

NFL teams often turn to tactics such as spying and counter-spying to learn about – and keep up with – their opponents

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By Daniel Uthman

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Ainsley Battles had gone from undrafted free agent to starter at safety for the Pittsburgh Steelers and was nearing the end of his second training camp in 2001 when he got an unexpected phone call.

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One week before the team's opener against the Jacksonville Jaguars, the Steelers told Battles he was being cut.

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One day later, his phone rang again. It was Battles' agent telling him that another team – the Jacksonville Jaguars – planned to sign him. "An eventful 24 hours," Battles said. <p> But before Battles could begin studying the Jaguars' playbook, the Jaguars studied him, asking him questions about the Steelers.

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"I could only tell them the little bit I knew," he said. "It was really nothing they didn't already know."

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Such exploratory questioning was common in the eight seasons Tom Coughlin was the Jaguars' coach. The team signed a handful of freshly cut Steelers players, many of whom --unlike Battles --were around long enough only for a quick Q and A.

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Questioning new players about their former teams is standard procedure in the NFL, but it's just one of the ways teams work to keep or gain an edge on the competition. In a league that turned over nearly one-third of its head coaching jobs in the most recent offseason, any advantage a coach and his staff can get is of immense value and immense need for protection.

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"Stuff is so secretive because jobs are hard to come by," said Oregon State quarterbacks coach Danny Langsdorf, who was an offensive assistant with the New Orleans Saints from 2002 to 2004. "If you have something special or you're a little ahead of the game, you have to protect it."

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As such, spy and counter-spy tactics are part of the game, whether it's signing a player released from an upcoming opponent, locking up game plans at a team's headquarters or even eavesdropping on a sensitive contract negotiation.

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Kevin Murray, president of the New Jersey-based counter-espionage firm Murray Associates, has counted NFL teams among his clients over the years. Though confidentiality clauses prohibit him from speaking of specific clients and cases, Murray said his company has worked on both sides of the business, from protecting teams to protecting agents and players who are involved in high-level contract talks.

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"It keeps us busy," Murray said, "I can tell you that."

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Espionage and counter-espionage take on many forms in the NFL.

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Some teams embellish their injury reports to keep their upcoming opponents guessing, a practice the league is taking measures to prevent.

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Against certain opponents, teams designate a defensive player as a "spy" and ask him to stalk one player on the opposing offense, mirroring that player's movement in a kind of perpetual man-to-man coverage.

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Perhaps it's only a matter of time before every jersey number starts with a 00. <p> Carroll Dale, a wide receiver for the Green Bay Packers under Vince Lombardi, said there was regular suspicion that Chicago Bears founder and coach George Halas had a network of spies.

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"Supposedly he had somebody watching for them," Dale said. "We had open practice, so Coach Lombardi had the jersey numbers mixed up in practice so people couldn't really identify who was who."

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Any time a helicopter or low-flying plane passed overhead, Dale said, someone would make a comment about being spied on.

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There are many accounts of teams suspecting that spies are watching from nearby vantage points beyond the team's control. Former Washington coach George Allen had staff members sweep the trees surrounding the training camp fields at Dickinson College to make sure they were free of unwelcome observers.

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In the 1990s, the New York Giants alleged that teams were placing spies in a Sheraton across the highway from the Giants' practice field to watch the team run its plays and cadences. So serious were the Giants that when it came time to run through the game plan, they did it in a secure, indoor facility.

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Conversely, during their 2001 Super Bowl run, the Giants stood accused of espionage, with members of the Minnesota Vikings and Philadelphia Eagles alleging that the Giants had tapped into their opponents' coach-to-quarterback helmet radio systems in back-to-back playoff games. Though nothing was proved, it brought to light speculation that the helmet radio – despite its communication encryption – is one of the facets of the league most susceptible to spying.

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"There's so much ability to intercept things with technology today, they may be sitting there listening to each other," Dale said. "I'm sure somebody's trying to pick it up."

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James Atkinson, a Gloucester, Mass.-based communications engineer who specializes in counterintelligence and technical security, said he has been hired to do sweeps in the NFL to make sure a coach is not sending information onto the field other than what he's

supposed to. Atkinson sets up near a team's bench and can sense every electronic device in the vicinity.

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"You not only can determine who it is," Atkinson said, "but what the equipment is and in what hand they're holding it. Piece of cake."

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Perhaps the most notable case of a team signing a player cut loose by its Week 1 opponent didn't involve the Jaguars and Steelers but the Buffalo Bills and New England Patriots. Unable to agree on a new contract, the Patriots cut veteran safety Lawyer Milloy five days before the start of the 2003 season, and two days later he was wearing a Bills jersey.

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Though Milloy explicitly stated he wouldn't give up the goods on his former team, he knew the Patriots' play calls a lot better than the Bills', and that Sunday, conspiracy theorists abounded when Buffalo beat New England 31-0.

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In a sport constantly seeking and rewarding innovation, even Peyton Manning's odd gesticulations, yelps and hand movements at the line of scrimmage could be considered a form of subterfuge, a unique means of baiting the defense before springing a surprise or trap. Atlanta Falcons quarterbacks coach Bill Musgrave, who served as backup and mentor to Manning during the Colts quarterback's early years in the league, said Manning's line of scrimmage antics date to his days as a Little League baseball player.

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"He's such a sharp fella, he's always been really innovative in the way he's competed in athletics," Musgrave said. "He's come up with that over the years and led the defense to believe he's making signals and is about to receive the snap. It makes them not able to hold their cards so much.

