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## Peter Tingling Professor critical of NHL draft strategy

By MATTHEW SEKERES

'Hockey is in the dark ages,' he says  
Earlier this year, professor Peter Tingling opened an email from a senior member of the Detroit Red Wings and was promptly "taken to the woodshed" over his NHL Entry Draft study.

Tingling, who teaches business at Simon Fraser University, is the founder and chief executive of Octothorpe Software Corp., a B.C.-based "decision sciences" company that produced an extensive report after analyzing draft data from 1997-2003. The company found that the Red Wings ranked 29 out of 30 teams in successfulness with North American prospects and just 12th with European prospects.

Both results were startling because Detroit is viewed as one of the best draft-and-develop organizations, particularly on the European front, where top birddog Hakan Andersson has found late-round gems such as Henrik Zetterberg and Pavel Datsyuk.

"They said: 'We have a great scouting department,'" Tingling recalled. "And I said: 'No, you have a good scout.'"

Unsolicited, Tingling sent the report to every NHL team, and he has heard back from more than half. Some franchises, like the Wings, are engaged enough to discuss the findings and see if there are lessons to be learned, while others have simply

dismissed him with remarks like: "We don't believe in that Moneyball stuff."

Tingling will be in Los Angeles this weekend for the 2010 draft and will speak to more hockey decision-makers, but he will not reveal whether any have hired his firm.

NHL teams will budget roughly \$1.5-million (U.S.) annually on amateur scouting, combing the globe for the next Zetterberg or Datsyuk and compiling reams of information to guide their decisions. But Tingling said most teams get it wrong, either because they search for the wrong information, dismiss the proper information or succumb to "groupthink."

"Most teams don't track the efficacy of their scouting and they should," he said. "If you're going to pay for this, wouldn't you want to know their track record? I'd want to make evidence-based decisions."

Tingling, 50, readily admits that he knows "nothing" about sports, and his English accent certainly doesn't paint him as an expert on 18-year-old junior players. He admits that his study is imperfect, but adds: "just because it isn't rocket science doesn't mean it's rubbish."

Octothorpe works with businesses and other sports organizations, advising them

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on better decision-making processes, if not the actual decisions themselves.

"From a sports perspective, hockey is in the dark ages," the CEO said. "It's nowhere near the level of science used in other sports."

Tingling's study showed that three-quarters of NHL teams would fare the same, or better, if they simply drafted the next best player from the league's Central Scouting Bureau rankings.

Tingling compares it to a mutual-fund manager who cannot beat the index and asks "Why would you pay for that?" He also wonders whether some scouts simply "re-index" central's final list, afraid to take stands against their peers.

Teams receive Central Scouting's report for free, but often bicker about the final rankings because they are completed in April and fail to account for late-rising prospects in the playoff season, the combine and other factors such as international showcases. Every team supplements Central Scouting with its own operation.

But insistence on gathering more information is often where decision-makers fail, Tingling says. Rather than look for data that disproves a premise, decision-makers are often inclined to find information that confirms their initial opinion.

For an example, Tingling takes former Ottawa Senator Alexandre Daigle, the first pick of the 1993 draft who was considered the NHL's next great star.

Daigle played 616 games but never reached his potential, and in retirement, he admitted that he never genuinely loved hockey. That would have been mighty useful to the Senators in 1993, but most scouts either didn't know about Daigle's indifference, or chose to dismiss it and ranked him first overall.

"Wouldn't you want to know who was telling you to pick Daigle?" Tingling asks. "And more importantly, who were the scouts with reservations?"

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