

# Road well-traveled: A peek inside the Packers scouting department

By Michael Cohen

Jan 31, 2019

MOBILE, Ala. — Brian Gutekunst is playing catch-up.

Two weeks have passed since the Packers introduced Matt LaFleur as their 15th coach in franchise history during a news conference replete with pomp and circumstance and the two men who architected the hiring: team president Mark Murphy and Gutekunst, the general manager.

The unveiling of LaFleur capped a seismic five-week sprint that began the afternoon of Dec. 2, after the Packers were embarrassed by the lowly Cardinals, and the decision was made to fire coach Mike McCarthy within a few minutes of his postgame remarks. McCarthy's dismissal catalyzed an all-hands-on-deck reaction from the organization's chief decision-makers. They cleared their collective schedules to dedicate attention to the task at hand: finding the next head coach.

For Gutekunst, who was less than a year into his tenure as general manager when McCarthy was fired, that meant sacrificing many hours he would have spent watching film during this time. Gone were the days when Gutekunst could immerse himself with college prospects as important showcases like the Senior Bowl, NFLPA Collegiate Bowl and East-West Shrine Game neared, and in their place was the all-consuming task of selecting McCarthy's successor.

So by the time he arrived in Mobile last week, carving out some time to speak with *The Athletic* Wisconsin before the first Senior Bowl practice, a sense of normalcy had finally returned to Gutekunst's life. The freneticism of the coaching search was gone. Roster building was once again his priority.

"I think it's been challenging, a little bit, finding some scouting time that I usually have in December and January," Gutekunst said. "But you just make it work, you find extra hours in the day."

Gutekunst's partial absence from the scouting department tested the hierarchy he announced last May, roughly a month after completing his first draft. Until then, Gutekunst had resisted hiring replacements for senior personnel executives Eliot Wolf and Alonzo Highsmith, both of whom accepted jobs with the Browns, as well as college scout Alonzo Dotson, who eventually joined the Jets.

Gutekunst believed those who remained were capable of navigating the critical months of the offseason, even if they were stretched thin to do so.

This time, as Gutekunst aided Murphy and executive vice president Russ Ball in finding a new coach, the division of labor beneath him was much clearer. The pro side would be handled by co-director of player personnel John Wojciechowski, assistant director of pro scouting Chad Brinker, personnel executive Lee Gissendaner and pro scout Richmond Williams, whose collective task was to monitor the NFL and Canadian Football League.

The college ranks, meanwhile, would be handled by the organization's fleet of area scouts, many of whom had been dropped into new regions for the first time, and a triumvirate of upper-level evaluators who cross-checked their work throughout the season: co-director of player personnel Jon-Eric Sullivan, director of college scouting Matt Malaspina and national scout Sam Seale, all of whom were promoted within the last year.

If everything ran smoothly, Gutekunst wouldn't be burdened during the coaching search.

"We just said 'Hey, let's take care of business,' " Sullivan told *The Athletic* Wisconsin during the Senior Bowl. "Let's keep everything tidy so (Gutekunst) can take care of what he needs to take care of. And that way when he gets back to scouting, which he's starting to get back into now, we have the answers for him that he needs to kind of help him hit the ground running.

"There's no shortcut to knowing players. You've got to do the work. Brian, again, he's a scout at heart. We were raised by Ted (Thompson). And the only way you get to know a player is by sitting down there and watching the tape and getting your hands on them and going to see them at the combine or their pro day. I can't help Brian get there. He's got to do that on his own. But what we can do is make sure all the ducks are in a row."

That process begins with area scouts, the nomadic travelers of football who make their homes in places far from Green Bay and who spend anywhere from 20 to 25 nights per month on the road during their busiest time. Area scouts visit the colleges in their region as many four times during a season to build profiles of players in multiple draft classes. Their written reports serve as the bedrock for the franchise's collective opinion on an individual prospect.

Gutekunst's reorganization of the scouting department offered new opportunities for several members of his staff. Luke Benuska, who spent the prior season as a member of the pro staff, relocated to Pasadena, Calif., as a college scout for the West region. Brandian Ross, who earned a full-time job after an extended stint as a scouting intern, was named a college scout in the Midlands region and moved to Kansas City, Mo. While Patrick Moore, whom the Packers hired away from the Browns, was assigned the lucrative Southeast region, which has some of college football's best talent. Moore and his family live in Auburn, Ala.

