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SportsBusiness
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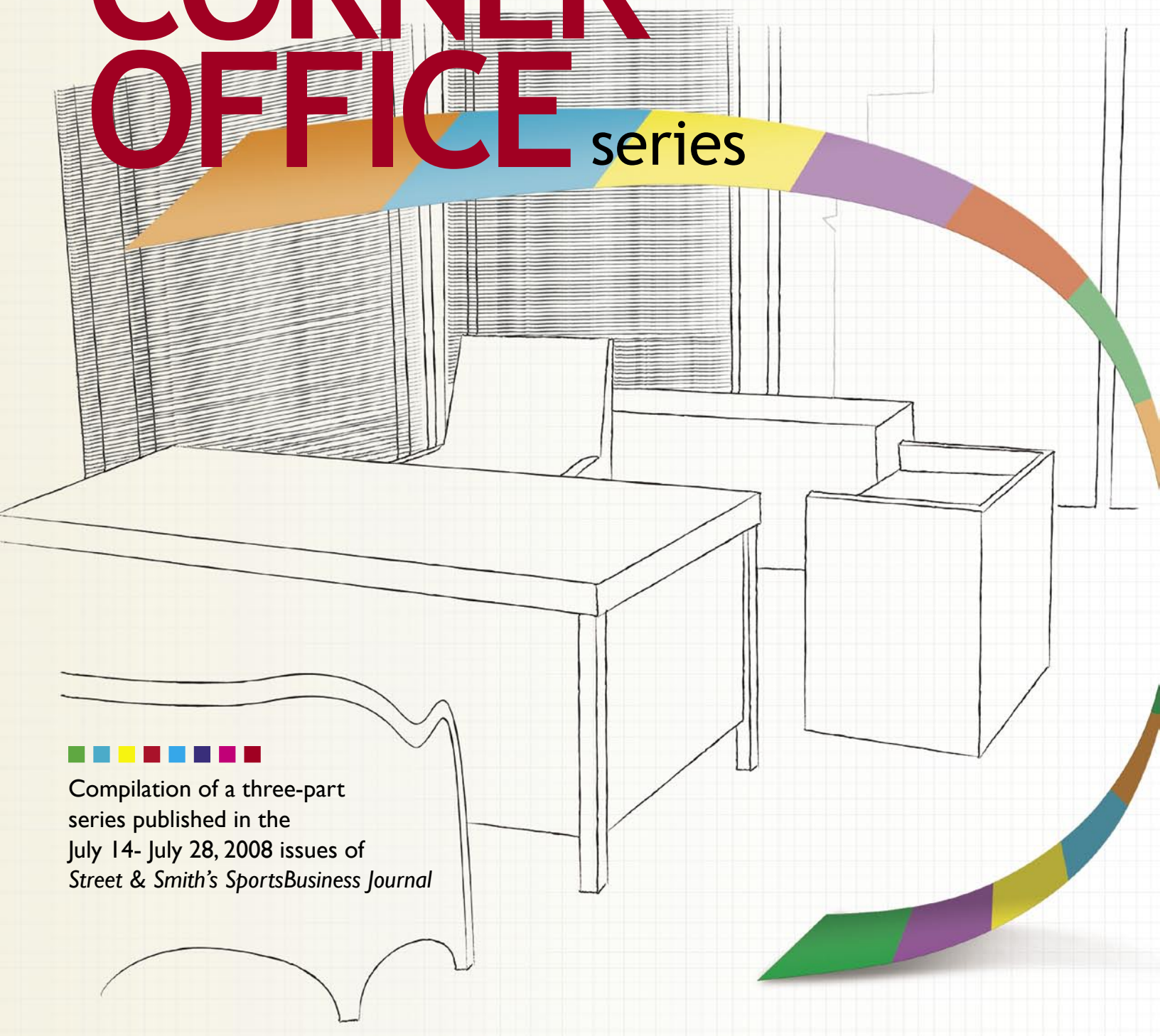
Path to the CORNER OFFICE series



Compilation of a three-part series published in the July 14- July 28, 2008 issues of *Street & Smith's SportsBusiness Journal*

Path to the CORNER OFFICE

Part 1: Landing the job

By Bill King *Senior Writer*

Roy Mlakar was 19 years old and in college when he screwed up the sort of courage that is the province of 19-year-olds, sneaking up the back stairs and into the administrative offices of the local minor league hockey team, where he cornered the owner with a business proposal.

Mlakar boldly promised Nick Mileti that he could bring hundreds of students like himself streaming through the turnstiles if the team, the Cleveland Barons, would sell him the tickets for a Saturday night game at half price. When Mileti agreed, Mlakar rented a few yellow school buses, lined up food from Buddy's pizzeria and posted fliers at 17 area junior colleges.

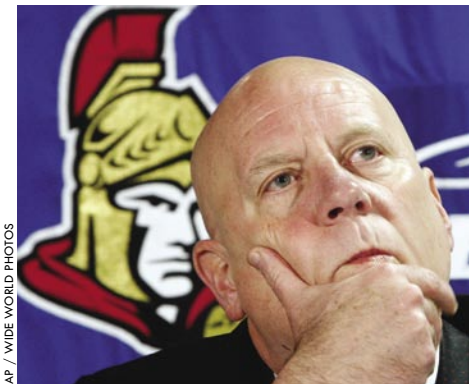
He sold almost 2,000 tickets.

And so, a career was born.

Thirty-eight years later, Mlakar is on his fourth stint as president of a hockey team, and third running an NHL team.

He has been to heaven and through hell.

He would trade the heartaches in a minute, and there have been plenty of them. The crash that followed the glorious Gretzky years with the Los Angeles Kings, which ended with owner and friend Bruce McNall in prison. The bankruptcy of the Pittsburgh Penguins. The afternoon on which he told players and staff of the financially beleaguered Ottawa Senators that, no, they would not get paid this week.



AP / WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Mlakar endured implosions in L.A. and Pittsburgh but was ready when Ottawa called.

But he would not trade any of them, not a stinking one, if it meant giving back a single day that he has spent running a professional sports franchise.

Is there a more coveted, or tightly clutched, job in sports?

Before Mlakar (pronounced Ma-LOCK-er) took his current job as president and CEO of the Senators, he spent the better part of a year as a consultant for a company that held a stake in the team. He was living in Manhattan Beach, Calif., surrounded by family, recovering from the bruising he'd taken during back-to-back implosions with the Kings and Penguins. That's when the man who was taking control of the Senators, Rod Bryden, invited him back into the game.

"I really wasn't excited about moving from Manhattan Beach to Ottawa," Mlakar said. "But when I reflected on the challenge, and the fact that there were only, I think, 24 teams at the time in the NHL — you don't look at a North American map and throw a dart and say, 'I wanna run'…"

Mlakar aimed at an imaginary board across the room and pantomimes a toss, letting out a "Boom!" on impact.

"Things happen," he said. "And opportunities come in funny ways."

Some climb the ladder. Others parachute in at the top rung. Some make the right friends. Some choose the right parents.

Rita Benson LeBlanc, granddaughter of New Orleans Saints owner Tom Benson, likes to say she has "grown up on the floor of the league meetings." She took over day-to-day operation of the franchise in 2006, completing a sequence that began when she showed an interest as a teenager and accelerated when she proved an acumen after college.

Hers is among the more typical of career paths taken by those who

SHANA WITTENWYLER

Welts' entry came a couple of rungs below the mailroom, as a ballboy for the Sonics.

run major sports franchises, and particularly those who run NFL franchises.

A review of the backgrounds of the executives who head the 122 franchises in the NFL, NBA, NHL and Major League Baseball revealed that one of the more likely routes to the top starts at either conception or reception. Almost 16 percent of ranking team executives — and nearly one-third of top executives at NFL teams — are related to a major stakeholder in the ownership group, most often by birth but a

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"I learned through 17 years in the minor leagues that once you get to the top you don't look back. And the challenge is something that you're always grateful to have."

— ROY MLAKAR, CEO, OTTAWA SENATORS

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"When I started here we had five people working in the organization. So if somebody was late for work you moved up to No. 4. You could really jump up the ladder. It was a different world; a different business."

— TOM WILSON, CEO, DETROIT PISTONS

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"To me, a big part of defining who is the right person and what background they should come from is all a function of what is the right structure. And there are 1,000 different structures."

— SANDY ALDERSON, CEO, SAN DIEGO PADRES

few times through marriage.

This won't surprise anyone who works in team sports.

While they carry high profiles, sports franchises are, by most definitions, small to midsized businesses, with fewer than 250 employees and annual revenue ranging from $100 million to $300 million. Many are, in fact, family businesses.

The NFL has the Rooneys and Hunts, Maras and Bidwills, Joneses and Krafts and Bensons and Glazers. Four MLB presidents and one COO are sons of team owners. Family connections are less common in the NBA (two) and NHL (one), but a next generation is rising at several franchises in both those leagues.

Some sports jobs do grow on trees. Family trees.

But what of those who were not born or wed into the business?

While trying to sort the infinite variables of a ranking executive's career path would be folly, most can be placed, bent or wedged into one of seven categories:

- Those who worked their way up at a franchise (36 percent)
- Those who were hired to run a team based on a prior business relationship with the owner (11 percent)
- Those who came in from outside of team sports, often through the work of a search firm (9 percent)
- Those who were brought in from a league office (7 percent)
- General managers who took on the additional title, sometimes with added responsibilities but sometimes without (12 percent)
- Former players who got the job primarily because of that connection (3 percent)
- Family members (16 percent)

Again, not every story fits neatly into a category. Some fit more than one. Consider the paths of two of the more accomplished executives in sports, Rick Welts and Sandy Alderson.

Now president and COO of the Phoenix Suns, Welts arrived at age 16, when he replaced a boyhood pal as a ballboy for the Seattle SuperSonics. He went to work for the team in public relations while at the University of Washington, and was running the department when the Sonics won the NBA championship in 1979.

