

CASE STUDY

The Carolina Panthers Use Fortinet Unified SASE to “Keep Pounding” Security, Both On-Premises and Remote

When the National Football League’s (NFL) Carolina Panthers started their playoff bid in 2003, assistant coach Sam Mills gave a speech to motivate the team. More than three months earlier, he had been diagnosed with intestinal cancer and given three months to live. “When I found out I had cancer,” he told his players, “there were two things I could do: quit or keep pounding. I am a fighter. I kept pounding. You are fighters too. Keep pounding!” A month later, the Panthers played in their first-ever Super Bowl, narrowly losing to the New England Patriots.

Mills coached the next season as well, before succumbing to the disease in April 2005. His message to “Keep Pounding” still resonates throughout the Panthers organization. It is even emblazoned on a drum that high-profile guests bang before every home game.

For Rob Bence, vice president of technology and cybersecurity for Tepper Sports & Entertainment (TSE), “Keep Pounding” has an entirely different meaning. TSE is the parent company of the Carolina Panthers, Major League Soccer’s (MLS) Charlotte FC, and Bank of America Stadium where both teams play. The stadium also regularly hosts concerts and other events. “Tepper Sports & Entertainment wants to continue delivering world-class sports and entertainment and in order to do that we have to continue to evolve the organization,” Rob says.

The company operates in two locations. The Panthers have offices and practice facilities at Bank of America Stadium, but most of Charlotte FC’s facilities are a few miles away at Atrium Health Performance Park. Rob and his team are responsible for ensuring that both locations have the seamless connectivity employees, guests, and vendors need; while also protecting the assets the organization requires to maintain a competitive advantage on and off the field.

“We need to create a seamless, secure, high-performance environment that supports the diverse needs of the large venue and sports franchises that we operate,” Rob explains. “Our network needs to meet both NFL and MLS standards for delivering a secure networking environment for our employees, fans, and athletes. We try to exceed the leagues’ security requirements; our goal is to provide a robust perimeter defense so that we can stop cyberthreats and secure everything in our network.”

Security Must Stay Vigilant

One key challenge for Rob and his team is that much of the organization’s most important intellectual property (IP) is in the hands of remote users—the player scouts. “Our scouts, for both the Carolina Panthers and Charlotte FC, are carrying a lot of intellectual property,” he says. “For example, they have report reviews on players. They also have sensitive data about potential schemes the team has come up with and the player attributes that best fit those schemes.



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Details

Customer: Tepper Sports & Entertainment/Carolina Panthers

Industry: Entertainment

Headquarters: Charlotte, North Carolina

Number of SASE Users: 500

“We cannot risk having scouting information stolen,” he adds. “Football operations are constantly traversing different locations, working from universities, hotels, airplanes, stadiums, and the scouting combine. We cannot lose sight of how crucial it is to protect the team from loss of data, malicious attacks, and IP theft, regardless of where the scout is located.”

When Rob arrived at Tepper Sports & Entertainment, he set two key priorities. First, he wanted to deploy a secure access service edge (SASE) solution to ensure that remote users are as well-protected as those on-site. Fortinet Unified SASE combines Secure SD-WAN with cloud-delivered security service edge (SSE) to extend the convergence of networking and security from the network edge to remote users. And second, he wanted to streamline the company’s infrastructure by consolidating its networking and security vendors. At the time, the organization used an assortment of technologies. One vendor’s firewall sat at the network edge in the stadium offices, and all internet traffic passed through it. Whereas Fortinet secured access to the wireless network within the stadium, as well as provided VPN tunneling between the stadium and Atrium Health Performance Park. This multivendor complexity made network security more difficult to manage.

“I did not have a great sense of our security posture in the multivendor environment,” Rob says. “There was no single console where I could see what was going on in our environment. Did we have the right intrusion protection? What were we catching with web filtering? Were our controls and application security considered best practice? The goal of our improvement initiative was to strengthen the security posture—and our visibility into the security posture.”

Fortinet came to Rob’s attention as a provider offering everything he needed: a FortiSASE solution that integrates tightly with FortiGate Next-Generation Firewalls (NGFWs). As his team held meetings and design sessions with Fortinet, they came to understand that Fortinet Unified SASE would meet all their needs, and then some.

“We are a lean organization, with a limited engineering staff,” Rob says. “We needed a simple solution so that we could maintain and manage it in-house. When we looked at how the FortiOS crosses from the firewalls to the SASE seamlessly, it was clear we would not need training on multiple different tools. The consistency of the interface across the Fortinet solutions gives us a pure foundation for our future security environment as well, as MLS and NFL requirements change and other needs arise.”

Standardizing on Fortinet

Tepper Sports & Entertainment engaged FortiCare Professional Services to help design a network that would be easier to manage, while also integrating with SASE to protect remote users. The company decided to deploy FortiSASE, replace its edge firewalls with FortiGates, and roll out the Fortinet management stack of FortiManager and FortiAnalyzer. The meetings with FortiCare Professional Services convinced Rob and his team to deploy FortiSASE not just to remote users, but to everyone.

“We were impressed that FortiSASE is universal, always on, and always protecting,” Rob says. “We decided to make FortiSASE our end-users’ new normal. That way, they are always seamlessly connected on all their devices, whether they are on-site or remote, with all traffic going through FortiSASE. This consistency is beneficial—both for the IT group as we manage the environment and for the end-users. Our users need security to be frictionless, even as they securely access whatever they need.”

