Sports tech firm Stats looks to bring A.I. to the broadcast booth and sideline

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When a baseball announcer rattles off your favorite player's batting average with two outs and runners on first and third, he's not pulling that figure from the back of his mind. There's a good chance that timely information was provided by Stats, a Chicago-based sports data and technology company.

Stats, which gathers data from sporting events around the world for more than 650 customers, says it has inked five deals this year worth a total of more than $70 million. The most recent deal, a $10 million agreement announced last week, extended and expanded a relationship with a global broadcast and telecommunications conglomerate.

Stats plans to invest some of the money into advancing its use of artificial intelligence to capture game data, said Chief Revenue Officer Richard Henderson, who declined to name the other parties involved in the deals.

The company, which has already started building out its artificial intelligence team, is working to train computers to review game footage and extract statistics, providing new insights for coaches and players and fun facts for broadcasters to relay to fans.

"There's lots of video footage that exists globally of historic games," Henderson said. "If we can get computers basically to watch the game and code the game, that enables us to aggregate data sources on a much grander scale than individual humans can."

Stats already uses advanced technology to gather data, he said. It deploys employees to stadiums around the world to code games in real time. Its technology can, for example, capture 2,700 data points in a soccer game. It can track the distance a player ran, the trajectory and speed of the ball, how many touches a player had, or how quickly she accelerated.

Artificial intelligence can gather and process even broader data, Henderson said. It can provide predictive analytics to coaches, showing them, for instance, a play in which their players failed to score and recommending a different run that could result in a goal.

"Because we've aggregated so much data, it will know how that defense operates in certain scenarios," Henderson said.

The coaches might not take the suggestion, but the idea is to give them increased insights to help them win.

Such predictive data goes deeper than just capturing statistics broadcasters can share with fans, though that is part of Stats' business. The company counts media and broadcasting companies, as well as sports teams and leagues, among its customers.

For example, Stats will provide data feeds to companies to engage fans during the upcoming World Cup, and coaches in FIFA use the data to strategize. It also distributes football statistics to fantasy sports providers for their platforms and works with Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Basketball Association and the National Hockey League.

Teaching computers to watch games and gather data could expand the company's reach to amateur or even high school teams, Henderson said.

The technology wouldn't replace employees; it would do work they don't have time for. The company plans to keep hiring more workers, in the artificial intelligence department and elsewhere. It employs about 1,200 people globally, more than 200 of whom are in Chicago. Earlier this year, it added a floor to its Loop headquarters that can hold

an additional 100 employees.

The expanded use of artificial intelligence would allow the company to analyze additional data for more clients as well as historical data. Stats has baseball data going back to the 1800s, for example.

Sheldon Jacobson, a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said the technology Stats is working on would find new value in sports data that are already out there.

"It's the artificial intelligence that realizes the potential of the data," he said. "What Stats is really monetizing is the information the data contains."

The data will help coaches make better decisions and ultimately improve performance, Jacobson said. But once other teams catch on, the value of the information could wane. He pointed to the way Michael Lewis' book "Moneyball" brought widespread attention to the Oakland Athletics' use of advanced statistics. Once other baseball teams caught on, the A's lost some of their edge.

Stats will need to keep innovating, he said.

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