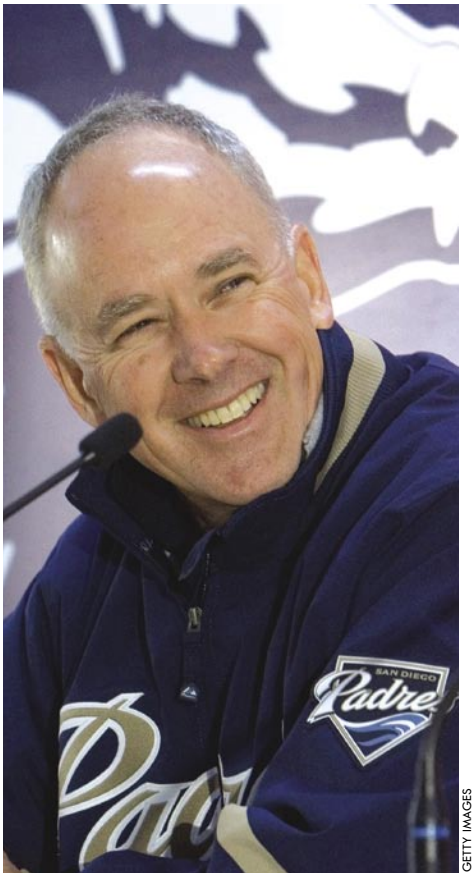
Welts had ambition, and he wasn't sure there was a serious career to be had in team sports, so he left the Sonics for a job selling TV time. But he came back to sports before long, taking a job at the NBA office in New York in 1981.

Welts had risen to the No. 3 spot at the league when News Corp. offered him the seat running the Los Angeles Dodgers as chief operating officer. That came apart when News Corp. sold off control of the team, but Welts was back in it again two years later with the Suns in the role he holds now.

Ask Welts about his path and he'll launch into the story of ballboy made good, explaining that he is, in his soul, a marketer of teams. "That's where I first found my place," he said. But he's quick to concede that it was exposure at the league level that got him the chance to run a franchise.

We chose to count Welts among those who rose from a league office, but you certainly could place him with those who came up with a team.

Alderson graduated from Dartmouth, served as an officer in the Marine Corps in Vietnam, got his law degree from Harvard and was working for a San Francisco firm when a partner there, Roy Eisenhart,



GETTY IMAGES

Alderson says his judgment, not his expertise, was the key to his advancement.

Silverman followed his dream to Rays

When Matt Silverman polled his family on whether he should follow his heart, walk away from a promising investment banking career, and take off to St. Petersburg to learn to run a baseball team, their support was nearly unanimous.

Only one voice dissented. But it was a powerful one. His grandfather, who took him to his first baseball game in Arlington, Texas, when he was 4 years old, didn't think he should mix vocation with avocation.

"He thought that there was more security with the job at Goldman Sachs," said Silverman, now in his third full season as president of the Tampa Bay Rays. "And then there was the pension you might earn at Goldman Sachs."

The rest of the family won out. Silverman chased his dream. At 29, he became the youngest team president in sports when Rays owner Stuart Sternberg, a friend who took a shine to him when both were at Goldman Sachs, tapped him to run the team in September 2005.

Silverman's grandfather didn't get to see him fill the role. He died in 2004. But he knew where his grandson was headed, and he approved.

"He thought it through enough to be supportive of it," Silverman said. "And he's a huge baseball fan, so he'd certainly be happy with the way the team is playing today."

ICON SMI

Silverman left Goldman Sachs to become sports' youngest team president.

At press time, the Rays were headed to the All-Star break with the best record in baseball, the surprise of the season.

— *Bill King*

was tapped to run the Oakland A's — in large part because it was his father-in-law who bought the team. Eisenhart, who also is a Dartmouth grad and former Marine, invited Alderson to join the front office as general counsel in 1981.

Alderson soon migrated to the baseball side as general manager, then back to the business side when he was promoted to president. He answered the call of the commissioner and joined the league office as an executive vice president in 1998. He returned to a team job as CEO of the Padres three years ago.

We classified Alderson as someone who rose through a franchise, but he could fit comfortably into almost all of our boxes.

"When you consider my path, what is most important is the judgment. That's how I got my job," Alderson said. "Not because of expertise or background. It was a faith in my judgment. That's where it started for me."

Classifying the career paths of the ultrasuccessful is educational.

But the more valuable lessons can be found within the fiber of their stories.

'Elevators in a hotel'

The president of the Dallas Stars nods patiently, glancing down occasionally to the cup of coffee he is stirring, then back up, as I explain my theory on career paths. I've always viewed them as roads crisscrossing the countryside. You take one west, then you come to a fork. You can choose to go left or right, but the choice needn't be permanent, because roads wind, and they crisscross, and a mind-swirling combination of choices can all land you in the same place.

ALAN HOWELL

A hellish nine-month stint with the Warriors was still the right move for Dolich.

"I agree with your premise to a point," says Jeff Cogen, putting down his spoon to free his hands for a demonstration. "But I think it's more like the elevators in a hotel."

At the lobby level in Cogen's analogy, there are four elevators. They all go to the 15th floor. You can take any of them, get off at the seventh floor, get on another elevator, and still end up at 15.

Thing is, there are 18 floors.

"And from the 15th floor to the 18th floor," Cogen says, "some of those elevators probably stop."

When you look at how the eventual leaders of sports have gotten their starts, inspiring stories abound.

Washington Nationals President Stan Kasten was off on a tour of major league ballparks after finishing law school, a job offer from an antitrust firm in hand, when he came upon Ted Turner leaving Busch Stadium after a Braves-Cardinals game and asked for a job. Turner invited him to Atlanta for an interview and hired him as in-house counsel. By the time he turned 27, Kasten was general manager of Turner's NBA team, the Hawks. By 35, he was president of both the Hawks and Braves.

John Allen, chief operating officer of the Cincinnati Reds until this year, when he handed the job over to owner Bob Castellini's son, left a successful accounting career to get a master's degree in sports administration and then spent the summer interning with a minor league baseball team.

Andy Dolich jokingly introduces himself as "United Van Lines poster child." One of the early master's graduates from the sports management program at Ohio University, he landed his first sports job with the record-settingly inept Philadelphia 76ers and went on to work for teams in all four major sports leagues, as well as the now-defunct North American Soccer League and the National Lacrosse League.

"To me, getting into this business is hard but not impossible," said Dolich, who last year left the top spot at the Memphis Grizzlies to become chief operating officer of the San Francisco 49ers. "If you have a burning desire, if you have a stick-to-itiveness, if you're willing to be beaten up and kicked around and move around, you'll get in."

"But then, when you're in this industry, how do you get up? Much tougher, and I suspect no two stories are quite the same."

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"Some people are driven to be CEOs. Driven to run their own show. They look for that day that they're going to climb and get their flag on the top of that hill. I felt that way. I felt that I could be CEO of a $100 million company that was highly exposed in the public sense and do a great job. I've always believed that I could. And I looked and shoveled and raked to find that opportunity."

— PATRICK LAFORGE, CEO, EDMONTON OILERS

Bailey's four 'key screens' for job seekers

Before taking the job as CEO of the Miami Dolphins, Joe Bailey spent 11 years heading the entertainment, media and sports practice for a global executive search firm, Russell Reynolds Associates. He advises candidates to run four "key screens" when considering a new job.

- Will you like the people you work with?
- Will you like the content of the work?
- Will you be fairly compensated?
- Is there room for growth?

"If you can say yes to all four, you should really consider that place," said Bailey, who worked for the Cowboys, the NFL and the NTRA before entering the search world. "If you can say yes to three of those four, you'll be there, but after a period of time you will leave. You may love the work, be fairly compensated and have room to grow, but if you don't like the people you'll get the hell out of there. If you're not fairly compensated, at some point in time you'll say this is not fair. People like to grow and expand, so if you're blocked you need to leave.

"Title, geography, spousal work, close to your parents, all that other stuff is OK. But those are the four key questions you have to ask yourself."

— *Bill King*

Cogen's story starts off like a little boy's fantasy. He ran off to join the circus.

He was working in marketing with Ringling Bros. when he met Jim Lites, a young attorney who had found his way into the sports business the old-fashioned way, meeting and marrying a fellow lawyer who also happened to be the daughter of pizza chain king Mike Ilitch.

Ilitch bought the Detroit Red Wings, and soon after hired his son-in-law as the team's general counsel. When Cogen met him, Lites had risen to executive vice president.

Lites and Cogen hit it off from the start. They found that the sports business and the circus business mirrored each other. Both sold tickets, concessions, souvenirs and sponsorships. Both did TV deals. Both traveled with large groups and paid the highest sums to their stars.

Lites offered Cogen a job running sales and marketing for the Red Wings. Engaged to be married, coming in off the road appealed to him. When Lites stunned the Ilitch family by taking a job as president of the Dallas Stars — he'd asked his father-in-law for the same title with the Red Wings and been turned down, proof that family ties don't always bind as closely as you'd like — Cogen went with him.

"At that point, Jimmy and I got hooked at the belt loop," Cogen said. "My career starts and ends with Jimmy Lites. He gave me a chance in Detroit at the director level. He brought me with him to Dallas at

Who's running the show? Clubs vary on top titles

By Bill King *Senior Writer*

Doug Moss had been president of Madison Square Garden Network, president and CEO of the Buffalo Sabres and president and CEO of the International Hockey League when the Walt Disney Co. offered him the chance to return to the daily rhythm of team sports, handling the business dealings of the Anaheim Mighty Ducks.

He would work parallel to general manager Brian Murray, who would run the hockey side. Both would report to Paul Presslar, the chairman of Disney's parks and resorts division. Moss's title would be senior vice president.

To many, that would sound like a step back; perhaps not in responsibility, but certainly on the business card. Moss thought otherwise.

"Title means different things in different places," said Moss, who took the job in spite of the deflated moniker. "So I didn't really get hung up on that. To me it was a challenge with a team, in the NHL, in Southern California. Let's not get hung up on semantics here."

Moss says he was happy in the role. Still, he left after nine months, lured by an offer to become president and chief operating officer of the Phoenix Coyotes, the job he still holds five years later. His responsibilities and reporting lines are the same as those he had when he was running the Ducks, but the title is loftier.

Moss has seen varied pairings of responsibility and title. The last time he was a team president, in Pittsburgh, he had responsibility for both business and hockey. When he was with the Rangers, general manager Neil Smith had the president's title, yet he had no responsibilities outside of hockey.

