

By Tom Speicher

The Analyst

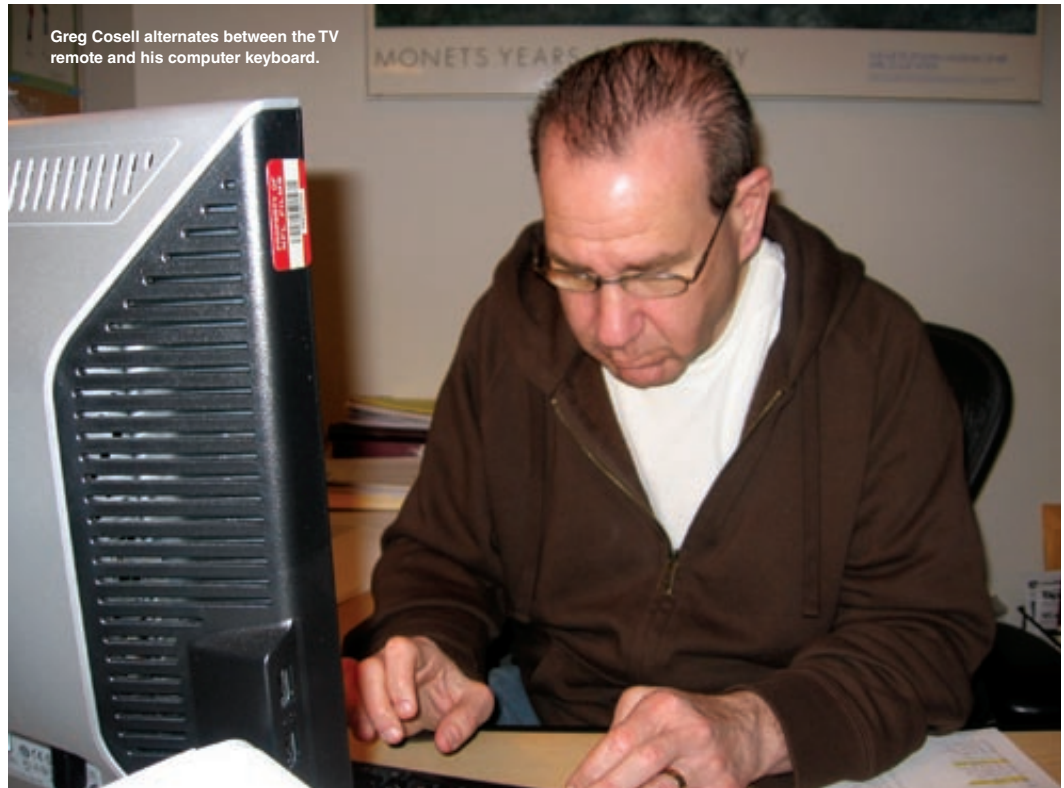
A day in the working life of NFL Films senior producer Greg Cosell shows how much the football analyst loves to engross himself in coaches' tape of current NFL players and future stars.

The sporadic tapping of the keyboard provides a hint of the melody to come. The clicking of the remote supplies the beat. The churning of the tape deck completes the rhythm. This symphony plays for hours on end.

The sounds emanate from a small, windowless second-floor office at NFL Films. It's not the type of sweeping orchestral music forever identified with the most honored filmmaker in sports, but on this particular day, the office inhabitants aren't romanticizing the game they love. Instead, the acoustic performance reflects their quest to answer a fundamental question: Who will be the professional football stars of tomorrow?

The conductor is Greg Cosell, senior producer at NFL Films. In his 30 years with the organization, Cosell has been a key contributor to the "myth-making" staple programming of NFL Films. The poetic words, riveting images and stirring music inherent in NFL Films' productions have made the game and the men who have played it larger than life and have helped the league attain its current status as the most popular sport in America.

While he devotes countless hours to celebrating the game on film, Cosell also relishes the opportunity to dissect its many



Tom Speicher/Wiking Update

intricacies. Since 1984, he has shepherded the ultimate Xs and Os football show, *NFL Matchup*, produced for ESPN. During the season, Cosell spends more than 30 hours a week poring over tape to help prepare show analysts Ron Jaworski and Merrill Hoge for their weekly assessments and verbal sparring sessions. Come late winter, Cosell turns his eyes to the college game. Rather than teams, he studies approximately 150 NFL prospects prior to the draft.

