

# AnalystDuel: Improving IPOE Through Fantasy Football

by Major Kyle Hanratty

"SOMEONE FIND THE S-2," bellowed the Commander from behind his computer screen. Entering the room a few moments later, the S-2 found the Commander pacing, uncharacteristically nervous.

"Sir?"

The Commander raised his head and addressed the S-2 directly. "You're the best chance we've got, Deuce. Help me understand what we're up against."

"Stop worrying, sir," the S-2 replied confidently. "I've been looking at this all week, and we can win this."

The S-2 launched into a description of the degrading weather conditions and their impact on both sides' aerial capabilities, then spoke about the effect the elevation would have on either formation's endurance. He wrapped up his briefing by explaining that attacking the adversary where they're weakest and exploiting existing intel about their plans would confer a significant advantage and virtually guarantee success.

The S-2 paused to allow the Commander a moment to digest this information. The Commander grimaced. "I want to make sure I fully understand what you're recommending. Do you really think starting Jayden Daniels at quarterback over Jalen Hurts is the right move?"

"Sir, that's exactly what I recommend. Hurts is playing in Denver, which will be a snowy, blustery mess. Daniels is playing in a dome against the Saints, who lost both of their starting cornerbacks and are weak against rushing quarterbacks."

"Excellent analysis, Two. I simply could never imagine not starting a Pro Bowler like Hurts."

And with that, the Commander completed his lineup and hit SEND.

## Introduction

Some analyses are more consequential than others—but the underlying principles remain the same. S-2s often bemoan their difficulties in training analysts to conduct quality intelligence preparation of the operational environment (IPOE). It's not news that IPOE requires a clear understanding of terrain analysis, threat system capabilities, and tactics. However, the patterns of thought and habits of mind required to produce

useful IPOE products—that is, transforming disparate data sets (steps 1-3) into a cohesive narrative (step 4) to drive operational recommendations—are strikingly similar to those needed to win at fantasy football. Ultimately, the difference between good IPOE versus *great* IPOE—or winning versus losing at fantasy football—is found in the quality of the recommendations drawn from the analysis.

Still skeptical? Stick with me. Using a combination of real-world vignettes and practical applications, hopefully (for your analysts' sake), I can convince you not just to put away the Distributed Common Ground System next season and improve your section, but to do it in a much more enjoyable manner.

## Vignette 1: IPOE Steps 1 and 2

The impacts of terrain and weather on military operations are undeniable. Lieutenant Meehan's iconic proclamation in *Band of Brothers* captured this succinctly: "The Channel coast is socked in with rain and fog! High winds on the drop zone! No jump tonight!" IPOE steps 1 and 2 (*Define the Operational Environment* and *Describe the Environmental Effects on Operations*) enable the Commander and staff to translate these advantages and disadvantages into operational recommendations. This logic translates well from the battlefield to the football field.

Perhaps the most telling example where steps 1 and 2 led to fantasy victories was the December 6, 2021, showdown in Buffalo, NY between the New England Patriots and Buffalo Bills. On the surface, a game featuring Josh Allen (a future Hall of Famer) and Mac Jones (a Heisman Trophy runner-up) looked like a shootout. Leading up to the contest, Allen and Jones averaged 272 and 238 passing yards per week, respectively. In fact, in just the prior week alone Jones threw for 310 yards. The weather, however, dramatically changed this analysis.

The forecast in Buffalo called for winds gusting to 55 miles an hour and a wind chill of -4 degrees Fahrenheit. With that intelligence at hand, an analyst could use IPOE to make several recommendations: First, passing in those conditions seems nearly impossible, so consider benching both quarterbacks. Second, because the teams must prioritize the run game, consider starting the second string running back. Finally, the game is likely to be a messy, low-scoring affair, so consider starting either of the defenses.

In execution, the game was a defensive struggle, but the Patriots ultimately triumphed with a final score of 14-10. The Patriots' Mac Jones threw a total of three passing attempts for 19 yards. Meanwhile, Harris totaled 111 yards on 10 carries, in addition to the starting running back, Rhamondre Stevenson, gaining 189 yards in 24 carries. On the other side of the ball, The Bills' Josh Allen fared slightly better than his counterpart, with 15 completions for 145 yards—but he only completed 50% of his passes. Fantasy team owners who considered IPOE steps 1 and 2 might have seen this coming.

There are countless examples demonstrating the value of IPOE-style analysis. For a simple and more recent example, consider Josh Allen's game-day performance on indoor fields. Analysis before the Patriots' December 15, 2024 game against the Detroit Lions revealed that in seven previous dome games, Allen's record was 6-1 with 20 total touchdowns (15 thrown and 5 rushing). Moreover, in a league with an average passer rating of about 90, Allen's rating is 119. In the December 15 game, Allen threw for 362 yards with 2 touchdowns, plus an additional 2 rushing touchdowns, giving him a passer rating of 122 for that game alone. While correlation does not prove causation, the value of analyzing the operational environment in fantasy football seems obvious.

