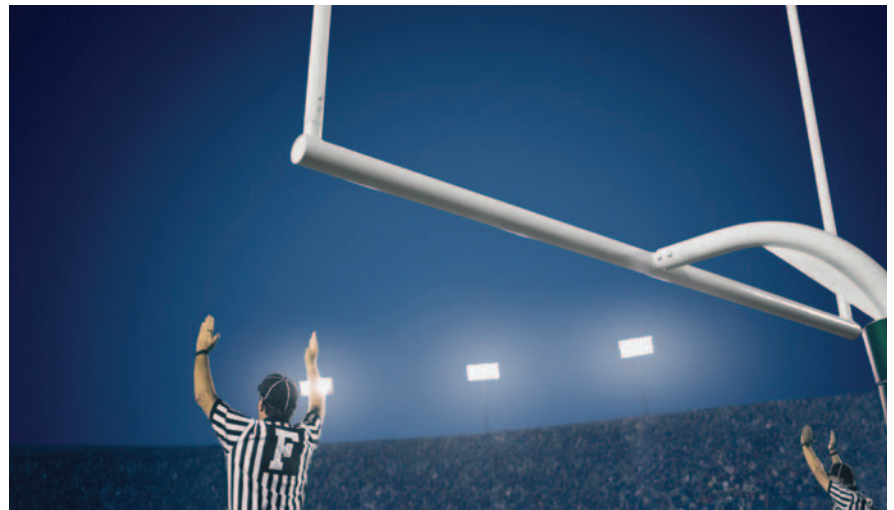
The NFL's ambitious broadcasting and programming plans required the flexibility to distribute its content through new ventures, channels and programs. To improve its ability to capitalize on new media opportunities and digital content partnerships, the NFL needed to reinvent its systems and processes.

■ **Solution**

The NFL engaged IBM to build a digital content management and distribution system that streamlined the way NFL Films ingests, stores, accesses and distributes its content.

■ **Key Benefits**

- *Improved ability to leverage and monetize the underlying value of NFL content*
- *Improved ability to support new programming outlets, such as shows on the NFL Network*



The National Football League (NFL) is the organization behind America's most popular spectator sport, and NFL Films is the league-owned media production company that has long been its main promotional channel. This season, the NFL Network is broadcasting eight NFL games, marking an expansion of its media activities.

Nearly nine decades after its founding, the National Football League (NFL) has never been more popular. Attendance, viewership and television revenue are at or near all-time highs, and the strength of the NFL as a global brand has never been greater. Sure, the players seem to always get better, the games more exciting and the presentation slicker. But that's just one side of the striking success of the NFL. The bigger story lies behind the scenes, in the strategies, tactics and programs the NFL has followed in its careful, diligent—and above all ambitious—stewardship of the league.

“Our new digital media solution puts the NFL in a great position to capitalize on a huge array of content opportunities... The quality and performance of our solution attests to our view that when it comes to digital media management, IBM is second to none.”

— Joe Manto, VP of IT,
National Football League

Business Benefits

- Significantly reduced video production cycle times through advanced digital search and editing capabilities
- More robust and compelling video content on existing media outlets
- Improved ability to capitalize on new media opportunities and digital content partnerships
- Strengthening of the NFL brand globally
- Improved ability to leverage and monetize the underlying value of NFL content
- Improved ability to support new programming outlets, such as games on the NFL Network

The NFL is more than a collection of franchises, players, coaches and owners. It also generates and owns some of the most sought after entertainment content in the world.

Going deep

Like any successful media and entertainment company, the NFL strives to extract the most value from its media assets, the core of which is an archive of video and audio clips established and maintained by its affiliated media company, NFL Films. Established in the early 1960s, NFL Films gained renown for the quality, depth and completeness of its game footage, as well as a reverence for the game that permeates its film product—all one hundred million feet of it, and counting. It is the NFL's most important promotional channel. Operating out of a new 200,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art studio in Mount Laurel, New Jersey, NFL Films produces television programs such as "Playbook" as well as "State Farm NFL Matchup." It is through such programs that NFL Films represents the face of the NFL, which is why the quality and richness of the content it produces is so important.

Even with its prime assets, the NFL still faces the media industry's fundamental challenges—the need to make content as compelling as possible and make the production and distribution of that content as efficient as possible. Moreover, with the media marketplace more crowded and competitive than ever, NFL Films needed the flexibility to distribute its content through new ventures, channels and programs as new opportunities arose. At a technical level, this means the ability of NFL Films to manage content throughout its lifecycle, from the time it's recorded, through editing, broadcast and archiving.

Some of the raw game footage acquired each week is videotape shot by the teams for use by coaches and players. For "X's and O's" programs like "Playbook" to incorporate desired segments of this footage—featuring a particular player or situation—production staff members had to conduct a manual, time-consuming search that involved scanning through printed game books, indexing plays to particular videotapes and conducting a linear review of reels of videotape to find them. Storage was another problem. While NFL Films did digitize this game footage, this content remained in digital format for only a short time due to storage limitations, reverting to analog format for longer term storage.