"I thoroughly enjoy analysis," says Cosell as he inserts the first

tape of the morning, the Mississippi offense versus the LSU defense. "I am trying to project and transition college guys to the NFL. That's the reason I'm watching college tape. Watching it really is an academic exercise."

As if on-cue, Cosell, 52, sounds like a professor when delivering his assessment of LSU's Tyson Jackson, regarded as one of the draft's top defensive ends, to Jaworski's assistant, Lou Russo, who has just arrived for a full day of information compilation.

"Jackson's a technically sound player," Cosell says. "He's a try-hard guy. But he has no special qualities. In an ideal world, he shouldn't be a top-15 pick in the draft."

The assessment of Jackson, who went third overall to the Kansas City Chiefs, is not a knee-jerk one. Rather it's the culmination of watching several of his games during the previous weeks.

"I don't feel comfortable unless I've seen at least three games," says Cosell with his right leg propped up on his desk. "I like to see games from different parts of the season. You have to do that."

He doesn't examine games taped off television (which by his estimation show only 20 percent of the action) or player highlight reels peddled by prospects' agents. Instead, coaches' tape is Cosell's textbook. This fertile source repeats every play back-to-back from two distinct high angles: the sideline and end zone. The two views generally facilitate analysis of all 22 players on the field. The more players from the same game he is studying, the harder the workout for Cosell's right hand clicking his remote to rewind the same play several times on the Beta deck. For him, tape is a much more valuable instrument to evaluate players than all the tests, drills and interviews conducted at the heavily hyped and scrutinized NFL Scouting Combine.

"The tape is where you see the players," says Cosell in between crunching the ice in his morning juice and watching Jackson on his 32-inch screen. "The Combine doesn't mean anything as far as judging a player. If you watch the tape and the guy is not a player, all the other stuff doesn't matter. If you see him perform on tape, then the stuff at the Combine becomes more important because you want to make sure there are no red flags. But if a guy can't play on tape, how high he can jump is not really an issue. Maybe he'll become a good rebounder."

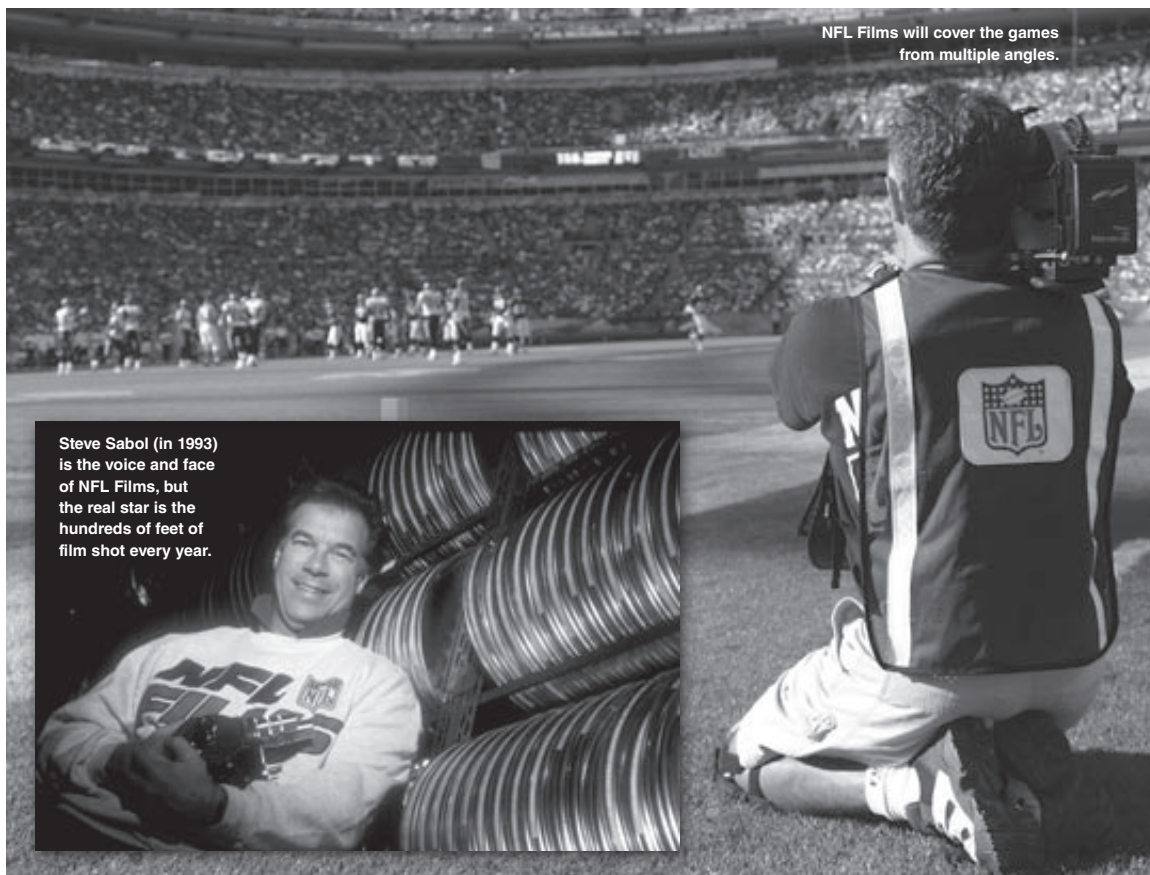
Cosell's candor and maturity are refreshing in an arena often