"The president of one team may have the same responsibilities as an EVP of another," Moss said. "It depends on the structure, and there are many. There's only one rule, and that is that there is no rule."

One team's CEO is another team's COO is another team's president is another team's executive vice president. Some owners hold one or more of those titles, even though they typically fill more the role of a traditional chairman, leaving the day-to-day management to others whose titles can vary. Over the years, some franchises have used the president's title as a sweetener to attract a highly regarded general manager, even though the job's responsibilities were limited to the already mountainous task of running operations on the field or court.

A more recent trend is for clubs — and particularly those in the NBA — to create dual jobs: a president of business and a president of basketball, for example. That acknowledges a divide that most say is inevitable.

The more transparent franchises have a clearly defined working president, but not all are that easy to dissect.

Buffalo Bills owner Ralph Wilson kept the title of president for himself from the time he founded the team in 1960 until 2001, when he used it as a carrot to attract general manager Tom Donahoe away from the Pittsburgh Steelers. It didn't go well. Wilson fired Donahoe after five seasons. And when he did, he took back the president's title.

Earlier this year, Wilson promoted highly regarded executive vice president Russ Brandon to oversee both the business and football sides of the operation, a job that mirrors that of many presidents. The increase in responsibility brought Brandon the new title of chief operating officer and, one would assume, a healthy pay raise.

But Wilson kept the president's title this time.

Once bitten, twice shy.

Several executives who have run teams for years, and are widely acknowledged as the day-to-day boss, hold executive vice president titles. Howard Pizer has run the Chicago White Sox since 1981, when Jerry Reinsdorf tapped him after he did the legal work on the purchase. He was executive vice president then. He is executive vice president today. So is Steve Schanwald, the ranking business-side executive with Reinsdorf's Bulls.

A few franchises have no one higher than a senior vice president on the next rung beneath the owner.


Moss

"If you don't have a president, and what you have instead is an EVP, that means the president is the owner," said Greg Jamison, president and CEO of the San Jose Sharks, who worked his way up through marketing in the NBA, was hired by the Sharks as an executive vice president, and ended up heading a group that bought the team. "Whether you want to call it president or grand poobah of the lodge, somebody's got to be in charge of running the franchise."

Since he was about 25 years old, Jeff Cogen strived to add marks to the scoresheet that tracks a career, just as many people do. Title was one way he did that. He believes most people do.

"I wanted, in order, more responsibility, power and authority; money; and title," said Cogen, who has been chief operating officer of the Florida Panthers and president of the Texas Rangers and now the Dallas Stars, and carried similar responsibilities with all three teams. "People say, 'I've got no ego and it's not about the title,' but it's very rarely true. I've said I don't care about the title. What I want is the responsibility. But, you know, that's only a half-true statement when I'm being totally honest with myself.

"If you're doing the job, you want the title, too."

LAYNE MURDOCH

Cogen was happy as Jim Lites' No. 2, but he finds he has grown fond of life at the top.

the VP level. And as his star rose, my star rose."

The two men became the best of friends. When Tom Hicks bought the Stars and then the Rangers, he put Lites in charge of both, a distinction held then by only five people in sports. Lites tapped Cogen as his No. 2.

Cogen had been with Lites for 15 years when he was offered the chance to run his own shop. The Florida Panthers were looking for a chief operating officer who would be the ranking business executive. Cogen explained to his friend, Lites, that he had to give it a shot.

It's not an uncommon dynamic. With relatively few franchises, and many of them operated by families, an executive often must move in order to land the top slot.

"People like to grow and expand," said Joe Bailey, CEO of Miami Dolphins Enterprises, who ran the sports practice for an international headhunting firm before taking his current job. "If you're blocked, you need to leave."

Dolich was executive vice president of the Oakland A's, working for Alderson, when he got his first chance to run a team. He was coming off a spectacular run, and was known across baseball as the marketing mind behind the famed "BillyBall" campaign. He knew he had it good with the A's.

And yet when he was courted by the Golden State Warriors, a feeble franchise in the midst of a power struggle in which one owner had sued the others, Dolich listened. The Warriors offered something the A's had not.

"The attraction was walking across the hallway from the Coliseum to the Arena to be president," Dolich said. "What? A little kid from Long Island who loved basketball, president of an NBA team? … Somebody offers you that, and you just kind of pinch yourself."

Dolich took the job. He lasted only nine months before his relationship with the owner who had prevailed crumbled. Dolich hung a shingle out on a consultancy, then joined the dot-com rage for a time before returning to team sports as president of business operations with the soon-to-be-relocated Vancouver Grizzlies in 2000. Last year, he left the Grizzlies to return to the Bay Area with the 49ers.

All these years, and stops, later, Dolich is thankful that he took that hellish job with the Warriors because, brief though it was, it represented first passage onto exclusive ground. He remembers that while he was slogging his way up in baseball, a friend told him that you couldn't be a team president until you were a team president.

"Back then, I thought that was the stupidest thing I'd ever heard of in my life," Dolich said. "But it makes sense now. You need to be thought of as presidential by somebody else before you can be president."

As executive vice president of sales and marketing for both the Texas Rangers and Dallas Stars, Cogen oversaw about half the employees in a 150-person organization, with responsibility for most of the franchise's revenue. He figured the move to the top slot with the Florida Panthers couldn't entail much more.

He realizes now that he underestimated what awaited him. He wasn't as well-prepared as he thought, particularly when it came to leadership. After two years Cogen returned to Dallas and to Hicks, this time as COO of the Rangers. Within a year, he was promoted to team president.

How did he pull that off, considering the fact that Jim Lites, his old boss and mentor, remained in the picture?

It was complicated. And unpredictable. Soon after Cogen left for Miami, Lites, who had been president of both the Rangers and Stars, left for a job running the Phoenix Coyotes. That lasted only eight months. Lites came back to Dallas, but only to run the hockey team. Hicks restructured his sports holdings. Cogen returned. Eventually, the shake-

Two calls later, Woolworth runs the Heat

The Miami Heat's president of business operations, Eric Woolworth, was skiing with his family in Aspen when his predecessor and then-boss, Jay Cross, called to tell him that he was leaving to become president of the New York Jets.

"I've really enjoyed working with you," Cross told him. "You're in charge. Good luck."

Woolworth chuckles as he tells the story.

"I was standing up, and I had to sit down," Woolworth said. "My head started to spin."

About 30 seconds later, Heat owner Micky Arison called from Europe. It was another surprisingly brief conversation. "Go get it done," said Arison, who long had shown confidence in Woolworth, the son-in-law of his vice chairman at Carnival Cruise Lines. Woolworth caught the next flight back to Miami.

"It was, in retrospect, pretty hysterical," Woolworth said. "But at the time, it was, 'Ohmygod, what just happened?'"

Woolworth realized that as Cross' No. 2, he was never more than that one phone call away from running the franchise.

"But while you may think about it," Woolworth said, "that doesn't mean you think it's going to happen tomorrow."

— *Bill King*

out created the opportunity for Cogen to ascend as president of the Rangers.

He remained in that role through three seasons, and then Hicks shuffled the cards again. He moved Lites out of hockey to oversee development of a $700 million stadium for the soccer team he owns in England. He made Cogen president of the Stars. And he hired Nolan Ryan to replace Cogen with the Rangers.

Cogen had to leave to get his first chance to run a team. "When I was No. 2, I said I was perfectly happy being Jimmy's No. 2 forever," Cogen said. "But you know, as I've gotten a taste of it, I like the first-class upgrades. I like the Ritz-Carlton. And I never thought I'd be like this."

Cogen offers this advice, tracking back to the elevator analogy:

"Pick a specialty and be great at it," Cogen said. "And play the game. Coordinators become managers. Managers become directors. Directors become vice presidents. Vice presidents become EVPs.

"Now you're at the 15th floor. Good luck."

Finding a right candidate

Joe Bailey, executive recruiter, had spent three hours with Miami Dolphins owner Wayne Huizenga, interviewing an A-level candidate for a position that Huizenga was creating. He wanted someone to oversee both the team and Dolphin Stadium, along with the development of property around it.

Bailey introduced Huizenga to six or seven candidates over the course of five weeks. After this latest one left, Bailey shut the door and asked Huizenga what he thought.

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"There are a lot of people who are constantly looking for their next job while they have the job. I've always taken the attitude that if I put all my energy into the job I have, I may never have to look for another job."

— RON CAMPBELL, PRESIDENT, TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

"I liked him," Huizenga said. "Liked him fine."

He paused.

"But when are you going to take this job?"

Bailey said Huizenga's question floored him. He'd spent most of his adult life around the NFL, starting with 19 seasons with the Dallas Cowboys, where he worked his way up from the equipment room to scouting and then the front office as a senior vice president. He did five years at the league office, working on what was then the World League. He had a short stint as deputy commissioner of the NTRA. His experience fit the profile of what Huizenga wanted in a CEO.

But now Bailey was in another stage of his career, running the sports and entertainment practice at an international executive search firm, Russell Reynolds Associates.

"I'm flattered," Bailey told Huizenga. "But I think you can do better."

He convinced Huizenga to speak to two more candidates. After he did, the owner came back at Bailey, this time even harder.

"I had no scintilla of interest in this job at all," Bailey says now, three years after taking it. "He ended up convincing me that for a variety of reasons this would be an interesting challenge.

"People say I'm like Dick Cheney. You do the search and then the next thing you're vice president of the United States. Nothing could be further from the truth. I had no inkling it would turn out this way. But it's a moment in time. At that moment, you believe an individual is the right person for the situation, and it all comes together."

The moment and situation dictate the person.

"I used to think there was a best candidate," said Buffy Filippell, who in 1987 launched the nation's first sports-focused search firm, TeamWork Consulting. "There actually is a right candidate instead of a best candidate."

The right candidate varies based upon what is important to ownership at that moment. It might include success running another franchise. Or a strong marketing bent. Or experience managing a brand. Or charismatic leadership. Or any combination of the above.

When Bailey lined up a list of candidates for the Dolphins job, he believed every one of them could do the job.

"They all fit from a competency standpoint," Bailey said. "Now, how do they get along with Wayne? Do they have a shared vision? And can they buy into what Wayne would like to do? There's competency, and then there's chemistry. And you have to have both."

