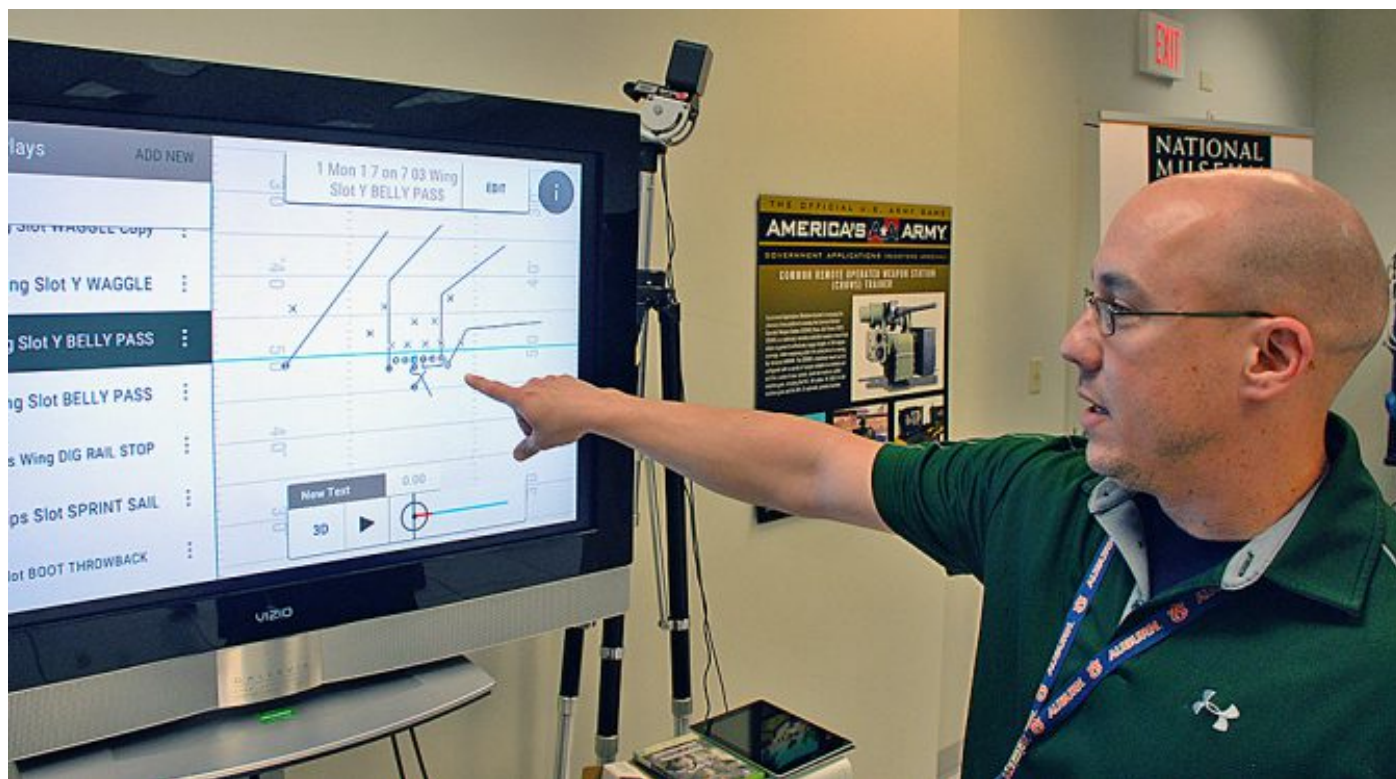


Football App Helps Recruiters Reach Student-Athletes

By Clifford Kyle Jones, NCO Journal

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Army Game Studio designer Tony Donatellie demonstrates some of the tools available in "Go Army Edge Football." (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

Recruiters have a new tool to reach high-school athletes, courtesy of Army Game Studio.

The "Go Army Edge Football" application gives football coaches and players a valuable, high-tech means to improve on-field performance and maximize training time. The application gives Army recruiters a valuable inside track with high-school athletics programs to foster relationships and deliver the Army's message.

What would become the free application was originally suggested by the Army Game Studio's director, Frank Blackwell, and was based on the software used in one of the development lab's first projects, the Javelin Basic Skills Trainer. That weapons training product included simulation software and enemy tracking that was easily converted into sports scenarios, Blackwell said.

Marsha Berry, the studio's software manager, said, "It was hard for us to sell it to the Army, because the Army has to have ROI, return on investment. [Products] have to have a reason and a justification. Anything, especially in the sports arena, these days, has to be justified quite a bit up on [Capitol] Hill .

"We try to keep that in mind when we're building our outreach products, because if it doesn't give the Army a good return on investment, then we can't fund it, ..." she said. "This is targeted for recruiters to use it to get into schools, get into areas that they may or may not be in already. It's basically a digital playbook, except we've applied some 3D animations to the playbook."

Blackwell built the idea for the app from the Javelin training system — before there was a formal Army Game Studio — but it took several years and some fortunate relationships to get the app to its current state.

"We ended up becoming the Army Game Studio, and we had the capability but we still didn't have the wherewithal or the funding," he said. "It was through a cooperative resource and development agreement with the Army football team at West Point, and they funded a trainer to teach the quarterback to run the triple option (offense). ...