The advice from senior members of the personnel department to scouts entering new areas was to immerse themselves as much as possible — and to understand that the immersion process itself takes time. Gutekunst, Sullivan, Wojciechowski, Malaspina and Seale all spent time as area scouts before ascending to their current roles, and their experience proved invaluable to scouts like Benuska and Ross who were thrust into that environment for the first time.

Said Gutekunst: “The players you’re looking at, you didn’t see them come in as freshmen and sophomores and juniors, so you don’t have that long history. When I did the Southeast for 11 years, by the time a guy got to be a junior or senior, I mean I saw them when they were a true freshman. Position coaches will say, ‘Watch out for this kid, he’s a true freshman, he’s going to be on your radar in two years.’”

“So you have all that and when you’re put in a new area or an area for the first time, that’s new, so you kind of have to grind it a little bit more, work a little harder in that first couple years to kind of establish that. And those guys did that this year. I’m really proud of them.”

Said Sullivan: “I think the one thing you have to push on them and make them understand is Rome wasn’t built in a day, OK? Really spend time developing relationships in the school. Because in this business, nobody stays anywhere forever. It will obviously benefit you at that school over the next couple years, but as these people leave and go elsewhere, you will start to know people across the country.

“And after you’re in this business for five, six, seven years, you know a lot of people. And if you spend the time — really, truly spend the time — developing relationships, not only on the day you’re doing the school call but when you go in the spring, (it all pays off). Take these guys out to dinner, get to know them, ask them about their family. Just develop a real relationship. And that’s the trust factor. Then when they trust you, they’ll talk to you.

“The other thing is just don’t be afraid to make mistakes. See what you see, trust your eyes and understand you’re not going to be perfect all the time. Nobody is. But don’t scout scared, don’t be scared to miss. Go in there, see what you see. (Former Packers executive and current Browns general manager) John Dorsey told me when I started this job, and I think he was being facetious to a point, but he said, ‘You’re not going to be worth a damn at this job for about five years, just so you know.’ I don’t really think he meant that, but it’s the message. And he’s right. The more players you see, the more of a reference point and a mental Rolodex you have. Hey, this guy reminds of this guy and he was a really good player and here’s why. Or this guy didn’t make it and I liked him, and he didn’t make it for this reason. And you start to connect the dots.”

There is a layered approach to the evaluation of each prospect, and opinions are submitted by more than one member of the scouting department as the draft board is compiled each spring. Gutekunst’s new arrangement created a system of checks and balances in which his three most-trusted collegiate evaluators — Sullivan, Malaspina and Seale — offered a second set of eyes for players the area scouts had already graded. Sullivan and Malaspina were based in Green Bay, while Seale remained in San Diego.

They did their work by loosely dividing the country into thirds based on prior experience. Sullivan, who served as Gutekunst’s most-trusted confidant during the buildup to last year’s draft, handled the middle part of the country by working his way north from Texas and Louisiana. Malaspina, who is described as a grinder and logged an estimated 180 nights away from Lambeau Field in the last calendar year, handled the entire eastern seaboard. And Seale, a well-respected scout who had six first- or second-round picks from his West Coast territory

between 2012 and 2017, flew further East than he had before, dipping into Texas and Arkansas on occasion.

“Having those three guys kind of cover the country for us, for me specifically, has been great because I know all three of those guys and know how they scout,” Gutekunst said. “It’s been a very comforting feeling.”

Milt Hendrickson, whom Gutekunst hired away from the Ravens, will give the Packers a fourth evaluator in this capacity. Hendrickson has been given Wolf’s old title of director-football operations and was with the team at the Senior Bowl last week. Gutekunst described him as “a really good fit with our group.”

Unlike with area scouts, whose job is to evaluate every prospect at a given school, the purpose of sending Sullivan, Malaspina, Seale and now Hendrickson on the road is to focus on the highest-graded players. They preempt their visits by watching film on team-issued iPads to become familiar with certain prospects and then spend the majority of their time on campus conversing with people closest to those particular players, all in the name of building a character dossier to pair with the football one.

That is why teams covet the interview portions of the scouting combine and college showcases like the Senior Bowl. It’s in those settings that personnel men compare their research to the demeanors of players themselves.

“We talk to everybody from the strength coach to the position coach, sometimes the head coach, the academic adviser,” Sullivan said. “We’re trying to build a whole profile of this kid. We’re going to ask about first and foremost (about) the family background. What’s he come from? Who is his support system? What did he grow up around? Who did he grow up with?”