When Edmonton businessman Cal Nichols was putting together a group to buy the Edmonton Oilers from Peter Pocklington in the late 1990s, he hired Patrick LaForge as a consultant. LaForge was a former Molson executive who managed the brewery's relationships with several NHL franchises and served as vice president of international marketing.

After about 18 months, when the ownership group finally was assembled and the deal closed, Nichols asked LaForge to come run the team. LaForge agreed to do it, in large part because he trusted Nichols, who had promised him the resources and authority to make over the operation. LaForge secured a

SBJ / SBD STAFF

When the Celtics called, dot-commer Gotham looked for ways to say yes.

guaranteed contract that assured that, even if it all went to hell, he'd get his money.

"If you want to have any history in this business, you have to recruit the owner, same as he's recruiting you," LaForge said. "Interview the owner. What's his character? How big is his wallet? Can you trust one another? It sounds like dating. But it becomes very intimate.

"If you don't share dreams, it's not going to happen."

Some owners find that the best way to assure that sort of chemistry is to hire a president with whom they've shared Bunsen burners for years, or even decades.

Such is the story of Arte Moreno and Dennis Kuhl.

Los Angeles traffic being what it is, Kuhl was not surprised that he was running late for his alma mater's basketball game on a Saturday night in March 2003. Arizona trailed Kansas 38-35 at halftime when Kuhl finally made it through the doors of Arrowhead Pond in Anaheim and hooked up with his old Alpha Tau Omega fraternity brother, Moreno.

They were hustling to their seats when Moreno grabbed Kuhl by the arm, pointed to a passer-by sporting an Angels cap, and asked, "What do you think of that hat?"

"I like it," Kuhl said, perplexed.

"Yeah?" Moreno said.

"Yeah, I like the new colors and everything," Kuhl said, wondering why they were reviewing baseball fashion in the concourse while their Wildcats were playing with a Final Four berth on the line. Moreno ducked in closer and grinned. "I think I just bought

the team."

"You're kidding," Kuhl said.

Moreno wasn't.

Moreno closed on the team in May. Seven months later, he invited Kuhl for a beer, and then asked if he'd like to be president of the team. When Kuhl quickly accepted, his old friend reminded him that they hadn't discussed pay. "I really don't care," Kuhl told him. "Let's just do this."

The makeup at the top of Moreno's lineup says a lot about his philosophy on making over the franchise, which he bought from the Walt Disney Co. Kuhl, the confidant who was with Moreno as he built a billboard advertising empire, sits at his right hand. The team's CFO, Bill Beverage, has overseen Moreno's finances for years. The top marketer, John Carpino, worked for him for 20 years.

While he retained many executives, Moreno's inner circle is populated by those who were at his side in his other companies.

Trust often trumps a track record.

When the Columbus Blue Jackets parted ways with founding president and general manager Doug MacLean last year, late-owner John McConnell replaced him with Mike Priest, a career financial guy who oversaw many of the family's investments. Priest served as a liaison between the family and franchise management, but he never envisioned himself as a sports executive.

With MacLean out, McConnell decided to split the job in the manner that most franchises do. He asked Priest to find a general manager. Then he pressed Priest to take over as president.

"Honestly, I was a little taken aback," Priest said. "My job, I thought, would be to find the next person to take this job — not to be the person to do this job.."

Though he had not managed the franchise on a daily basis, Priest was familiar with it. He met with sales and finance executives for updates every two weeks for two years. The night before he took over, he jotted down notes on aspects of the operation he wanted to overhaul, or at least tweak.

After 15 months in the job, Priest has become comfortable in his new environment. But it's clear that he still does not think of himself as a sports executive. He is an executive who happens to work in sports. Were that to change tomorrow, he says he'd be able to move along happily.

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"Wherever you are on the food chain, do great work. So much of what I see now is a sense of entitlement. For those of us that have been in it for a while, these opportunities are few and far between. So when someone comes in thinking that because they have a certain pedigree — an Ivy League MBA, for example — they deserve this, that's not particularly appealing."

— TERDEMA USSERY, PRESIDENT AND CEO, DALLAS MAVERICKS

"There's an independence in that," Priest said. "If the McConnells decide that someone else is better served to do this … it will not make a great difference in my life as long as they feel that I've been of value and can help in another way.

"Some people work so hard to get there, that if they ask you to step aside that could be a crushing blow, because this is what they spent their whole life wanting to do. For me, if it doesn't play out, I'll go back to what I was doing before and be quite content with it."

Ron Campbell is another tested and trusted accountant who gained a team owner's trust.

Campbell, who started as an accountant in Palace Sports owner Bill Davidson's glass company and rose to CFO of his sports and entertainment holdings, had spent the better part of the previous year representing Palace in its purchase of the sad-sack Tampa Bay Lightning. With the deal done, Campbell, Davidson and Palace CEO Tom Wilson came together to decide where to go next. Eventually, the conversation turned to where they might find someone to run the franchise.

"No, no, no," Davidson interrupted. "It'll be one of us."

Campbell scanned the room for candidates. Certainly, it wouldn't be Davidson. And Wilson had the Pistons and a string of concert venues to look after. So it must be …

Recounting the story, Campbell chuckles and turns a thumb into his own chest.

He grew up in Detroit, met his wife in junior high and went to college at nearby Eastern Michigan. Leaving wasn't something he or his wife had ever considered.

"I know it was hard for Ron," said Wilson, who agreed with Davidson that Campbell not only deserved to run the Lightning, but that Palace needed one of its own in that seat. "You're taking him out of his comfort zone and away from his family and away from his friends and you're saying, 'Here is your opportunity to run the worst team in professional sports.' Ya-hoo!"

Rootes found room to grow in big pond

The phone call that accelerated Jamey Rootes' already rapid ascendancy in the sports business came shortly after he was married. It was late in 1999, and Rootes was beginning to make a name for himself as a former Procter & Gamble MBA who had built one of Lamar Hunt's MLS franchises, the Columbus Crew, from scratch.

An executive recruiter, Buffy Filippell, phoned to ask if he'd be interested in a job with the NFL expansion franchise in Houston.

"You've done this startup thing in soccer and done great," Filippell told him. "Big fish, small pond. Now, why don't you dive into a big pond and help us start up this new NFL team?"

Rootes thanked Filippell for the interest and explained that he was newly married and needed to discuss the move with his wife. Within minutes of hanging up, he caught himself. "Wait a minute," Rootes said. "What am I doing?" He called Filippell back.

"I don't know if I can take it or not, Buffy," he told her. "But I'm absolutely interested in this job."

As president and general manager of the Crew, Rootes ran the entire franchise, including the stadium. With the Texans, he would be vice president of sales and marketing, responsible for fleshing out revenue production for the expansion franchise.

"It was a step backwards in scope of responsibility, but size was a 40-fold increase," Rootes said. "So that's OK. I'm 34 years old at the time. I've got plenty of time to catch up."

It didn't take him long. Rootes was promoted to senior vice president three months after he was hired. In October 2005, he was named president of business operations. Last year, owner Bob McNair shortened his title.

"We took the biz ops off the end of president," Rootes said, smiling, "because we don't have another one."

— *Bill King*

Well aware of the scarcity of the type of job Davidson was offering, Campbell took the assignment. His family moved to Tampa and settled in comfortably. In 2004, the Lightning won the Stanley Cup.

When Bailey worked in executive recruiting, he often reminded prospects that, while geography and family ties felt important, most people ultimately found that those were secondary factors in whether a job was a good fit.

That was the case for Campbell.

"He went, and it turned out to be the best thing he could've done," Wilson said. "Now he's established. Whatever happens after the sale, whether he stays or not, he's legitimately a team president who has had some success and holds a ring."

The "whatever happens after the sale" question is one that we'll tackle in detail in the third, and final, part of this series. For now, let's just say that Palace Sports' sale of the Tampa Bay Lightning closed in June. And on July 1, Campbell still was president of the team. And that for months leading up to that, he wasn't sure he would be.

Making the right move

When Larry Miller was coming out of Temple University with an accounting degree, he prepped for job interviews the way most students do, anticipating questions and preparing answers. He knew the recruiters would ask where he envisioned himself in five years. He knew most of his classmates would say they hoped to be controllers or CFOs.

Miller told them he wanted to be a decision-maker.

COURTESY OF MIAMI DOLPHINS

Bailey tried to find someone to run the Dolphins, but the owner chose him instead.

"Even then, I was willing to take the responsibility of helping to make those decisions, and to reap the rewards if it was a good decision and deal with the consequences if it was a bad decision," said Miller, who last year moved from one of the top jobs at Nike to run the Portland Trail Blazers. "That was what motivated me. So I always looked to move into more decision-making roles."

Miller was in one of those roles, running Nike's global basketball business, including Brand Jordan, when a friend with the Trail Blazers told him that he thought Miller would be the perfect person to run the franchise, and asked if he could pass Miller's name to Tod Leiweke, who oversees billionaire Paul Allen's sports holdings. Miller agreed, but didn't think of it as any more than a feeling out.

Leiweke and Miller met for drinks at a Portland steakhouse, hit it off, and ended up staying for dinner and trading ideas for more than three hours. Then they agreed to meet again. And again. After those informal sessions, Leiweke asked Miller to consider the job more seriously, and get back to him if he wanted to be a candidate. Two days later, Miller phoned to say he wanted in.

"The more I got into it," Miller said, "the more it felt like it was the right move for me at this point."

Leiweke's hiring of Miller is particularly instructive, in the context of this story. While he oversees all of Allen's sports holdings as CEO of Vulcan Sports and Entertainment, most of Leiweke's time is spent running the Seattle Seahawks. And he's got a well-grounded, and well-traveled, sports marketing background.

Before going to work for Allen, Leiweke was president of the expansion Minnesota Wild. He also had stints as executive vice president of Orca Bay, which owned the Vancouver Canucks and Grizzlies, president of the Houston Rockets and vice president of marketing for the Golden State Warriors. He got his start in the sports business when he and his brothers launched an indoor soccer team in Kansas City.

Debriefing Leiweke offers a window into what an experienced team president might look for in a team president.