#### Putting It into Practice

S-2s are often teased as the staff's "weatherman." But think about it: how often has an S-2 briefed weather effects like the local news station? S-2 reports typically sound like this: "Sir, the high for tomorrow will be 52 with a low of 28. There will be a moderate cloud cover through the early evening. Oh, also, illumination will be 76% tomorrow night." The Commander (and staff) are left doing the mental gymnastics to tease out why any of that matters. This analysis is akin to seeing the weather report for the Bills-Patriots game and thinking simply, "wow, I'm glad I'm not playing in that weather!"

Commanders need an S-2 with enough analytical insight to say, "Sir, no significant impacts to operations tomorrow morning. However, the combination of freezing temperatures and cloud cover in the early evening may restrict our ability to utilize unmanned aerial systems as the Battalion moves to its attack positions. Moreover, while illumination is 76%, the moon will set at 2230 and leave 8 hours of total darkness until sunrise at 0630. I recommend adjusting our line of departure to midnight to exploit the cover of darkness and increase the likelihood of support from unmanned systems." This data→analysis→conclusion→recommendation methodology is analogous to not starting the quarterback in a game being played in subzero temperatures with 55-mile-per-hour winds.

## Vignette 2: IPOE Step 3 and 4

In IPOE steps 3 and 4 (*Evaluate the Threat* and *Determine Threat Courses of Action [COAs]*), analysts seek to understand the threat's capabilities and translate these into predictive analysis of how those capabilities will be employed. This process includes an analysis of threat composition, disposition, and strengths, identifying high-value targets (HVTs), and understanding threat tactics. Once again, football presents a similar dynamic.

NFL teams publish an injury report each week to capture which players are active, questionable or doubtful to play, or out completely. This report is mirrored in an analysis of battle damage assessment of a threat's order of battle. After identifying unavailable assets (i.e., players), an analyst must forecast the impact of their absence.

The 2024 Tampa Bay Buccaneers ("the Bucs") game versus the Las Vegas Raiders provides dramatic examples. On October 13, the Bucs lost Mike Evans and Chris Godwin, their top two starting wide receivers, to injury. Two days later the Raiders traded *their* top wide receiver, Devante Adams, to the New York Jets. In evaluating this "threat," Evans, Godwin, and Adams are identified as HVTs. The question for fantasy team managers would be to determine how the Bucs and Raiders would compensate for their loss.

For the Bucs, the answer was tight end Cade Otton. Over the next three weeks, Otton's performance increased from his average of 3 receptions for 27 yards to 9 receptions for 86 yards. The Raiders responded by prioritizing their number 2 wide receiver, Jakobi Meyers. Since the Adams trade, Meyers's performance increased from an average of 5 receptions for 54 yards to 7 receptions for 74 yards. In both cases, analyzing the "order of battle" utilizing a depth chart prepared by each team's coaching staff that ranked each player's anticipated performance, then applying IPOE steps 3 and 4 revealed the likely solution.

More broadly, fantasy football also provides an opportunity to consider when and how these assets may be employed, a process very much like COA development. In the same way the threat has preferred tactics, so do football teams—but instead of a doctrine manual, football strategists use a playbook. While the football analyst doesn't need to know which specific tactics an offensive line will use, they do need to understand how the team will adapt its strategy that weekend given the weather, field conditions, and available capabilities.

To visualize this style of thinking, let us revisit the Bills-Lions game discussed earlier. The Detroit Lions use a "pass funnel" defense, which means that opposing teams are typically more successful if they pass instead of run, regardless of whether they focus on any combination of formations, called plays, or players' talent. The opposing Bills offense often utilizes

“2-safety zone coverage,” in which the team’s 2 safeties split responsibility for protecting the deep end of the field. This coverage typically allows “slot receivers” to run routes straight up the center of the field with less defensive pressure.

This threat template-style analysis yields several key insights. Josh Allen, the Bills’ quarterback, will likely have ample passing opportunities, augmenting the above terrain-based (dome-covered stadium) analysis. As for the Lions offense, analysts may prioritize playing Amon-Ra St. Brown, the team’s top wide receiver, who plays in the slot more than 50% of the time.

A fantasy team manager who applied these recommendations very likely won their matchup. We already noted Allen’s exemplary performance: 362 yards gained, with 2 passing touchdowns. Likewise, St. Brown also took his opportunity and ran with it: 193 receiving yards and a touchdown. There are certainly instances where the analysis is not nearly as successful; nevertheless, fantasy football team owners will undeniably benefit from this thinking style over time.

