

Grand Rapids company scores with formula for hockey player's success

by Garret M. Ellison | The Grand Rapids Press

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CASCADE TOWNSHIP -- Aggressive behavior and amped emotions are two hallmarks of a professional hockey game.

But trying to determine whether a hot young prospect is going to clash with the coach and his fellow players off the ice is tough for scouts to determine by looking at statistics alone.

Pondera Advisors LLC, which has offices at 5200 Cascade Road SE, Suite 100, believes it has a formula for figuring the likelihood of player success.

The firm uses a proprietary psychological work-up titled Virtual Coach, offering a window into how players' thought processes might affect performance.

Pondera Advisors' client list includes the National Hockey League's Chicago Blackhawks, New York Rangers and St. Louis Blues.

"It's been incredibly accurate in terms of evaluating the personalities we're dealing with," Rick Dudley, the Blackhawks assistant general manager, said of Virtual Coach. "It gives us an idea of what kind of hockey player we're looking at, what will make them function well."

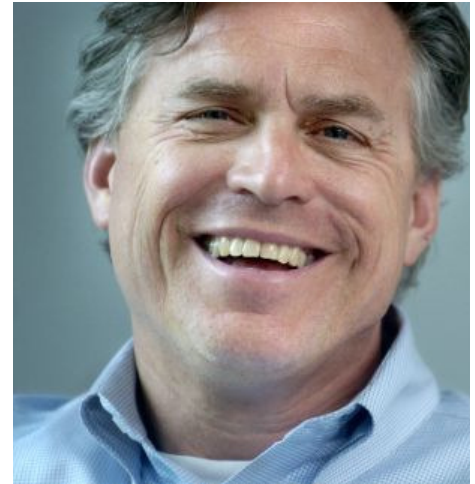
He was in Toronto on Wednesday at the invitation-only NHL Scouting Combine, where 103 top prospects were being run through physical, medical and psychological testing ahead of the June 26-27 draft in Montreal.

Virtual Coach was developed by Pondera Advisors partner Joe Day, who played 72 games with the NHL's Hartford Whalers and New York Islanders between the 1991-92 and 1993-94 seasons.

"I always thought that there has to be a way that coaches can get the meaningful data on players -- the emotional makeup, personalities they respond, or don't respond to," Day said, who was in Toronto with Dudley helping assess talent. "Players have responded favorably to it, especially younger guys at the NHL combine."

A St. Lawrence University graduate who also is East Grand Rapids High School's hockey coach, Day is one of Pondera Advisors' co-founders and partners. The other two are Rob Elliott, a former Wolverine World Wide Inc. director of learning and development with 17 years education experience, including Cedar Springs superintendent and East Grand Rapids assistant superintendent for business; and John Belaski, a longtime business owner and Northview school board member who is a former business teacher.

Established in 2006, Virtual Coach is among three Web-based assessments established by the leadership consulting firm, which specializes in leadership and family development, strategic planning, team



Rob Elliott does psychological workups on professional hockey players, including the Chicago Blackhawks, at his company, Pondera Advisors LLC.

Emily Zoladtz | The Grand Rapids Press

building and executive recruiting. The privately held company had 46 percent growth last year and expects 55 percent growth this year, said Elliott, who declined to release specific figures.

Pondera has players answer 306 questions for Virtual Coach, which measures behavioral traits and emotional intelligence. To date, more than 700 players have been put into Virtual Coach's 18-month-old database.

"It's kind of our secret sauce that we use to determine what the profiles will look like," said Elliott, adding the average hockey player "is very concrete in the way they process information."

However, Dudley said: "But that's not true for everyone. Some take criticism well; others need a pat on the back."

The bottom line is making the proper investment into players, Elliott said.

"Being sure that a young prospect isn't going to clash with management or fellow players is crucial when it comes to drafting decisions that involve large salaries," he said. "If you draft a player, commit to pay him \$375,000 and they never make it on the team, you have just thrown \$375,000 away. ...

"We've yet to have a single person tell us that this thing didn't nail 'em. Everyone says that it's spot on."