Turns out he went outside of what he might have looked for elsewhere, because he felt comfortable that he had a handle on the traditional core skills — selling tickets, in particular. He was looking for a leader who could energize a staff and rebuild a brand, and do it in a quirky market that might puzzle an outsider.

"They had good people there who were ready to be liberated out of crisis and into a proactive mode," Leiweke said. "Larry's expertise, his reputation at Nike, was that he was this guy that everybody liked. He was a problem solver. His door was always open. A lot of people confided in him. And he was very relevant in basketball."

Because of all that, Leiweke didn't so much care that Miller had not run a team. Miller's inexperience was trumped soundly by his standing in Portland, where he'd spent the previous 16 years in the starting lineup at an iconic brand.

Boston Celtics owner Wyc Grousbeck made a similar choice when he hired Rich Gotham to run his franchise.

The most recent NBA team president to add a championship ring to his jewelry case was coming off a dot-com option payday that allowed him to take a year off, play with his three children, and plan his career path.

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"There's two routes. There's put your nose to the grindstone and get a shorter nose and fight your way up. Or you pole vault in and take a tremendous amount of risk because you don't really know what you're doing. The opportunity I got was one in a million. But it worked."

— JAMEY ROOTES, PRESIDENT, HOUSTON TEXANS

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"Go make some money, if you can, because it's not always easy in sports. A lot of people spend 10 to 15 years in sports and the ship never comes in. So go make your money, and then once you've made your money, you've got options and flexibility, and then you can choose your career as opposed to having the career choose you."

— RICH GOTHAM, PRESIDENT, BOSTON CELTICS

That's when his sports ship came in.

Gotham was tapping at his computer on a Friday afternoon when the phone rang.

"I'm Wyc Grousbeck, owner of the Celtics," said the voice on the other end.

"Yeah, I've been following that you bought the team," said Gotham, who shared season tickets with some friends. "I'm a huge Celtics fan."

Grousbeck was searching for someone to run the Celtics business side. Gotham's name had come up several times. This wasn't a surprise to Gotham. His previous job was as vice president of U.S. sales for TerraLycos. The former CEO and COO of Lycos both had ties to the venture capital firm at which Grousbeck was a partner. Grousbeck suggested that Gotham look at the operation. If they clicked, they could talk about employment. If not, Gotham could at least pass along a few marketing ideas and Grousbeck would toss him some choice playoff tickets.

It sounded like a no-lose proposition. It got even better for Gotham when the two men hit it off over lunch.

"From that point on, it was just a question of trying to figure out a way that I could say yes to it," Gotham said, "because it's really what I wanted to do in my heart."

In his head, there were hurdles to clear. He'd made a name in the dot-com world and, at 39, he wasn't ready to leave it.

"I don't really want to be part of someone's hobby," Gotham said. "I take my career seriously and I want to know that the guys I'm working for take the business part of it seriously."

Grousbeck assured him that he did. He wanted to drag the Celtics business model into the 21st century while keeping intact the rich traditions of a storied brand. That challenge intrigued Gotham.

He also came away confident that, even if the marriage with sports didn't work, he could build enough connections through the Celtics ownership group, which is loaded with venture capital players, that he could find his way back to a familiar world.

In his mind, Gotham was working with a net. He didn't need it. He started five years ago as executive vice president, added the title of chief operating officer in 2006 and was named president at the end of last season — just in time for a championship.

"People always ask me if this was my dream job," Gotham said. "Well, I never really dreamt about it, because it was never something that I thought was within my wherewithal."

Why do this to yourself?

A bit more than a year ago, Roy Mlakar's 32-year-old daughter, Tracy, greeted him with word that she was starting work on a master's in sports administration, which would mean driving about 45 minutes to Long Beach four days a week for classes and projects. This on top of a full-time job in the development office at UCLA, and a commitment to run a church youth group on Sunday nights.

"She told me this, and I said, 'Why?' said Mlakar. "Don't you remember the struggles we went through, Tracy? When you were born, I made $15,000. It's too difficult. Too hard a road. Why the hell would you do this to yourself?"

Tracy Mlakar volleyed with an answer all too familiar.

"Because," she said, "I really want to get into sports."

Path to the CORNER OFFICE

Part 2: Living the job

By Bill King *Senior Writer*

When he worked as deputy commissioner and general counsel of the Continental Basketball Association, Terdema Ussery thought he had a finger on every slice of business that floated through the league's doors.

Once he moved into the commissioner's chair, he realized that while he had touched all those pieces, small and large, he hadn't actually held any of them.

Nothing he had done before could quite prepare him for that new responsibility, just as nothing he had done before could prepare him for the step he would take a few years later, out into the blinding lights as president and CEO of the Dallas Mavericks.

A platinum education — Princeton to Harvard to Cal — followed by a string of fast-track career moves made Ussery eminently qualified to run the Mavericks, the position he landed at age 38. But they did not prepare him for what awaited him atop a team, reporting to an owner who staked his millions and, perhaps more importantly, his reputation, on an enterprise that thousands follow passionately.

Those who ascend to that rare air typically have either run a business or worked for a team. Their first day as president marks the first time they've done both.

"As consigliere, when I closed the door and went home, (the commissioner) was the one still sitting there with the light on, and he was the one who ultimately was going to take the hit for whatever we did," said Ussery, who is in his 11th year as the Mavs president and CEO. "He was the one responsible for the decision and he had to live with the consequences of that.

"At the end of the day, the decision rests with you. And you don't have a lot of people to talk to about it. You're either going to be applauded for your wisdom or you're going to be called an idiot. And there is no in-between. So it's very important that you be very confident. This is not a job for someone who is not quite sure."

Tom Wilson, longtime president of the Detroit Pistons and Palace Sports & Entertainment, likes to use the same analogy that teams frequently use to explain the vast price difference between a courtside seat and one anywhere else in the house.

"The biggest distance in the world is the 18 inches between the first and second seat," said Wilson, who was hired by the Pistons as a sales guy in 1978, when there were only five employees, and found himself running the shop a year later. "You're not prepared until you sit there."

Landing one of those seats will feel like an arrival.

But it's actually a departure.

And life is never the same.

Everyone's a critic

When Pierre Boivin took over as president of the Montreal Canadiens nine years ago, the fabled franchise had fallen on hard times. He faced what he saw as a traditional business turnaround, one that would require a massive realignment and restructuring.

He was confident he was up to it. Boivin came to the team after stints as CEO of Nike Bauer and its predecessor company, Canstar, the global leader among hockey manufacturers at the time. He ran two other sporting goods companies before that. And, he grew up an honest-to-God, sweater-wearing Canadiens fan.

Considering his business pedigree, his hockey ties,

and his Montreal roots, he felt certain he was the man to engineer the necessary change.

"Being a Montrealer all my life and having followed the franchise, you always feel like you know as much if not more than the people managing it," Boivin said. "So I felt I came on board with an awful lot of knowledge, only to quickly realize I didn't know a damned thing."

Boivin chuckled. It wasn't that he was clueless, so much as that he kept reading and hearing that he was clueless. In fact, once he got into the job he found that his prior management experience was even more applicable than he'd expected.

The piece that was unlike the other businesses — and different from anything he anticipated — was the public side of it. For the first time in his career, there were pundits to blister decisions. Were he not so confident in his plan, the criticism would have tested his resolve.

AP / WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

LaForge quickly learned how sports can make execs the center of attention.

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"I told these guys I think I can fill the building with the right crew. I need a green light to do what I gotta do. And then I need some money. And I need a guarantee from you that if this whole thing goes to hell in a handbasket I still get my money, because I've got a house to pay for."

— PATRICK LaFORGE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, EDMONTON OILERS

"When you're in the kind of turnaround situation we were in, you need to be patient and you need to have an awful lot of courage," Boivin said. "Because you're going to get lambasted a number of times on the way through."

Two decades ago, Wilson came to work one morning to find Pistons general manager Jack McCloskey steamed and staring at the morning sports page, where a columnist had taken him to task. Wilson thought McCloskey was overreacting.

"It's not a big deal," Wilson told him. "It's one article."

McCloskey asked Wilson to go back to his office and read it again, this time inserting his own name every time he came upon McCloskey's. He did it. And then he understood.

"With that simple exercise," Wilson said, "you realize that it's a little personal."

Years later, he had a similar conversation with Joe Dumars, the team's president of basketball operations. The Pistons were about to announce a trade that both Wilson and Dumars were convinced was a winner. But Dumars knew it wouldn't play that way publicly. "It may not seem like much to you," Dumars told him, "but I have to go home, listen to talk radio and find out how stupid I am. Read the paper, find out how stupid I am. Watch television, find out how stupid I am. And I'm doing the right thing."

Wilson concedes that this shouldn't come as a surprise. Sports is, after all, a visible business about which people care deeply. Anyone with the smarts and skills to land a job running a team should anticipate the repercussions.

"You may think you understand it," Wilson said, "but until you turn on that radio and start hearing your name, it's something you're just not prepared for."

Almost all of the nearly 30 ranking executives interviewed for this story pointed to the public nature of their job as a factor that distinguishes them from their counterparts outside of sports.

"Newspapers dedicate an entire section to your industry, and we're small businesses," said Jay Cross, the outgoing president of the New York Jets who also headed the Miami Heat. "We're not big businesses. And yet we have these incredible klieg lights turned on us all the time. That is unique. Dealing with the exposure is entirely unique."

Some put up with it. Others are attracted to it.

When Ussery was recruited to run the Mavericks, he was drawn in by the chance to see how he'd hold up on a grand stage.

"I just wanted to experience what it's like to day in and day out experience extreme success and phe-

Moss got a lesson in roomful of bankers

The president and COO for the Phoenix Coyotes, Doug Moss, landed his first chance to run a team after making his bones as head of MSG Network. The Buffalo Sabres hired him as president in 1994.

It was at the tail end of five-and-dime magnate Seymour Knox's ownership of the team, and the Sabres were under the gun financially. Moss inherited a payroll budget that wasn't enough to allow for a competitive team. During his first meeting with the bankers who financed Knox, he asked how much room there was to expand his budget, based on the existing loan covenants.

None.

He asked whether they might change the terms to allow for it.

No.

