This Football Fan Hopes that NFL Players Do Strike
by Andrea Knox

Although he is an avid football fan, J. Scott Armstrong, a Wharton School marketing professor, wouldn't mind at all if the players of the National Football League carried out their threat to strike when their contract expires July 15.

A strike would be an important piece of evidence in support of his contention that society is overlooking a useful tool that could save people a lot of time and money by speeding the resolutions of conflicts.

That tool is role playing: assembling groups of people to act the parts of the antagonists in a conflict.

Armstrong used role playing this spring to predict the likely outcome of the NFL conflict over players' salaries. The conclusion of his role-playing groups: strike.

Armstrong, obviously, hopes they were right.

A correct prediction would be one small weapon in his nascent attempt to persuade society in general and business in particular of the importance of role playing. The technique now is used widely for therapy and training, but Armstrong says it also can be used to minimize conflict.

The professor's interest in using role playing to make forecasts developed unexpectedly from a classroom exercise that was intended to encourage students to think about the social responsibility of business.

The exercise recreated a case in which Upjohn Co. fought a Federal Drug Administration order to take off the market a drug that had resulted in deaths and for which there were non-lethal substitutes.

He said he was astonished that Upjohn refused to take the drug off the market. "I thought that was terrible, and people I talked to said it was crazy not to take it off the market. I wanted to illustrate it to the class and I made it a role-playing situation. I never expected it to turn out the way it did: 1 had seven students playing the board and they decided to do exactly what the company did, keep it on the market."

Armstrong was so intrigued with this unexpected turn of events that he continued to find groups to act out the situation, eventually playing it with 57 groups in 10 countries. Each time, the groups were given the bare facts of the case, then asked to put themselves in Upjohn's place. And each time, the result was the same:

"None of them took it off the market," he says with still a trace of his original astonishment. "Yet if you asked individuals what they would have done, 98 percent of 71 people surveyed said they would take it off the market."

There are many business situations in which this simple technique could be used to great advantage. Armstrong says.

A union could use role playing to guess management's reaction to contract demands and to estimate how much it could ask for without risking a strike.

A company planning to close a plant could see how the community and the workers would react to various strategies for announcing and carrying out the closing.

A company considering restructuring might use role playing to assess employees' possible reactions. By not approaching the employees directly, for example, the company could avoid upsetting them over some. thing that might-not happen.

Armstrong and his neighbors in Drexel Hill used role playing to keep their local elementary school from being closed.

Some community members played the roles of the principal and the school board while other members tested arguments and approaches on them. When they were satisfied that they had a winning strategy, they went to the board with their pleas.

"Some of us almost started laughing when their reactions turned out so close to what we had role-played," Armstrong said.

This experience, combined with a very slight body of experimental evidence, has Armstrong more and more convinced that role playing can be used to help forecast events.

Convincing other people will be the hard part, he says, and that is why he has decided to gamble on predicting the outcome of the foot. ball impasse. Armstrong hopes to gain a bit of publicity if he is right.

This is the first time he has tried to predict something that has not yet happened. In his other experiments, the role-playing groups were given disguised information about historical situations to determine whether they would have played out the event as it actually happened.

Conclusiveness will be a long time in coming, especially since he hasn't been able to scare up any grants to support this research.

"There are such large costs associated with conflict;" he said earnestly.

"If we could improve our predictive ability about how the other side would act, we could resolve conflict more effectively."

His idealism gradually pulled him away from more traditional aspects of marketing, in which he earned a Ph.D. at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and it enticed him into forecasting.

"Marketing doesn't change anything," he said. "Forecasting can help you do things better. The notion of developing a more efficient system is one that appeals to me, and it's not one that marketers traditionally look at."

In two experiments this spring, Armstrong gathered more evidence that role playing beats expert opinion by a wide margin as a predictor of how a dispute will be resolved – or not resolved.

In each case, the same information about a conflict was presented both to individuals who could discuss it in pairs and to groups of four people who would act out the roles of the protagonists.

In one case, the subjects were asked to say whether a supermarket chain would agree to a request by the Ace Co. to sell large appliances alongside groceries. In the other situation, the subjects were asked to predict the probable outcome of a strike by artists against the government of Histavia.

Both cases used information from real situations - the Ace Co. was actually Philco Corp. and Histavia was actually Holland.

When the tally was in, not a single individual had correctly predicted the actual outcome of the Philco case, but 80 percent of those who played roles were correct.

Only 7 percent of the individuals had chosen the real outcome of the Dutch artists' strike, while 50 percent of those in the groups had come to the right conclusion.

The important point, Armstrong says, is not that the groups did well but that they did much better than people who simply studied the situation and made a forecast.

Yet in business, many important decisions are made on the basis of judgment alone, Armstrong says.

"People have very sophisticated methods for forecasting things like inventory," he said. "But they get less sophisticated when they get to the big strategy questions like: "Should we build a new factory or should we go into the international market?" They get less sophisticated because they have more faith in their own judgment. Too much confidence."

For example, Armstrong says, the University of Oregon took all the information the faculty used to select Ph.D. candidates and created a computer program to make the selections instead.

As it turned out, the groups of candidates that the computer selected did better on average in graduate school than the groups of candidates the faculty had selected.

The reason, Armstrong thinks, is that the computer never gets tired or cranky or lets unconscious biases get in its way.

Yet despite a fair amount of publicity about the success of the computer program, Armstrong said the creator of the program told him recently that no other school was doing anything similar.

"I tried to talk it up at Penn, but no one was interested in investigating the possibility," Armstrong said. So the professor is thoroughly aware that he will have a tough row to hoe in promoting role playing as an alternative to individual judgments in some situations.

But a correct football prediction would help.

Armstrong's groups of role-playing students not only predicted a 60 percent chance that the football players would strike, but also suggested that the chances of a strike could be reduced to 30 percent if a compromise solution were brought to the negotiating table.

When Armstrong did his experiment in the spring, the players were asking for 55 percent of the National Football League's gross revenue to compensate for the fact that a 1977 free-agent rule didn't bring their salaries up to the levels of those in other leagues. The NFL said it would not grant any fixed percentage of its revenue, no matter what that percentage was.

But after the test groups had drawn their conclusions, Armstrong and his research assistant, Harry Walker, asked the groups to predict what would happen if either side suggested that the wage and free agent system be left intact but that the players be given a fixed percentage of television revenues.

If that proposition were introduced in the real strike case, the likelihood of a strike would drop to 30 percent, the role-playing group said.