

Sports-sales seminar patterned after NFL combine

By Jeff Weiner, Orlando Sentinel

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Sports Sales Combine, which begins Friday at [Orlando Magic's Amway Arena](#), is like a job fair for the ticket sales industry, except participants actually sell tickets and could be hired by a team at the end of the weekend

No [NBA](#) team would sign a player without watching him play. So why should a team hire sales people without watching them sell?

That's the premise behind the Sports Sales Combine, which begins Friday at Amway Arena, home of the Orlando Magic.

The brainchild of Dick Irwin and Bill Sutton, two veteran sports sales professionals who also teach in the field, the combine is like a job fair for the ticket sales industry with at least two notable twists.

One, participants in the combine not only engage in classroom role-play activities, but in actual ticket sales.

Two, the participants learn how to sell from the same recruiters who may hire them at the conclusion of the combine.

If it sounds like the [NFL](#) Combine, that's no coincidence. Irwin and Sutton got the idea for the combine from its NFL counterpart, while they were both working for the NBA Job Fair.

Irwin is a professor at the University of Memphis and has served in executive marketing roles for several sporting events and organizations. Sutton is a professor at the [University of Central Florida](#) and the founder of Bill Sutton & Associates, a consulting firm.

As they do in their professional lives, Sutton and Irwin have blended business with education to form the basis for their combine.

"Basically what you're doing is having people audition," Sutton said. Irwin stressed the hands-on experience available at the combine as one of its biggest selling points.

"We wanted to get some 'doing' into it," he said.

The combine will start in the classroom Friday, as participants are taught about "Eduselling" — very simply put, selling a product by educating a client on its merits. Then the participants will hit the concourse of Amway Arena for a night game, collecting information and sales leads from Magic fans who aren't season-ticket holders.

The next day, the selling begins. Participants will call the customers they met the night before and try their hand at selling ticket packages, all the while under the guidance of recruiters from teams including the Magic, the [Phoenix Suns](#), the [Atlanta Hawks](#) and others.

Then, on Sunday, the participants will interview with those same recruiters for jobs with pro organizations.

Friday's combine, hosted by the Orlando Magic, will be the fourth the pair have put together. Another is scheduled to be hosted by the Phoenix Suns later this month.

The combine does not accept all comers. Applicants are weeded out based on the strength of their applications. About 35 are invited to participate in each combine, many of them recent graduates with bachelor's degrees in sales. The cost, \$395, does not include lodging or airfare.

Irwin and Sutton insist the combination of experience and exposure that participants receive is well worth the cost. Sutton said that, typically, about half of the participants are hired at the conclusion of the event, and many more find work later due in part to what they learned at the combine.

While finding hireable people is a perk available to all the teams in attendance, for the host team there is an added "home field advantage," Sutton said. In addition to being able to show off the team's facilities, the Magic will get to keep the profits from the tickets sold by combine participants.

According to Sutton, those sales have ranged from \$5,000 to \$17,000 at past combines.

Members of the current Magic sales team already have a combine success story in their midst: Marisa Kinikles, now a ticket-sales representative for the local team, attended the Atlanta Sports Sales Combine last year.

"The combine, on several levels, changed my life," she said.

Kinikles wasn't among those hired at the end of that combine, she said, but she credits

the experience and networking opportunities she gained there as a major factor in her finding a job with the Magic.

"I definitely believe that's how I was able to make my way here," she said.

Even for those who aren't hired at the combine's conclusion, Sutton said, the event offers all comers an opportunity to network, to be seen and to get a glimpse at what a life in sales would be like.

"Worst case, they learn how to sell themselves," Sutton said.