DATA FIELD: Mike Lyons '88S (MBA) will help bring a more data-driven approach to the Buffalo Bills' game and business strategies as the head of the team's new analytics department.

Game Changer

Mike Lyons '88S (MBA) will never forget January 3, 1993.

The lifelong Buffalo Bills fan sat slumped in the stands of what was then Rich Stadium, his spirits dashed as halftime descended on his beloved team, already down by 25 points in a mild-weather matchup against the Houston Oilers.

Friends were packing up their seat cushions and coolers, sparing themselves the slow torture of a certain loss and bemoaning a sorry end to the regular season. They indulged in a little light-hearted heckling of Lyons and his cockeyed refusal to throw in the rowdy rag.

"Oh, they said I was out of my mind," he recalls. "But I was an optimistic Bills fan then, and I still am today."

Such stalwart support has had its rewards. Staying in his seat that day, Lyons watched as the Bills staged a history-making comeback—still the biggest single-game turnaround for a team in the NFL.

But for the past 15 seasons, the team has failed to make a play-off appearance, and Lyons hopes to be in on the start of a bigger turnaround. He has parlayed his passion for the squad into a head-office position that he calls a "dream come true."

Named last November as director of the Bills' first analytics department, he will collect and use data points from both the business and sporting sides of the franchise to optimize the team's decisions on everything from draft choices to fans' experiences to the performances of each player—all with the goal of increasing the team's tally of wins.

Call it a career Hail Mary, Lyons's opportune, why-not-give-it-a-shot vie for the job. His sister, Brigid Maloney, an attorney living in Buffalo, caught last year's press conference during which team president and CEO Russ Brandon announced plans to create an analytics department—a move growing in popularity across the NFL, with about a third of the league's teams by then already employing a more data-driven approach to team management.

Maloney knew, as head of such an effort, her brother could put to use the considerable information management skills he'd been honing the last 26 years at Xerox.

"I didn't think this kind of job existed," Lyons says.

Much of Lyons's work will be done ahead of, rather than during the games, and he'll travel with the team only occasionally. And he need not fret about stepping on any cleats; he'll present objective

analyses to the coaches, who will then make the delicate decisions about whether and how they're applied on the field.

"Rather than using simple observations, we're able to quantify characteristics," he says. "It's just a better way to understand likelihoods."

Lyons, who earned a bachelor's degree in molecular engineering at MIT before pursuing an MBA at Simon, hasn't missed a Bills home game since 1989. And while the team last made the playoffs in 1999, he remains an undaunted optimist. Unlike that lonesome halftime two decades ago, these days he's hearing the cheers of his friends and family, including his wife, **Christine** '93 (MS), '99S (MBA), daughter, Chelsea, and sons, Nate, Rochester freshman Zach, and Luke.

"Their eyes lit up," Lyons says, remembering the moment he told his boys what their dad would be doing for a living.

Squad system analyst Peter Linton, who makes up the other half of the team's analytics department, says his new colleague's kids have good reason to be proud: Lyons's addition to the roster strikes a robust balance for the Bills of brains and brawn.

"Mike knows how to get out of the data what nobody has before," Linton says. "It's just a great thing to do what you love and to see it manifest on the field." Ⓡ   —MELISSA LANG

Poker's Newest Face

Professional life began typically enough for **Jonathan Dimmig** '05, '06S (MBA). After earning two degrees at Rochester, he returned to his native Buffalo to take a job as a financial analyst. For 10 years he worked in the field, while pursuing a hobby he'd been introduced to by one of his roommates at Rochester: poker.

In 2012, Dimmig took a dramatic step. He left his job and moved to Las Vegas to make a go of it as a professional poker player.

"It was obviously a big risk," he says.

And a worthwhile one, apparently. In June, he prevailed over nearly 8,000 competitors around the world to win the six-week-long 2014 World Series of Poker—and take home more than $1 million in winnings.

A lifelong hockey enthusiast and diehard fan of the Buffalo Sabres, Dimmig says the World Series of Poker is "like the Stanley Cup"—except in this contest, a Buffalonian came out on top. About 15 of Dimmig's friends traveled to Vegas to watch him play at the final table, where he wore a Buffalo Sabres shirt with pride.

According to Alex Weldon, a game designer and poker player writing on the website pokerforums.org, "Dimmig came out on top of the second largest field in live poker history." Yet, "Dimmig would not have been anyone's pick when the final table first kicked off."

He began the final table in sixth place. Moreover, while the final table is called the "Millionaire Maker," Dimmig, a relatively young player, had never won more than five figures.

Dimmig says his poker prowess comes down to math.

"It's a heavily math-based profession. So if you don't have a background in math, you're at a slight disadvantage. At Simon, they definitely teach you a math-based approach to solving problems. So that approach has given me a leg up on the competition."

Las Vegas is the world's center of professional poker. But London is another hot spot, and Dimmig hopes to travel there and elsewhere in Europe to play.

"Looking forward from a poker perspective," he says, "I definitely want to play in some more tourneys. But one of the things I'm most looking forward to is, I'm actually writing a book."

"I have no background in writing whatsoever," he says. But he had an unusually vivid dream, and it became an idea for a novel. He's completed several chapters. "I think it can be very successful," he says. Ⓡ   —KAREN MCCALLY '02 (PHD)

WORLD CHAMPION: Dimmig won the World Series of Poker, the ultimate poker competition, in Las Vegas in June.