

Denver Post.com

Nuggets find victory in the details

Scouts sift for smallest facts to help team win

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The Denver Post

Posted: 05/05/2009 12:30:00 AM MDT

Updated: 05/05/2009 01:44:57 AM MDT



The results of video study reach the practice floor as assistant coach Chad Iske goes over the report. (Evan Semon, Special to The Denver Post)

While a maintenance crew swept fallen confetti from the Pepsi Center seats, Jack Murphy crammed inside his cubicle elsewhere in the building, lost in a confetti-like whirlwind of statistics while Jasons and X's and O's did the tango on his computer screen.

By 2:30 a.m. last Thursday, after the Nuggets' victory hours earlier against New Orleans, "I literally couldn't see straight," said Murphy, a Nuggets' advance scout. He went to sleep on a bed in the team's office for two hours, then woke up at 4:30 a.m. to finish his report on the Nuggets' next opponent, Dallas.

Meanwhile, Chad Iske was sprawled on his bed at home, simultaneously exhausted and elated, the Mavericks also on his mind, Jason Kidd threading passes, Dirk Nowitzki swishing jumpers.

"You can't fall asleep because you have so much on your mind, but then you're so exhausted you just pass out and suddenly it's morning," said Iske, an advance scout and assistant coach. "Half the time, you might be dreaming it."

NBA basketball is a glamour game, for players and coaches, not for advance scouts and video coordinators. The seemingly "25-8" grinders look to uncover one nugget, one weakness, that could be the difference in a playoff series.

"Every little thing can make a difference in a playoff game," said the 33-year-old Iske, a 1994 graduate of Regis Jesuit High School. "So knowing what's coming can make a difference."

Welcome to their world.

After Saturday's practice, where an impossibly peppy Iske and Murphy did much of the coaching leading up to Game 1, Nuggets guard J.R. Smith said: "Those guys are here every day, night and day. I think people take them for granted."

The process of scouting the Mavericks was a thorny one, because, as Murphy said, "Play-wise, Dallas is probably one of the more difficult teams in the NBA."

Denver first played Dallas in November, and lately, the Mavs haven't been running many of the sets they used back then. So there was a lot of new

material to compile.

Murphy, 29, had spent the past two weeks jet-setting in Texas — from San Antonio to Dallas to San Antonio — intently listening from his seat near the baseline. As coaches shouted out plays, he furiously scribbled out notes, drawing the motion of the ball and where players were on the court.

The Dallas series ended late last Tuesday night, after which Murphy returned to his hotel in San Antonio and began writing his "thesis paper," as Iske calls it — the scouting report for Dallas. It was finished in 36 hours, during which Murphy slept about six hours.

The report, more than an inch thick, features a write-up of each player's tendencies. (Nowitzki favors shooting from the top of the key, and, for goodness' sake, don't let Jason Terry shoot a 3-ball from the corner.) Then there are the play names, four pages of more than 100 possible Dallas play calls (such as V-series, V-down, V-twist, Zipper and Fist-up), and there are extensive computerized diagrams of each Mavericks play, a modern-day chalkboard.

Also in the report are statistics, a blizzard of black-and-white digits. Box scores of prior games. Pages and pages of quantifiable trends, player shooting charts and conclusions drawn by Dean Oliver, the Nuggets' director of quantitative analysis, such as "team ranking in half-court defense, not including defense immediately after allowing an offensive board," in which, as you probably already knew, Denver ranked eighth in the NBA.