Having come from MSG, which then was a unit of Paramount, Moss felt like he had walked into the wrong meeting room. When he wanted to go outside his budget with the network to make an acquisition, he didn't deal with bankers. He went to Stanley Jaffe, the president of Paramount. Maybe his mistake here was in dealing with the bank at all.

So he went back to the Knox family and explained he couldn't achieve what they had hired him to do if they didn't infuse the franchise with more cash.

Nope, they said. You have what you have. Make do with it.

"It was a stark change from the Garden, which could do anything," Moss said. "Whether they wanted to was another thing. But they could. It was a whole different world. I gained a lot of perspective from that."

— *Bill King*

nomenal failure," Ussery said. "A team is unique in that sense. You're graded every day, in a very public way, and you live with that. You're in line at the movie theater and people tell you you're a jerk because your team lost a game. Or everyone wants to shake your hand and buy you a drink. The emotional highs and lows — there's nothing like it."

When he was contemplating an offer to leave his post as MLB's chief labor counsel to take over the presidency of the Pittsburgh Pirates, Frank Coonelly fretted about whether he could handle the emotional drain.

A lifelong Philadelphia Phillies fan, he made it a nightly routine to check his BlackBerry for an early-inning Phillies score before boarding the train each evening for a lengthy commute home. He typically got in his car by around 9:30 and would tune the game in on the radio. He could usually count on being home in time to watch at least the ninth.

"On those nights when the Phillies blew the game late, I'd be so miserable that for that little bit of time that I was home with my wife and kids I'd barely talk to them," Coonelly said. "And I wasn't even involved with that team, other than as a fan. What was I going to be like when it was my job?"

Coonelly decided to find out. He hasn't disappointed himself. The losses sting every bit as much as he feared they would; sting worse, even, than they did when he was a fan. Still, he said he's been able to balance it, because he knows that part of his role is to lead, and he doesn't want to drag his staff down.

"There's no chance I can act as if I don't care," Coonelly said. "But you can't take the losses into work the next day."

As for taking them home … he's working on it.

The president and CEO of the Edmonton Oilers, Patrick LaForge, began his career in the marketing department at Molson Breweries in 1979, rising to vice president of international marketing and overseeing most of the brand's sports sponsorships, including those with the Oilers, Canadiens, Toronto Maple Leafs and Calgary Flames.

He chuckles when he compares the attention paid to a public company like Molson to that paid to a sports franchise.

"People generally don't blog about your public company," LaForge said. "They don't give your employees shit when they're at the Safeway. They don't cheer you or boo you. They don't take their shirts off and wave them in the air for Google or IBM or anyone else. It's all emotion.

"My mother is 87 years old. We win a Stanley Cup game and she's up dancing. What the hell is that?"

JONATHAN REYNOLDS / UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS / URCM

Ussery says the uncertain and the semi-confident need not apply to run a franchise.

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"As both president and general manager, you don't have that extra layer when it comes to having to check off on items. There's that clarity. And also, from an ownership perspective, they know who to turn to when they want an answer in any area."

— DAVE DOMBROWSKI, PRESIDENT, GM AND CEO, DETROIT TIGERS

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"There are some people who feel like sports is completely different. But people change industries all the time. You gotta be smart. You gotta be passionate. You have to have a knack for people. You have to have an open mind. You have to be asking questions."

— JAMEY ROOTES, PRESIDENT, HOUSTON TEXANS

Managing the transition

When management wonks speak of the "on-boarding process," they typically mean it to describe the orientation that employees receive when they take a new job.

Joe Bailey spins it around. The Miami Dolphins CEO, who f ormerly headed the sports practice for a headhunting firm, uses it to describe the early days of a senior executive — and particularly a CEO or president — who has come to a team from another franchise, or especially another line of work.

This is when the new boss marshals the employees, lays out a vision and a plan, and asks them to climb aboard.

For the known quantity who rose from within an organization's sales force or provided its legal advice, this is a graduation. For the outsider, it's a baptism.

There's a reason that soldiers call their first taste of battle "baptism by fire."

When he was a headhunter, Bailey often reminded C-level executives who were changing jobs that 60 percent of CEOs who failed cast their own lots in their first six to nine months. They mismanaged the transition and never recovered from their missteps.

His advice on avoiding derailment: Find an ally within the incumbent senior staff and ask them to help you understand the culture of the organization and the history of the people.

Bailey tells the story of one senior executive at a league who came into the job amid great fanfare, only to implode almost immediately because on his first conference call with owners he suggested a path that they'd rejected three previous times. By the end of that first call, he had lost credibility with half his constituents.

"If there had been someone there to tell him 'Don't say that; not today,' he might still be there today," Bailey said.

Those who have parachuted into organizations with no previous team experience say that admitting as much to yourself is crucial. Often, one or more executives who remain from the previous administration see themselves as candidates who were passed over. That's touchy ground.

So is the fear that someone who hasn't worked at a team will come in with ideas that sound good to the owner, but in reality are difficult to implement.

"If you're an outsider, you need to come in and listen first and speak later," said Vancouver Canucks President and CEO Chris Zimmerman, who, like Boivin, came from the top job at Nike Bauer hockey to take over an NHL team. "I think that's really critical. I had the advantage of some really strong brand credentials and also having credibility with regard to the sport. Those help. But, you know, I'd never worked with a hockey team before."

Robitaille

Luc Robitaille certainly had worked for one before. But never out of skates. Robitaille played 19 seasons in the NHL, 14 of them with the Los Angeles Kings. When he retired at the end of the 2005-06 season, he was the highest scoring left winger ever in the NHL. In May 2007, the Kings named Robitaille president of business operations.

Robitaille wasn't sure what he wanted to do after he finished playing, but he knew he wasn't cut out to

split his time between the sofa and the links. So he approached the president of Kings owner AEG, Tim Leiweke, about where in the organization he might fit. Robitaille told Leiweke that he was leaning toward the business side.

They agreed that Robitaille should spend a year around AEG, learning the organization and attending owners meetings. He asked for an office in the building, which surprised Leiweke. Robitaille intended to learn by watching.

"I went to regular meetings with every department for a year," Robitaille said. "And I didn't say a word for a long time. I think that was important. Nobody told me that, but I just knew that. I had to learn before I could expect them to listen to me."

Jamey Rootes had never worked in sports when Lamar Hunt hired him to launch an MLS franchise in the nation's first soccer-specific stadium in Columbus. A former college soccer player, he worked at IBM, got his MBA, and then landed a prime spot with Procter & Gamble. Rootes didn't have to worry about how he'd be received with the Columbus Crew, since he was the first hire. But he has brought enough of P&G's strategic planning principles to sports — first at the Crew and now with the Houston Texans — to understand what a turnaround engineer hired from another industry will encounter.

As team owners' offspring come aboard, some presidents get to train their new bosses

By Bill King *Senior Writer*

Soon after he bought the Montreal Canadiens in 2001, George Gillett approached the team's incumbent president about the role that his 25-year-old son, Foster, would play in the management of the team.

Behind a poker-faced nod of intrigue, Pierre Boivin cringed.

"I've had some tough situations in that regard, and I didn't know how this one would go," said Boivin, the former Nike Bauer Hockey CEO who was recruited to head the Canadiens' front office in 1999, after 22 years in the sporting goods business. "Really, it depends on how the son is, and how the relationship between the son and father is.

"Foster has been outstanding. But, you never know."

While most owners hand day-to-day management of the franchise over to a seasoned executive, almost all teams are, at their core, small to midsized family-owned businesses. When the next generation of that family comes along, taking over day-to-day management of the franchise may be on their to-do list.

Some CEOs, presidents and executive vice presidents end up training their eventual replacements. Others are training their eventual bosses.

Jeff Cogen has run both of the major U.S. sports franchises owned by Texas billionaire Tom Hicks. Now president of the Dallas Stars, he filled the same role with the Texas Rangers for three years.

Early in his tenure running the baseball franchise, he began working closely with Hicks' oldest son, Tommy. One afternoon, during a chat about other matters, it occurred to Cogen that it was time to let his boss know he was comfortable playing the role of teacher, even if it meant training the person who one day would take his job.

"Boss, we've never talked about this, but I consider it one of my responsibilities to train Tommy," Cogen told Hicks, "and to make sure that he's ready to take these reins."

Hicks waved a hand.

"Ahhhh, don't make a bigger deal out of that than it is," Hicks told him. "He's got a better job than you've got."

Cogen realized he'd been naïve. Tommy Hicks wasn't training to be the president. He was training to be the owner.

"If that other phenomenon does occur, and he does replace me as president one day, that's not a reflection on my capabilities," Cogen said. "He's the owner. We all understand that."


Boivin

Such is the nature of a family business.

Seven years into Gillett's ownership of the Canadiens, Boivin has navigated the generational relationship deftly. When the time came to discuss Foster Gillett's role, he suggested that they keep it loose. "Let's not give Foster a position," Boivin told Gillett. "It wouldn't be fair to him. He doesn't have a lot of experience."

Boivin explained that, instead, he wanted Foster Gillett to take the title "assistant to the president," working at his side and joining in the debate as they made decisions. Both father and son agreed. After five years in that role, the son ascended to managing partner, the role he holds today.

"He learned immensely during that five-year period because he had access," Boivin said. "The right individual will respect that privilege, will cherish it, will learn from it and will contribute always because he realizes that he's part of things. The wrong kind of individual will cause an awful lot of tension."


MICHAEL HEBERT / NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

Benson LeBlanc sought responsibility to go with experience as she rose with the Saints.

While that model worked for Gillett, it's a matter of individual choice.

Rita Benson LeBlanc, granddaughter of New Orleans Saints owner Tom Benson, worked summers at the team's offices and later interned at the NFL office and at NFL Films. She joined the team full time when she graduated from Texas A&M in 2001.

Throughout her time at the franchise, Benson LeBlanc has held dual roles. She attended owners meetings, but also took on projects in each department. The tasks were sometimes menial and tedious. She entered data for the coaching staff. She worked in media relations. She went on sponsor sales calls. The idea was to get a breadth of experience and then allow her to assume management responsibilities.