dominated by shrill analysts. His matter-of-fact delivery and blunt assessments of players reflect the absence of an agenda. Cosell isn't trying to augment an allegiance to a team, please a prospect's agent or secure more face time on TV. Instead, he just watches tape and offers his honest opinions.

"I feel confident in what I see," he says.

Right now he sees some negatives in Mississippi wide receiver Mike Wallace, who became a third-round pick of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"He's a straight-line vertical receiver with speed," Cosell says. "His biggest problem is he doesn't catch the ball very well. He



INSET: Scott Halleran / Getty Images
Ronald Martinez / Getty Images

almost has to gather himself to catch the football. You obviously lose speed if you have to stop and gather, so his speed becomes less of a factor."

Cosell's scholarly approach to the game is appropriate, considering he was an American history and political science major at Amherst College. He played basketball in college and both basketball and baseball in high school and says he always enjoyed "thinking those sports through." He grew up on the Mets, Knicks and especially St. John's University basketball since that campus was just five minutes away from his house. Football, though, was not a prime pursuit. His high school in Queens didn't even field a team.

"I watched football on TV, but I was not a football fanatic," says Cosell, even though his uncle, sports broadcasting legend Howard Cosell, was the star attraction of *Monday Night Football*.

“Howard wasn’t relevant in my growing up because he lived too far away. He wasn’t relevant in my upbringing whatsoever.”

After graduating from Amherst, Cosell took a job outside of Detroit teaching and coaching basketball and baseball. Hoping for a career change a year later, he sent out approximately 1,000 résumés, including one to NFL Films.

“I loved sports and wanted to stay in sports if I could,” he says. “They hired me as a producer. Back then the feeling was if you could write well, you could be taught the rest. Back then, we didn’t do nearly the stuff we do now.”

That “stuff” includes hundreds of hours of programming for the NFL Network as well as other broadcast and cable outlets. Housed in a 200,000-square-foot television production and post-production facility in Mt. Laurel, N.J., about 15 miles across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, NFL Films is the exclusive repository and licensor for the league’s film and network footage.



Ron Jaworski and Greg Cosell enjoy watching hours of tape on prospects and current players.

It boasts the world’s largest sports film library, including more than 100 million feet of 16mm film of NFL archival footage. NFL Films’ programming has garnered nearly 100 Emmy Awards, but those beautiful gold statuettes shimmering in the natural light of the lobby don’t faze Cosell when he arrives each morning at 7:30 for work.