“And then what we’ve tried to do is really to streamline the process. We call it football character. We want to know does he love it. Why does he play the game? Is it because he loves it? Is it because of what the game brings him? Is it the money, the notoriety, the women, the potential fame and monetary gains? Or does he play because he loves the game, the pure passion for the game. And there’s both, you know? Some guys play it because of the passion and they just love the sport. Some guys play it because it’s what they got, you know what I mean? It’s their way out. They don’t come from much and they know that it’s the carrot they’re chasing, so to speak. It’s interesting.

“We’re looking for guys that are smart, tough, will play when they’re banged up — not play hurt, not put them in harm’s way — but play when they’re uncomfortable, practice during the week. You want to build a locker room full of those guys. You’ve got 53 (spots on the team). You get enough of those guys in the mix that are playing for the right reasons, you’re going to have a chance to win games.”

Sullivan said upper-level scouts around the league, and even within Lambeau Field, have their own preferences for how much information they want before visiting a certain school. There are some evaluators who want specifics of what the area scout saw while making his rounds earlier

in the year. They want to know what grade was applied to a given player and what was said about that person's character.

There are others who prefer arriving on campus without any preconceived notions in order to form their opinions from scratch. Any disagreements between scouts can be addressed later, during the annual draft meetings at Lambeau Field.

"I go in blank," Seale told *The Athletic Wisconsin*. "I don't care what he thought, it's what I think. They don't pay me to piggyback off of someone, you know? It's my opinion, and that's what scouting is all about. We all have opinions, you know? Like (former Packers general manager) Ron Wolf told me, we all have opinions and most of the time they all stink. You've just got to figure out which one smells better than the other one."

"College coaches don't tell you everything, even your best buddies, because they always want to make their players look good. I think I'm good enough — well, you're never good enough because you're always learning. I'm always learning. I will never tell anyone that I know everything about scouting because I don't. I'm still learning every day, you know? I just listen to what people tell me. After you talk to the kid, you listen to what he says and it's just like when you and someone have an argument: You're right, it's your opinion. He's right, that's his opinion. Somewhere in the middle is the truth."

With the area scouts providing a base level for every prospect and his top evaluators doubling down on the highest-graded players, Gutekunst was free to build his own scouting trips around individuals that piqued his interest.

During the season, Gutekunst designed his schedule so that Mondays and Tuesdays were spent at Lambeau Field handling the fallout from that week's game — namely the injury situation and whether any subsequent roster moves were needed. And then if all went well, Gutekunst would depart Green Bay on Wednesday or Thursday to visit a few schools during the second half of the week.

Gutekunst also made a habit of seeing a college game in cities the Packers traveled to for road games. In October, for example, when the Packers played the Rams, Gutekunst and several members of his personnel department watched Southern California host Arizona State at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum with specific players in mind.

"And we have obviously a list of players and we're looking at a certain grade and up, focusing on the crème of the crop," Sullivan said of those road trips. "(Gutekunst) went and saw a lot of games, a lot of games, actually. And he went out to some schools during the week as well. It's just harder at times to get away during the week depending on what's going on in the office."

"He will pick certain players he's wanting to see versus schools. He just kind of cherry picks. ... Brian is a scout at heart. He's the same as Ted. He's always going to get out and see players, and that's the crux of this business. You have to put your eyes and hands on them to know what you're buying."

Which is why Gutekunst was so keen on attending the Senior Bowl after the coaching search deprived him of valuable scouting time the month prior. And in that regard, hiring LaFleur only a week after the season ended proved rather fortuitous in decluttering his schedule.

So Gutekunst and the rest of the personnel department, including the area scouts, converged on Mobile for a week of practice and several rounds of interviews with college prospects. They manned the bleachers at Ladd-Peebles Stadium by day and met with players at the Mobile Convention Center by night. The entire group will reconvene in Green Bay shortly after the Super Bowl to begin their annual draft meetings.

“I thought they knocked it out of the park,” Gutekunst said. “Just really been impressed with their process, their work ethic, their attention to detail. I think we’re really excited because we did have some new guys in areas, which is unusual. Just really, really impressed with how they attacked it.

“Our most important time is coming up with the meetings and the combine. So I wouldn’t say I’m behind, but I would say I’m excited to get to that part of it. Getting in a room with the guys and figuring out these players is always kind of the fun part.”

And with LaFleur in place, Gutekunst can finally join them.