"I don't think it's a good thing to sit there with a vague title or to not have responsibility for a task," said Benson LeBlanc, who took over day-to-day operation of the franchise in 2006. "There are perception issues there. If you don't have a structured program, people always think you're just floating in nebulous land.

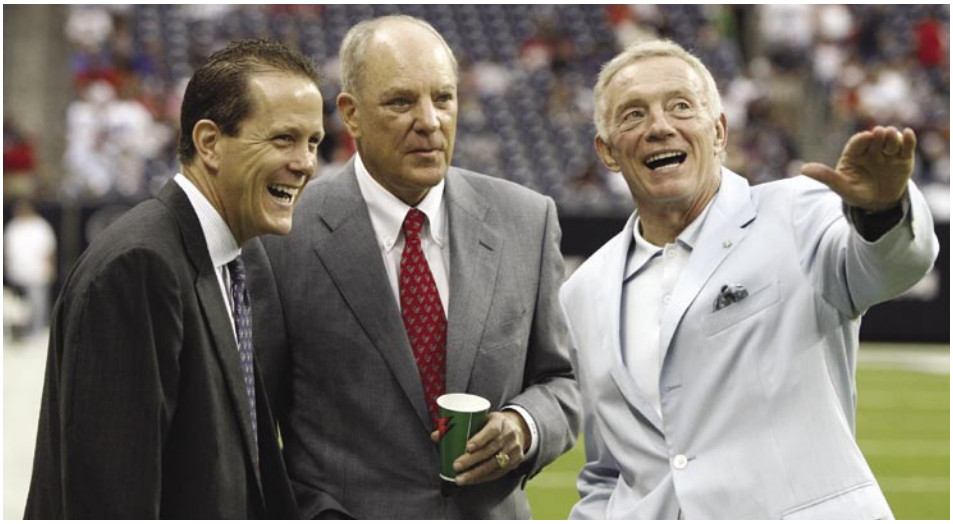
"It's an interesting role to play. It's never perfect and it's never easy for family members. Fortunately, most people here saw me coming back every year and working, and they knew that I actually did work. … People who know my grandfather know that he has a tremendous work ethic, and that anything less than that (from me) just wouldn't fly with him."

Of course, if it did, there wouldn't be much anyone could do about it. There are distinctions between running a business that someone else owns and running one that you will someday own.

Think about this: When the big four leagues gather to chart strategy and vote on issues, they don't call those franchise meetings, or CEO meetings. They call them owners meetings.

"When you get into those meetings, there are owners, there are owners' sons, and then there are guys like me," Cogen said. "I've spoken once in 26 meetings.

"It was to push the button on the microphone during roll call and go, 'Hicks, Hicks, Cogen.'"



HOUSTON TEXANS

Rootes (left, with Texans owner Bob McNair, center, and Cowboys owner Jerry Jones) learned the importance of buy-in when he brought Procter & Gamble principles to sports.

"I think the biggest challenge people have when they come from the outside is that they come in thinking, 'I know how this thing should work and I'm going to save these people from themselves,'" said Rootes, the Texans' president. "If that's your approach, that you're going to come down with the tablets to explain to everyone how business works, you're probably going to have a challenge."

Acceptance by the incumbent staff is one half of the equation. Finding which of them fit your philosophy is another.

With the Mavericks, Ussery has been through a pair of front-office transitions. The first was his own arrival, again, as an executive who never had worked for a team. Then, less than four years later, the team was sold to Mark Cuban, the hard-charging entrepreneur who would install an entirely different culture.

"The first thing any successful CEO needs to do is shut up, sit down, and listen," Ussery said. "You come in and take stock of the landscape. You listen to people and what their concerns are. And then you come up with your agenda of how to turn the ship. Then it's a question of getting buy-in from all those folks who have been here and giving them a fair opportunity to get on board with the new program. A lot of people are able to, but some are not."

Executives who have been with a franchise for 10 or 20 years, through multiple administrations, and believe that they've been successful may be resistant to change. Ussery ran into that when he took over the front office, and again when Cuban bought the team. "The key is, when you run into those folks, you've got to give them a fair shot to get on board," he said. "And then, if they don't, you gotta let 'em go."

Who reports to whom?

The president and CEO of the Ottawa Senators chooses his words carefully as he outlines the reporting structure at the franchise he has run since 1996.

"The hockey end currently reports to ownership," said Roy Mlakar, who spent 17 years in the minors and has run three NHL teams. "That is not the way it has always been in my career. If you look at 30 teams, you're going to find different reporting lines with a lot of them.

"When it comes to that, I have referred to it as OP: Owner's prerogative. It's very simple. That's what I believe it is. And you adjust accordingly, whether it's one way or another. I'm not saying there's a right or wrong way. Just two ways."

This may be the most significant of the ways in which sports franchises depart from the structure of many businesses. Most team presidents and CEOs feel they are responsible for the bottom line financial results of the franchise, as are the CEOs at General Motors, Bank Of America and AT&T. But, in many cases, the CEOs of sports franchises don't control what is overwhelmingly the largest expense, player payroll.

Some shrug their shoulders when asked how they manage that, as if it's as simple as balancing a checkbook when someone else writes many of the checks.

Some teams, and particularly those in the NBA, have moved to clarify the reporting structure by splitting the presidency into business operations and sports operations. But most still operate with a president and a general manager, with the general manager reporting to the owner.

If the general manager wants to add $5 million to the payroll at the trade deadline, he typically goes straight to ownership. The president may lend advice, but the call is often made outside his authority.

"It's not lost on anybody in the room that if the payroll number fluctuates by 10 percent from budget, it's going to have a material impact on the bottom line," said Jeff Cogen, president of the Dallas Stars. "But that's a decision that's made by the boss (owner Tom Hicks). He can set my goals and alter them based on market conditions."

Rootes said he's comfortable with that split of the business with the Houston Texans. Though the Texans recently adjusted his title to make him president, rather than president of business operations, the club's general

Corporate vets find sports more fluid

Like most businesses, sports comes with its quirks.

Before he came to hockey, Columbus Blue Jackets President Mike Priest was used to the sort of payback analysis he would do on a manufacturing or distribution business that the John McConnell family owned or invested in.

If a new piece of equipment cost $2 million, but it would produce an additional 1,000 pieces an hour, he could calculate the savings and assess how long it would take for the machine to pay for itself. If the numbers added up, he made the purchase.

A CPA by trade, Priest found that no such reasoned approach existed when the late Blue Jackets owner asked him to take over management of the hockey club.

"What you cannot do very well is decide that this 24-year-old defenseman who is going to require a commitment of five years at $4 million a year is going to play well enough to justify what it costs to sign him," Priest said. "Getting used to allowing your organization to make decisions like that without the ability to see concrete evidence that it's going to work is difficult. It's more artful than it is a science.

"For someone with my background, that's certainly been something to swallow."

Long before he landed the controller's job at a swimwear company, parlayed it into a far bigger one running Brand Jordan for Nike, and then crossed over into the team sports world as president of the Portland Trail Blazers, Larry Miller worked as an accountant for Campbell Soup Co.

It was his first job out of college.

"You know, tomato soup is tomato soup," Miller said. "You produce X number of cans and sell X number of cans of the tomato soup. Here, every day it's a new game. Every day it's something different. It's dynamic. If you don't enjoy that kind of dynamic situation, then this is not the kind of business for you to get into."

— *Bill King*

NEWSCOM

Outsiders should listen first and speak later, former Nike Bauer chief Zimmerman says.

manager still reports to owner Bob McNair. Rootes' performance is gauged based on the profit he shows after deducting business expenses from revenue.

Some chief executives say they could never accept that sort of division of authority and accountability, where a general manager dealt directly with an owner.

"What the owner gets is a plate on the door and a parking spot and all the things he should get in a successful business," said the Oilers' LaForge. "But he shouldn't be day-to-day hands on. The owner makes emotional decisions about things that need rational and logical digestion. You can't do that in business."

Another hockey executive, Boivin, compares the Canadiens hierarchy to that of a corporation in which he is the CEO and the general manager oversees a division. He says the hockey department runs through him. Still, he acknowledges that, in sports, there must be leeway to that structure.

"There have to be clear reporting relationships with a hierarchy," Boivin said. "But in this business, because the owners are passionate, because these are small businesses in scale, and because there's an emotional roller coaster called winning and losing, the owners have to have access to the people who run the sports side of the business.

"You can't deny that to them. It's why most of them got into this."

Though Mlakar won't voice a preference, the animation he shows when sharing war stories leaves the impression that he was, at the very least, having more fun when he was running both business and hockey. One of his favored yarns shows the connection between the two.

Late in the 1999-2000 season, the Senators had the look of a team that could go deep in the playoffs, if only they could add an experienced goaltender. One afternoon, his general manager, Marshall Johnston, came to his office with word that he could land Penguins veteran Tom Barrasso in a trade, but there was a catch. They'd have to kick in $350,000 in cash.

The club was already at its player budget of about $25 million for the season. But rather than shooting the deal down, Mlakar made the rounds of the building to see if he could find the money. The marketing department said it could do without giveaways for the first round of the playoffs, a savings of about $50,000. Corporate sales figured the extra playoff games would be worth at least $75,000 more. Mlakar got two players to take deferrals on their contracts, and, in a matter of hours, he'd come up with the $350,000.

He went to the office of owner Rod Bryden with the news of the money he'd found.

"Good job," Bryden told him through a thick Canadian brogue that Mlakar parrots with aplomb. "And your player budget is?"

"We're at it Mr. Bryden," Mlakar said.

"I know that," Bryden said. "And you found $350,000? Why didn't you find that last June?"

"Well, I …" Mlakar stuttered.

"Give it to me," the owner said. "It goes in my jeans."

As he recounted the story, Mlakar's jaw dropped in shock. Then, a look of recognition replaced it.

"When you think about it, he's absolutely right," Mlakar said. "That's the job. How do you maximize revenue? You've got to hit these targets. Here's your player budget, Marshall, and that's it. We were taught never come back and ask. It is what it is. I approve it, you go run it.

"Rod Bryden was a very smart guy."

Smart enough to know when to take his president over the hurdles to make a point, and when to give ground to make the most of an opportunity.

He called Mlakar back into his office. They made the Barrasso deal.