“I don’t think about the Emmys,” says the married father of two daughters, whose office is decorated with family mementoes rather than personal awards and football memorabilia. “It’s like I’m sure it is for kids with a celebrity parent. Kids don’t think about that stuff. It’s just their parent. This is where I work. I do my job.”

A job that became more intriguing in 1993 when the league

decided to make NFL Films its dubbing center. That move gave Cosell access to coaches’ tape for the first time.

“It opened up a whole new world to me,” says Cosell, while swiveling in his chair to type notes into his computer. “I didn’t feel comfortable with what I was looking at for three or four years. You are seeing the game totally differently. I worked with people who helped me a lot: Ron Jaworski, Phil Simms, Mark Malone, Jackie Slater. They helped me in learning what to look for.”

According to Jaworski, who has just arrived to study some tape with his friend and colleague, Cosell has learned well.

“Greg has picked up the intricacies of the game without having played it by his tape study, which is very unusual,” says Jaworski, a staple of ESPN’s NFL coverage, including the analyst role on *Monday Night Football*. “Through the years, he has developed an incredible eye for the game. He’s not 100 percent, but he’s pretty darn good about projecting talent to the NFL level. I’ve told people around

the league that Greg Cosell is as good a talent evaluator as anyone has on their staff on an NFL team. He’s that good.”

Cosell is oblivious to Jaworski’s high praise. Donned in jeans, a brown hoodie (Bill Belichick would be proud) and sneakers, he leans back in his chair and navigates the remote to slow down the tape to examine Oregon State cornerback Keenan Lewis playing press coverage against USC.

“He’s showing aggressiveness and a willingness to play the run,” Cosell says to Adam Caplan, senior NFL reporter for Scout.com, who, like Jaworski, has migrated this morning to NFL Films to watch tape with Cosell. “Two things stand out. He plays press coverage, which you don’t see from a lot of college corners, and he is willing to play the run aggressively, which you don’t

see a lot from NFL corners.”

Caplan, a frequent visitor to the office, smiles as Cosell starts typing his assessment of Lewis.

“What I admire about Greg is that when it comes to evaluating players, it only matters what he sees, not what somebody else told him,” Caplan says. “That’s why he’s right most of the time. He sees with his own eyes.”

Jaworski, who is renowned throughout the league and broadcast circles for his own meticulous tape study, believes the “eye in the sky doesn’t lie” if the evaluator knows what to look for.

“What’s impressive about Greg is that he studies the pro game for seven months out of the year, so he understands the skill set to play in the NFL,” Jaworski says. “So when he looks at college tape, he

knows the skills players should have to project to the NFL. He has a real good intuitive feel for what it will take to become an NFL player.”

Such as quickness in a cornerback, something that Cosell doesn’t believe Lewis, a third-round pick of the Steelers, possesses after watching more tape.

“Look at him here,” he says during a pass play. “He’s not a quick-twitch guy. He’s a little mechanical when he changes direction. He’s not a smooth-flowing athlete and doesn’t have the ideal quickness you want. Look how slow that turn is right there.”

Even if a player has gaudy college statistics, Cosell believes traits on tape are a much better indicator of future pro success than numbers on paper.

“I like to see production, but great production in college is not necessarily compatible with NFL success,” he says. “The fact that a guy averaged 10 tackles a game in college doesn’t mean he will do that in the pros.

The pro and college games are totally different. The quality of players throughout the roster is much greater in the NFL. Lateral attributes are much more important than vertical attributes in the NFL game. And the college game has morphed into the spread offense, which does not translate to the NFL. Guys are operating in a lot of open space in college. You rarely see open space in the NFL.”

In terms of positions, Cosell looks for basics. For example, offensive linemen must have quick feet, balance and body control. Bending forward at the waist or standing straight in pass protection are red flags because both result in poor balance. Top defensive line prospects have outstanding leverage and fire off the ball coming out of their stance. Receivers need to be explosive and can’t waste any steps getting off the line of scrimmage. To prosper in the pros, running backs must possess lateral explosiveness, plus the ability to create space in small areas and the elusiveness to make the unblocked defender miss. Good linebacker attributes are similar to those of running backs, namely lateral ability and explosiveness. And for defensive backs like Lewis, how well they move their feet and turn their hips are key.