Business Impact

- Improved security of intellectual property for scouts and other remote workers
- Unified security management enables quicker reaction in the event of an attack
- Better visibility to threats supports requests for additional security tools, justifies prior investments
- Reduced staff training and faster resolution of issues, due to consistency of interface across SASE and NGFWs

Solutions

- Fortinet Unified SASE
- Fortinet Secure SD-WAN
- FortiGate Next-Generation Firewall
- FortiAnalyzer
- FortiManager

Services

- FortiGuard AI-Powered Security Services Enterprise Protection Bundle
- FortiCare Professional Services
- FortiGuard Data Loss Prevention (DLP) Service
- FortiGuard OT Security Service
- FortiGuard Attack Surface Security Service



FortiCare Professional Services helped the company roll out FortiSASE to a pilot group of users, including the technology team, some back-office workers, and some remote staff. “We are working with everyone in this alpha group to make sure that everything is working properly, and we are gathering data,” Rob reports. So far, the testing is going well.

FortiCare Professional Services also helped install a high-availability (HA) pair of FortiGate NGFWs in both Bank of America Stadium and Atrium Health Performance Park. All the firewalls are currently running in monitoring mode. “We have them observing our network traffic right now, and that is going great,” Rob says. “We are getting excellent support from Fortinet as a partner, which is helping us knock out some of our use cases. Our relationship with FortiCare Professional Services is giving us exposure to best practices and opportunities to improve security in other areas.”

Each NGFW has the FortiGuard AI-Powered Security Services Enterprise Protection Bundle. The FortiGuard Data Loss Prevention (DLP) Service and FortiGuard OT Security Service are already proving valuable. Likewise, the FortiGuard Attack Surface Security Service, which continuously assesses and rates the organization's security posture, is making Tepper Sports & Entertainment more secure. Rob is particularly enthused about its coverage of IoT devices—crucial for a venue that has many different devices plugging in all the time.

Soon, the company will roll out the FortiManager management platform. Being able to manage the FortiGates and FortiSASE through FortiManager and FortiAnalyzer will simplify network administrators' lives. “The Fortinet solutions will give us a simplified management environment so that we can look at what is going on without logging into multiple systems and multiple dashboards,” Rob says. “Having that single pane of glass will make it easier to see threat intelligence, as well as which devices are responding and which are not. We will be able to quickly handle exceptions, without having to hunt for information.”

“FortiGate virtual machines [VMs] have been successfully deployed in Microsoft Azure as part of our integrated security strategy. Working with FortiCare Professional Services, we've implemented a well-engineered network design spanning our on-premises locations and Azure environment. This extension of the Fortinet ecosystem ensures unified security across our cloud platform, optimizing protection without compromising performance,” Rob says. “We had to extend the Fortinet ecosystem to our cloud platforms so that our security has more cohesiveness companywide. Bringing Azure into the Fortinet Security Fabric helps ensure that all our security solutions are optimized, while not slowing down end-user traffic.”

In the Foxhole with Fortinet

The result is a network security architecture that is transparent to end-users, manageable in-house for the IT team, and highly secure. “When we rolled out FortiSASE, we expected three outcomes, and we are achieving all of them,” Rob says. “First, we have enhanced our security posture, with consistent security policies that are enforced on all the network edges. Second, we can now see real-time threat information disseminated among all the Fortinet devices, which provides for better protection and response. And third, we have built a unified approach to network security that has closed the security gaps that existed in our multivendor environment.” Visibility is key to this unified security management.

“Before, we had no visibility of what people were connecting to from our devices,” Rob says. “What web traffic was going in and out? Where was our data going? Where were users engaging in risky behaviors that they might not be aware of? Where were we sending our data in the cloud? Not having visibility into any of those questions meant we did not know what our risk was.

“Now, with Fortinet Unified SASE, we have clear visibility to the number of true attempted intrusions on a day-to-day basis,” he continues. This data enables Rob's team to shore up security, justify investments they have already made, and demonstrate the need for additional protection in some areas. “Identifying our key attack vectors has provided valuable insights. This evidence reinforces the reality of cyberthreats and strengthens the case for continued security awareness and investment,” says Rob.

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He adds, “The integration of FortiSASE into the Fortinet Security Fabric will serve as the foundation of our strategy as we take on additional security controls. Our leagues are maturing, and more cybersecurity controls are coming into play. Complying with MLS and NFL rules may require us to deploy additional security solutions down the road, and the Fortinet Security Fabric streamlines our ability to implement different components.”

Meanwhile, training for IT staff has also gone well. “Having a consistent interface between FortiSASE and the FortiGates has been amazing,” Rob says. “We did not have to learn multiple operating systems, and we can navigate both solutions with confidence. That not only makes us more efficient, but it has removed some of the guesswork of troubleshooting, so we can resolve issues internally more quickly. We looked at cobbling together SASE and firewalls from different vendors, but the cost of support would have gone up. With FortiSASE and the FortiGates, we have significantly increased our security without adding extra work and inefficiencies for the support team.”

Rob concludes, “Fortinet is a true partner to Tepper Sports & Entertainment; we are not in this fight by ourselves. The Fortinet team is in the foxhole with us, and they have helped us keep pounding on our security posture. Fortinet Unified SASE and FortiGates prevent data leakage and help us stay ahead of the game so that if a malicious attack arrives, we are prepared to respond. We are ahead of the curve when it comes to getting the best possible protection.”

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