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"I think most teams have tried to adopt in certain ways what Peyton has done there in Indy and replicate it in their own systems."

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Something Musgrave discounts, however, is a counter-espionage tactic favored by many coaches of covering their mouths with their play cards to prevent lip-reading. It would be nearly impossible, Musgrave said, to use any information gained by lip-reading in a timely fashion during a live game.

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Langsdorf, the former Saints assistant, said: "It's all paranoia. To be honest, the verbiage is so long, good luck trying to get something."

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But as the game and business evolve, some concerns are legitimate. Musgrave, who played for four franchises and has coached with five others, said trade secrets change hands more and more frequently in the NFL.

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"That's become a hot topic in the last few years because there's been more turnover amongst not only players but also coaches," Musgrave said. "Teams change code words and code colors and signals each and every year, I would guess to protect their

information."

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Even Bills general manager Marv Levy, a Hall of Famer who disputes the value of espionage and counter-espionage in the NFL, sees some value in plumbing the institutional knowledge that a newcomer might bring to his organization.

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"We wouldn't purposely hire someone from the Dolphins to get information," Levy said, "but if we did hire someone, we'd probably ask him a few questions."

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Though Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis is known as the most secretive figure in the NFL, probably the most wary and spy-conscious by far was Allen, the former Washington coach.

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"Man, he was paranoid about being spied on," said Levy, an assistant to Allen in 1971 and 1972. "We would go on the road and he would wonder if the locker rooms were bugged. He used to have security men and people on the roof across the street." <p> Allen employed Ed Boynton, a retired California police officer, to be his main spybuster. Rivals, meanwhile, speculated that Allen wasn't above having people spy for him, too.

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For his part, Levy never would have bothered. <p>

"I always felt you can have too much information," he said. "You gotta look out and make sure the players aren't starting to blink. Don't give them too much. If you want them to learn how to speak Spanish, don't teach them Japanese and Russian at the same time."

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Sometimes, when a popular scheme such as the 3-4 defense or West Coast offense is adopted by multiple teams, secrecy and code words can be beside the point. Langsdorf said he used to laugh when he came across a coach from another team that employed the West Coast offense.

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"We were a West Coast team, a true West Coast team, and we had the same terminology as the old San Francisco teams. Same with Philadelphia, Green Bay and Tampa Bay," he said.

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"Whenever I'd see Mike Sherman or somebody on the NFL Network, they'd be using the same terminology. They were doing the same thing we were doing." <p>

Then again, in the NFL even the most inadvertent leak can have far-reaching implications.

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In 1991, during preparations for Super Bowl XXV in Tampa, Fla., the Bills were holding a practice and running through a few plays while television cameramen and reporters milled along the sideline. Later that night, then-Giants coach Bill Parcells saw the footage on the evening news. And a few days after that, the Giants held off the Bills 20-19 in part by stopping the running play that had flashed up on the nightly news.

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Levy recalled Parcells telling him later, "We weren't trying to snoop, but we knew you were preparing for it and we were ready."

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Two of the common denominators in most espionage cases – money and power – also are products of a winning NFL team. But Murray, the counter-espionage expert, said it's hard to say how much spying goes on in the NFL.

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"If it's successful, you'll never know," he said. "If it's done correctly, you may see the results of it, but you'd never know it occurred. If you take the failed attempts you see, you can figure that's just the tip of the iceberg."

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Murray said the three most common methods of espionage are eavesdropping, going through a team's garbage for information, and placing an "inside" person in a workplace or subverting an employee who already works there. Often, Murray said, it is a combination of two of those tactics.

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It is the charge of the league's competition committee, co-chaired by Atlanta Falcons general manager Rich McKay and Tennessee Titans coach Jeff Fisher, to eliminate the need for spying --while also ensuring fair and honest play and what committee member Bill Polian calls "a level playing field."

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"There's far more money in the game today, and when the stakes go up, there's more incentive to try and do everything you can to win," said Polian, the Colts' president. "Given the amount of money in the game now, even compared to 10 years ago, it's amazing that there's so little skullduggery, if you will. But I think that's because most people accept the fact that rules are the rules and they ought to be obeyed."

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Perhaps it's also because not every team is so paranoid. Take the Steelers. Even though Battles turned to one of their staunchest rivals six days before the 2001 opener (the newcomer helped Jacksonville beat Pittsburgh 21-3, one of just three Steelers losses that regular season), the Steelers welcomed him back three years later. Battles made the Pittsburgh roster that time, only to suffer a season-ending injury in the fourth quarter of his first game.

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Bringing back Battles was a typical move from a franchise that doesn't seem to worry about opponent intelligence. Unlike many teams that have built palatial headquarters on secluded suburban land in recent years, the Steelers moved into a new facility in the city in 2000 that has a separate, privately owned office building abutting the south end of their practice fields. Anybody standing on the third floor of that building could have a perfect, unobstructed vantage point to watch the Steelers go through their drills each day, play after play after play.

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Reed Agnew is the principal at Thoughtform, an information design firm whose offices enjoy that exact view. Agnew said people occasionally wander over to the windows to glance out on the team, but they generally are loyal Steelers fans who even tacked up signs of support last season when the team was making its run to the Super Bowl title.

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"People like the fact that they're over there," Agnew said. "It's something to talk about."

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They just should be wary of who's listening.

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