"All the academies were running the triple option at that time, and they were running about 62 percent on their progressions," he said. "After running on the software we developed, they were running about 90 percent. And, Army went to a bowl game during that time, the first bowl victory I think in 25 years. That was no Army money, just booster club money. At that point we had enough of an asset to really show what you could do with this technology."

Army beat Southern Methodist University 16-14 in the 2010 Armed Forces Bowl.



Army Game Studio designer Tony Donatellie demonstrates some of the tools available in "Go Army Edge Football." The screen shows a play from a player's perspective. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

To further develop the app, the Army Game Studio received input from the NFL. Blackwell said the Army had a connection with the National Football League through a former Army player, Anthony Noto, who was a star linebacker while at West Point and who would become the NFL's chief financial officer. Noto is now the chief financial officer for Twitter. Four years ago, the Army Game Studio started working with the New England Patriots, and now, it partners with the Indianapolis Colts. The Colts use the app with multiple position groups, Blackwell said.

Former NFL quarterback Brett Favre used the app while he was the offensive coordinator for the Oak Grove High School Warriors in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Oak Grove was one of the studio's educational partners, Blackwell said.

Army Game Studio designer Tony Donatellie helped develop the application and continues to work to improve it. It's designed to be flexible enough to fit the needs of any coach at any level — high school, college or pro — but easy enough to use as soon as you download it.

"We actually ship the app with a pro-style offense, a spread offense and a wing T offense already in the app for them as example playbooks," he said. "That way, any coach, if he doesn't want to draw, that's fine. He can just load the app, find a drill and just run it."

"We kind of capture the high school coaches' attention, get them in the door. Then once they see this stuff, they start saying, 'Well, in my defense, this defensive end is two steps in, so let me go change that,' " Donatellie continued. "We slowly bring them in so they have a starting point, instead of giving them a blank slate and saying, 'Go nuts.' That doesn't really work."

Once they're comfortable with the app, though, coaches can draw offensive or defensive plays just like they would on a white board, except they're using their finger or their mouse. And instead of X's and O's, they're using images of players whose uniforms can be customized. When the coach hits "Play," all the players move.

"Now whatever play I want to draw, I can see it happen on a virtual field, like it's a video game," Donatellie said.

The app also offers a variety of camera angles as routes are run, including the view normally used when reviewing film and views from each

player's helmet.

"For any play I want to draw in the app, I can see it from any players' perspective," Donatellie said. "Now the coach is able to be there with the player, see the same things, talk about the same things, side by side."

Access to a team's plays is available from the cloud, so plays can be drawn up and shown to players before practice, Donatellie said. They might review the formations Sunday night, for instance, so they're ready for practice Monday, he said. The view from the app can also be projected on a screen, so coaches and players can review things together during practice.

"Once you get a load of plays in there, you can start using those to make drills," he said. "Drills are a guided mode, like a flash card system you can use, so now you can start quizzing your players on the plays."

Donatellie said the app has helped teams spend less time on the practice field for formation recognition, so they can spend their time on the field doing other types of training.

The Indianapolis Colts "said they don't even do formation training on the field anymore," he said.

The app offers coaches robust technology for free that many programs and schools couldn't afford otherwise, but it also delivers the Army's message.

"Every time something loads, we show them a little Army commercial," Donatellie said. "We have the U.S. Army star, and all this [links] to goarmy.com. We have a Twitter account, a Facebook, Instagram. We run on all devices and we communicate on all mediums, so we're trying to reach as many coaches and football players as possible."

Any time a player older than 17 expresses an in-app interest in the Army, a recruiter is notified.

Before this fall's football season started, more than 4,000 teams had been created in the app, and it has already provided recruiters access to some student-athletes who were previously off-limits. Some schools had policies that didn't allow traditional visits by recruiters, but because of interest in the app, recruiters have been able to develop a relationship with coaches and players.

"The Army loves football players because they already understand working as a team, overcoming adversity, working out, working to a plan," Donatellie said. "Those are all very Army-like virtues."

Donatellie said that even as the football app rolls out to more teams and more Army recruiters are trained on how to use it to conduct their outreach efforts, the Army Game Studio is working on repurposing the engine to reach even more students.

The studio has a version for soccer in beta testing and is working on a version for marching bands. The soccer app required some changes, Berry said, because unlike starting and stopping plays in football, soccer consists of a series of possessions.

"Then band is completely different," she said. "Each one brings some new challenges, and it's kind of fun to solve those problems."

Some of those lessons have helped improve the football application. Having to track opponents on the screen during soccer possessions led the studio to develop a "ghosting" visual.

"And once we saw that in soccer, we all stood up and said we have to have that in football!" Donatellie said.

Berry said as the app becomes more widely used and promoted, interest has swelled.

"Coaches are calling recruiters," she said. And, Army recruiting events that include demonstrations of the app are drawing large crowds to previously lightly visited booths.

The Army Game Studio regularly reaches out to recruiters to hear their success stories and how they have used the app to reach potential Soldiers. The studio is collecting best-use scenarios and building awareness among recruiters and coaches, but the app also shows what the Army is capable of, Berry said.

"It shows the Army is high-tech," she said. "It shows the type of technology the Army uses every day with training devices like these."