

Amazon's cloud computing will help Seattle Seahawks tackle data for 'a competitive edge'

November 27 2019, by Benjamin Romano



The most difficult completion through the first 11 weeks of the NFL season was a Russell Wilson-to-Tyler Lockett touchdown in the final minute of the first half against the Rams. The Seahawks quarterback scrambled on the play action pass and then lofted the ball to a well-covered Lockett, who hauled it in and made a Pacific Northwest Ballet-worthy toe-tap at the back corner of the end zone.

The probability of that catch was 6.3%, according to the NFL's Next Gen Stats program, which makes use of Amazon's cloud computing technology and [sensor data](#) to capture factors such as how close defenders were to the quarterback and receiver, and their positioning on the field.

Now, the Seahawks themselves are going all-in on Amazon's cloud capabilities to gather and analyze a wide range of data, automate video analysis and manage media assets—for starters.

The five-year contract shifts a large and important chunk of the hometown team's IT systems from Microsoft Azure to cloud computing rival and market leader Amazon Web Services.

It is a marquee customer win in a high-visibility sector that is increasingly reliant on data analysis—though not as significant as the \$10 billion Department of Defense cloud computing contract that last month unexpectedly went to Microsoft rather than Amazon.

(And no, this is not an indication of Jeff Bezos' alleged interest in buying the Seahawks, as The Washington Post reported, citing an unnamed source "familiar with the NFL's thinking" earlier this month. The Seahawks—owned by the trust left by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and headed by his sister, Jody Allen, who chairs the team—are not for sale, sources told The Post and The Seattle Times.)

Seahawks vice president of technology Chip Suttles said the team is just now ramping up its use of AWS, so it hasn't played a meaningful role in football strategy yet this season. But he envisions coaches and scouts using machine learning, computer vision and related technologies to answer questions that aren't captured by traditional statistics, which are quickly being augmented by new ways of parsing sports information, such as the "Improbable Completions" rankings topped by the Wilson-Lockett touchdown.

The NFL's Next Gen Stats program is only four years old and the data underlying it—player location, speed and acceleration, gathered by sensors placed around the stadiums and in player shoulder pads—was made available to individual teams beginning last season, said Ariel

Kelman, AWS marketing vice president.

Teams add other datasets, as well as mounds of video from games and practices, to produce as comprehensive a look as possible at their football and business operations—just like more and more businesses, nonprofits and other organizations today.

NFL teams "are now just starting on a process of figuring out what they want to do with the data, and how they apply technology to it," Kelman said. He said the trend began with baseball, as documented in the 2003 book "Moneyball," and has since spread throughout the sports world.

AWS has made marketing hay with the NFL partnership, highlighting stats such as Catch Probability in commercials featuring Wilson and other NFL stars.

Suttles said teams are willing to collaborate on the business aspects of their IT strategy. "But when it comes to what the player performance and sports science teams are doing within the individual clubs, it's really kept to the vest. Everybody's looking for a competitive edge."

Suttles, who is responsible for all IT functions for the Seahawks organization, including stadium technology, said there are no current plans to use Amazon's facial recognition technology at Century Link Field.

"But the great thing about this relationship is that AWS is so broad and has so much capability," he said, adding that the team is eager to "start investigating opportunities."

There's not much branding associated with the new Amazon cloud deal beyond an AWS sign in the stadium, Suttles said.

An earlier agreement between the Seahawks and Microsoft put the Bing search engine logo on team practice jerseys. And Microsoft continues to have a deal with the NFL for its Surface tablets, which are used on the sidelines to review plays during games, and for other hardware with the Seahawks, Suttles said.

Suttles declined to disclose the value of the AWS deal, or the Seahawks' IT budget, but said he expected it to be a cost savings.

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