As for the most important position, quarterback, the desired traits become apparent while watching tape of prized prospect Mark Sanchez of USC sandwiched around lunch and footage of a potential diamond in the rough—Mike Reilly from Division II Central Washington. The Sanchez footage features high-profile games against Oregon State and Notre Dame while Reilly, who had to sign a free-agent contract with Pittsburgh after he went undrafted, is seen toiling in relative anonymity versus Western Washington and Montana.

“I think Sanchez is a smart, savvy quarterback who understands his offense especially well,” Cosell says after typing some thoughts on his keyboard. “I think the guy is very much a function of a well-orchestrated and calibrated offense. If he doesn’t get that in the NFL, he will struggle. The USC offense provides a lot of easy throws for him. My concern is when guys aren’t running wide open, how good is he going to be? In college, he didn’t have to make the stick throws into tight windows that you have to make in the NFL.”

The sounds intensify as Cosell continues his thoughts while switching back and forth between the remote and keyboard.

“When there are bodies around Sanchez, his efficiency drops. When there are bodies around him, his arm strength, which isn’t great to begin with, drops. In the NFL, you have to play quarterback with bodies around you.”

That’s a quality that the little-known Reilly demonstrates.

Jaworski received a tip to check out the four-year starter who put up amazing numbers (64 percent completion percentage, 12,448 yards and 118 touchdowns) throughout his career at tiny Central Washington and encourages Cosell to fire up the Western Washington tape. After a few jokes about the size of the crowd at the game—many high schools have more stands and fans—Reilly’s game forces Cosell and Jaworski to focus on him rather than the sparse surroundings.

With each passing play, Jaworski becomes more enthused.

“His mechanics and fundamentals are good,” he says. “Look at the ball position. There is no wasted motion. Every ball has been accurate. Great job of setting his feet on the move.”

After Reilly stares down a fierce pass rush to complete a pass, Cosell is excited to interrupt Jaworski.

“This is big-time, Jaws,” he says. “He had pressure he could see. It wasn’t backside pressure. There was pressure in his face and he still stepped into the throw. That is an NFL trait right there.”

“You can’t teach that,” Jaworski adds.

Several plays later, Cosell is impressed with Reilly’s “inherent accuracy” and the way he “drives the ball” when he throws. Asked about the level of Reilly’s small-school competition, the reason most draft pundits projected him to be at best a late-round choice, Cosell believes it’s immaterial.

“You’re looking for attributes and traits,” he says while opening a second bag of Raisinets (an extra serving is acceptable today because Cosell is hitting the gym on his way home). “His players are of the same caliber as those he is playing against. Who he is playing doesn’t mean anything.”

But it certainly doesn’t hurt Reilly’s cause that his performance continues to shine with the next tape, showing him against Division I opponent Montana.

“Greg, he’s slinging it,” Jaworski says after a deep out. “That’s a big-time throw. He keeps his eyes down the field. He throws the ball with more velocity than Sanchez.”

Cosell agrees.

“This kid has the best arm of the quarterbacks I’ve seen on film other than (Matthew) Stafford,” he says. “There’s a certain savvy and awareness about him. He’s far more advanced than Josh Freeman. What I really like about this kid is his consistency of execution, play after play.

“I’m not sitting here saying that he is a first-round pick. That’s not the point. We don’t have to decide where kids get drafted. It’s about projecting attributes to the next level.”

“Write this down,” Jaworski instructs. “This kid will be a starting quarterback in the NFL someday.”

“I had no expectations when I put the tape in,” Cosell says. “I put the tape in and the tape tells me. It’s fun to see this kind of stuff.”

Late in the afternoon, there is time for one more tape: Florida’s offense versus Georgia’s defense.

“Most people go to work to get through the day so work is over,” Cosell says while nearly simultaneously clicking his remote and typing on his keyboard. “I don’t think that way. I’m happy this work is part of my day. I love doing my job. It’s football!”

And in Greg Cosell’s office, it’s beautiful music. ■