“Demand for NFL content is strong and getting stronger. We needed to improve our ability to capitalize on this demand—and to build a foundation for doing so into the future.”

— Joe Manto

Poised to grow its programming activities and leverage its brand, the NFL realized that it needed to reinvent the way it managed some of its valuable assets. Where an existing process was linear, restrictive and bottleneck-prone, it sought to deploy a process that was common, flexible and intelligent. By streamlining the way NFL Films ingests, stores, accesses and distributes the coaching footage used in several programs, the NFL sought to put in place a foundation for it to expand its activities while making its programming richer and more robust. The “foundation” metaphor was also apt because it was essential that NFL Films’ existing production processes—which were well-tuned and proven—would need to sit atop and interface with the new content management processes. The NFL engaged IBM to help it realize this vision.

Reinventing the production flow

Led by IBM Global Business Services, the IBM team conducted a diagnostic analysis of the NFL’s content assets and process flows to catalog content and to identify and map opportunities for process improvement. Having identified over 100 different kinds of content created daily by the NFL, the team turned its sights on process transformation. As a first step, the NFL and IBM selected the TV programs “State Farm NFL Matchup” and “Playbook” as the proving ground for the new solution. IBM conducted a detailed mapping of the process flows affecting these programs, and from it fundamentally streamlined—and redefined—the way content was handled throughout the production process.

The key difference is the intelligence, flexibility and automated capabilities of the new approach. At the front end of the process, for instance, videotape is now ingested, digitized and indexed with metadata at the outset, thus eliminating the endemic need to repeatedly copy tapes. With rich metadata appended to its digital game footage, production staff looking for footage can apply sophisticated queries to quickly locate game situations of interest. Once production staff find the content, they create a playlist that is automatically shipped in digital form to the production editors who assemble the show. The fact that production staff can now apply creative searches in the place of linear videotape review percolates directly upward in the process, since it enables producers and editors to deliver more compelling content, and the programs’ hosts to provide more insightful analysis. This solution ultimately reduced the time associated with the search and retrieval of critical game footage used in the production of the programs, made editing ten times faster and quadrupled programming output.

Key Components

Software

- IBM DB2®
- IBM DB2 Content Manager
- IBM WebSphere® Application Server
- IBM Tivoli® Storage Manager
- Ancept Media Server

Hardware

- IBM BladeCenter®
- IBM System p™
- IBM System x™
- IBM TotalStorage® LTO Tape Drives

Services

- IBM Global Business Services

Business Partner

- Ancept

Time frame

- Upfront diagnostics and solution planning: 6 months
- Pilot deployment: 4 months
- Expanded deployment: Ongoing

Why it matters

The communications business is in the midst of a quiet revolution known as “convergence.” Advances in multi-media technology and standards will enable the distribution of rich multi-media content through almost any kind of device or medium. With demand for premium content expected to skyrocket, content owners like the NFL have a golden opportunity to distribute their content—such as video game clips—through wireless, cable and other types of service providers. With NFL fans looking to view their favorite game clips whenever and wherever they want to, the NFL’s new digital content management solution will enable it to deliver truly on demand content—the wave of the future.

Making it all possible is a centralized digital media management and distribution solution the NFL calls Digital Foundation. At the heart of the solution is IBM DB2 Content Manager which—together with Ancept Media Server at the front end—provides its core content management capability. Both run on IBM WebSphere Application Server, which provides a secure, scalable runtime environment for the content management solution. IBM BladeCenter blade servers provide the hardware foundation for content management functions. IBM Tivoli Storage Manager, used to manage an IBM TotalStorage storage area network (SAN), runs on an IBM System p server, as does IBM DB2, which manages the NFL's inventory of digital assets. To handle the heavy processing load required for the rapid ingest of videotape-based content, the solution employs a number of IBM System x servers.

Ready for the future

With ambitious growth and diversification on its agenda, the NFL couldn't have picked a better time to put in place a first-class content management capability. Take for example its recent—and groundbreaking—decision to become the exclusive broadcaster of several NFL games through its NFL Network affiliate. By extending its business model from being a content source to a content outlet, the NFL has taken on a whole new set of challenges, not the least of which is the need to provide large amounts of targeted and relevant content to enrich the broadcasts and meet high viewer expectations.

The NFL is also well positioned to capitalize on the broader opportunities arising from the expanded use of wireless devices to download premium multimedia content. Communications service providers, now investing in the networks needed to deliver it, will need sources of high-quality video and audio content to satisfy their customers. The NFL, with a super-efficient means of accessing and delivering its huge base of content—from clips to scores to programs—is poised to deliver, further strengthening the NFL brand around the world.

Joe Manto, VP of IT for the NFL, sees the league's investment in the Digital Foundation platform as critical to the success of both initiatives, and a key enabler of others down the road, from the addition of new channels to partnerships with other content and media companies. "Our new digital media solution puts the NFL in a great position to capitalize on a huge array of content opportunities," says Manto. "It's given us the means to produce and distribute more robust content, and do so more efficiently, which ultimately supports the brand and the mission of the NFL. The quality and performance of our solution attests to our view that when it comes to digital media management, IBM is second to none."

For more information

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