#### Putting It into Practice

The same S-2 who briefs weather effects like a news reporter likely briefs step 3 as a catalog of capabilities. It typically sounds something like, “Sir, here is the threat order of battle. As you can see, he has 12x S219s, 1x 1L220 radar ... [laundry list of assets continues].” Update briefs during the execution of operations sounds similar: “Sir, we’ve killed 3x 2S19s and 1x 1L220 radar...” In both cases, the S-2 has deferred analytic responsibility to the Commander (and staff).

The Commander needs the relative combat power analysis to identify strengths that can be exploited and weaknesses that must be mitigated. Here’s a brief that meets the Commander’s requirements by adding analysis to the factual data: “Sir, the threat only has 1x counterfire radar (1L200). This represents a critical vulnerability. Once it is destroyed, our artillery batteries can mass with impunity.” The logic behind this recommendation mirrors the logic of a fantasy football team owner evaluating the significance of losing a key wide receiver.

Moreover, the process of analyzing how a football team will build its game plan and playbook exercises is very similar to COA development. Rather than simply scribbling enemy icons on an acetate overlay, the S-2 must consider whether the plan makes sense in the bigger picture. In football, one team may have a Hall of Fame quarterback, but if analysis indicates the opposition is weak against the run, a passing play might not be the best option. Likewise, just because an enemy in the battlespace has breaching assets does not mean they will conduct a breach. If the conditions to perform an infiltration or bypass are more favorable, then the COA should be adjusted to accommodate.

#### Recommendations for Implementation

If you’ve made it this far, I hope I’ve started to make a believer out of you and you agree that IPOE can help you win at fantasy football...or maybe you’re just a big football fan. Either way, I have two recommendations to maximize this training event.

First, instead of a traditional season-long draft league, use a weekly league like FanDuel or DraftKings. By opting for a weekly format, each week provides a fresh game cycle. This allows an analyst who neglected the weather impacts in Buffalo one week, for example, to remedy that going forward. Arguably the most significant benefit of “IPFFE” (intelligence preparation of the fantasy football environment) is the immediate feedback loop allowing analysts to compare their assessments with results. Whereas most IPOE training in garrison often concludes with a simple analysis brief and suggestions about where it could be improved, fantasy football provides an “execution phase” that enables reflection.

Second, each week have an analyst brief the section on why they chose their lineup. This recommendation not only encourages analysts to focus on analytic rigor when making their selections, it also provides a valuable opportunity to practice briefing skills. Although this article focuses on the thinking required for effective IPOE, this analysis is wasted if it cannot be communicated effectively to the boss. Briefings like this in a low-stress situation ensure the section gets practice on *both* critical tasks.

#### Addressing Anticipated Misconceptions

I would be remiss if I didn’t address two anticipated misconceptions. First, some readers may object that there is a distinct difference between the consequences of military intelligence analysis versus a fantasy football manager’s analysis, arguing that intelligence analysts inform life-or-death decisions while fantasy football managers certainly do not. They’re not wrong. The benefit of fantasy football analysis, however, is not linked to outcomes; instead, its value lies in the analytical process itself. Stated differently, analysts do not drown in the magnitude of the analysis, they drown in the data points. Fantasy football provides an easily accessible medium to refine this pattern of thinking, translating a myriad of data points into a compelling recommendation for the boss.

Others may contend that fantasy football wastes time that should focus on building knowledge of threat systems and tactics. Of course, IPOE requires a thorough knowledge of the threat, and fantasy football cannot (and should not) replace threat-focused training. It can, however, reinforce IPOE training and augment analysts’ abilities to draw coherent conclusions and provide realistic recommendations. Even a savant-level knowledge of the threat is only useful if an analyst can make sense of it. Fantasy football offers a low-pressure environment to practice those sense-making skills.

#### Conclusion

For many S-2s and analysts, IPOE is a daunting process, but we must not overcomplicate it. Ultimately, IPOE is a methodology for structuring analysts’ thinking when determining how the operational environment and the threat can and will impact friendly operations. While intelligence analysts

leverage the methodology to determine how a threat will operate, it is a methodology applicable to numerous scenarios.

In particular, fantasy football managers use the same pattern of thinking. The difference is that fantasy football managers do it every week for four-plus months. In contrast, a typical intelligence analyst might get a similar opportunity once a quarter. Next season, instead of grinding through another analysis of the Suwalki Gap, why not train the same thinking processes while debating whether Lamar Jackson or Derrick Henry is more important to the Ravens' success next Sunday? 🌟

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