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"It seems a lot easier from the outside than it does once you're inside. You have owners who say, 'I've run very successful businesses across multiple lines. I have this team, and it's x-years and we haven't won anything. Why is that?' That Cuisinart of putting it together is a challenge."

— ANDY DOLICH, COO, SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"We are in the team sports business. There is nothing about running a business in two distinct silos with thick walls that has anything to do with being a team. I find that so incredibly ironic."

— CHRIS ZIMMERMAN, PRESIDENT AND CEO, VANCOUVER CANUCKS

From P&L to W's and L's

Boivin became accustomed to the rhythms of reporting to a board of directors in what sometimes seems like a lifetime ago.

He has found that reporting to a single owner can be a liberating experience.

And that reporting to a team owner can create a tension unlike anything else.

"It's different from other businesses," Boivin said. "You don't have quarterly results to report to ownership. You have three results a week.

"That's an awful lot of explaining to do."

AP / WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Losses always brought Coonelly down as a fan, and running a club has only made it worse.

Path to the CORNER OFFICE

Part 3: Leaving the job

By Bill King *Senior Writer*

When former Tampa Bay Lightning owner Bill Davidson reached agreement to sell the team last August, its president, Ron Campbell, thought it meant he was out of a job.

Or at least that job.

Campbell represented Davidson throughout the negotiations with a group that included Hollywood producer Oren Koules, former hockey coach and executive Doug MacLean and South Florida real estate investor Jeff Sherrin.

The talks started smoothly and moved quickly. Only two months after the sides first met, they announced a deal. But then they hit several snags. The application process for ownership took longer than expected. The financing hiccuped.

Through it, Campbell impressed the new owners, helping them work through the hurdles. Still, they made it clear to him that while his work was appreciated, it wasn't going to lead to a lasting relationship.

"I was told we think the world of you, we think you're awesome, but we're bringing a president with us," said Campbell. "We don't need two. Nothing personal.

Campbell

"And you can't take it personal."

Telling the story in the restaurant of an Atlanta hotel on the eve of the NHL All-Star Game, Campbell seemed resigned to the tenuous nature of a perch atop a major sports franchise. Next to him, the president and CEO of the San Jose Sharks, Greg Jamison, nodded his head in empathy.

"Nature of the beast," said Jamison, who has headed the Sharks since 1996 and managed to survive the team's sale six years ago by assembling the group that bought it. "I've seen people in sports move and leave their family behind, then have them come join them, only to have to move again. It's tough. But it goes with the territory."

Campbell never planned to run a hockey team, or to run anything in Florida, for that matter. Born, raised and educated in and near Detroit, he met his wife in high school and they had three children. When Davidson made a bid for the Lightning, he sent Campbell to Tampa to negotiate the deal. Then, he asked him to stay there and run it.

Campbell had mixed feelings. His wife hated the

Reputation as 'building guy' opens doors but carries limits

By Bill King *Senior Writer*

Miami Heat owner Micky Arison was out to hire a specialist who could land the franchise the new arena that it desperately needed when he came upon his next team president.

The architect who pulled off a similar trick for the Toronto Raptors was married to an American wife who wanted to move back to the States.

The pairing seemed ideal. But there was one hitch.

"As I thought about my career going forward, I did not want to be a building guy who came and went from team to team, even though that was my skill set," said Jay Cross, an architect with a knack for political maneuvering who has parlayed those skills into a pair of sports presidencies, first with the Heat and then with the New York Jets. "I wanted to move into managing people. I like managing organizations.

"Fortunately for me, they said, 'That's OK, we need that, too.'"

Cross moved to Miami in the summer of '96, ostensibly as a consultant on the arena project. He was named president of business operations by year's end.

Five years later, when Robert "Woody" Johnson bought the Jets and began assembling the pieces for a stadium drive, one of his attorneys recommended

SHANA WITTENWYLER

"You end up with a certain profile based on your background," says Cross.

he bring in Cross. It was a chance to spearhead what then was the most ambitious stadium ever in the U.S. Again, Cross took the job nominally as the president of stadium development, but his contract called for an elevation to president of the franchise when his predecessor retired.

For the second time in his career, Cross was able to parlay a valuable specialty into a pearl of a job.

"I'm only attractive to people who have to build a facility, because that's what they look at me as," Cross said. "I like to think I run a good franchise at the same time. Decent box office. Decent marketing. Decent finance. All of that. But somebody who has a brand-new stadium and a pretty good franchise, I don't know that they would come looking for me.

"You're sort of tarred with a broad brush early on. And it's true of others. I always think of Dave Checketts as a media guy. You end up with a certain profile based on your background."

Alas, the Jets story didn't end as Johnson and Cross hoped it would. The stadium deal fell apart after New York failed to land the Olympics. The team got its new stadium, but again will share it with the Giants. Cross pointed out that while he did not get "the" stadium, he got "a" stadium, something that long evaded the Jets.

He also got a new job. Last month, Cross left the Jets, and sports, to head the Hudson Yards development, a massive real estate project that is set to go up on the site on which the Jets once hoped to build.

idea. But, ever the good soldiers, they went.

Now, nine years later, the Campbells do not want to leave. The older of their two daughters went to law school at the University of Florida and has made Tampa home. The couple also has a son entering his senior year of high school.

Once told that there wouldn't be a place for him in the new administration, Campbell got a reprieve in November, when the group buying the team came apart. MacLean and Sherrin sued Koules. Koules settled by buying out his former partners. With MacLean out of the group, there once again was the chance that Campbell could remain as president.

He continued to work with Koules on the sale.

"Do I want to stay? Sure," Campbell said at the All-Star Game. "I love Tampa. I'm proud of what we've accomplished. But I don't know where this all will leave me. … All you can do is what you can do. You go to work every day, show your work ethic, the assets that you bring, your relationships in the community. And you know what? It's up to them."

Koules' long path to purchase the team finally concluded last month. When he took control, he kept Campbell in place as president. He will be far more hands-on than his predecessor, Davidson, who rarely visited Tampa. Campbell's role most certainly will change.

But at least it appears he'll have one.

A perusal of the tenure of ranking sports executives at 120 teams in the four major leagues (two teams were omitted because of unclear structures) showed one-third have held their current title for less than two years. Barely 40 percent (49 of 120) have held their title for more than five years. Only 18 have held their current title for more than 10 years. The median tenures: Five years in MLB and the NHL, four in the NFL and two in the NBA.

It's worth noting that this only takes into account what people are called, not what they do. Some were running their teams as EVPs or COOs for several years and recently got better titles. Even with that, the numbers are jarring.

"It's the most vulnerable of positions," said Tom Wilson, longtime CEO of the Detroit Pistons and Davidson's sports and entertainment company, Palace Sports & Entertainment. "We are among the very first to go. You sort of understand that when you come here."

Not holding the cards

The president and CEO of the Edmonton Oilers, Patrick LaForge, is a former Molson Brewery marketing executive who took charge of the franchise eight years ago, brought in by a cadre of local investors who put up the money to keep the team in town but had no clue how to right it.

That sale created an opportunity for him. Earlier this year, it appeared that another might cost him his job.

Like his colleague, Campbell, LaForge went to the All-Star Game in January with his future in the wind. Days before the game, billionaire drug store chain owner Daryl Katz wrapped up the last round of a protracted negotiation to purchase the team.

LaForge suspected the deal would be approved, but had no way of knowing whether the new owner would require his services.

"I think about it a lot," LaForge said over coffee on the morning of the game. "His relationship with me is going to matter a hell of a lot to him and even more to me. If it's good it might last a couple of years. And if it isn't — that's the way it is. I don't really stay awake nights thinking about it. Not that I'm independently wealthy, but I understand the rules of the game. That's the way it is."

LaForge thought it likely that Katz would bring in someone he was familiar with to take his job. Katz might employ him for "a year or so" but then would likely thank LaForge for his trouble and send him along.

"I'm not OK with that, but I don't know anything that I can do about it," LaForge said. "The cards are on the table. They're all face down. I can't see them. But I've got my cards. There's a fatalism in that, but there's not any other way to deal with it."

As it turns out, LaForge held a better hand than he expected. Soon after the $201 million sale was approved by NHL owners last month, Katz met with LaForge and asked him to stay on.

"He said he likes what I do," LaForge said two weeks ago. "Keep it up."

It doesn't always play out that way.

In October 1999, Rick Welts still was relatively new to Los Angeles. He was energized. Excited. He faced a massive mess of a job.

Four months earlier, Welts had left the No. 3 spot at the NBA to become president of Fox Sports Enterprises, a newly created role. There, he was to assess the place of the Los Angeles Dodgers in the News Corp. portfolio, and then take over operation of the franchise.

Lamping found himself in a great position, and he knew that it was time to move on

The president of the St. Louis Cardinals began to think about the job that might follow his dream job a couple of years ago, after the club concluded the arduous task of building and opening a new ballpark.

Born and raised in St. Louis, a Cardinals cap fixed atop his head from boyhood, Lamping often told friends that the position he landed 13 years ago when he was only 36 was well beyond anything he would have dared aspire to.

And yet here he was, contemplating an exit, just as things were getting really good.

"I could not have had a better situation," said Lamping, who left the Cardinals in April to head the joint stadium venture between the New York Giants and Jets. "I had an unbelievable boss. I was in my hometown. The franchise was in great shape. It would have been very easy to say I can just ride this out for the last 15 years. And that scared me, to be honest.

GETTY IMAGES

Lamping had clear sailing ahead with the Cardinals but wanted a new challenge.

"When the thought came to me that everything is going OK and we can ride it out — I didn't want to be in a job at 49 where I'm just riding it out."

The timing was right for Lamping to make a move. His youngest child is off to college. His wife of 28 years would have steadfastly opposed a move while they were raising a family, but with the children out of the house and no grandchildren on the way, they agreed that an empty-nest stint in New York City could be energizing.

So it was that Lamping found himself approaching Cardinals owner Bill DeWitt with the news that he was moving on.

"I just don't see myself being president of the Cardinals when I'm 65," Lamping told DeWitt, to which the owner responded, "Why not?"

"I got the job when I was 36," Lamping reminded him. "I asked myself, would I be satisfied with this being the last job I had? And the answer was no."

Lamping isn't sure whether the call to run a team will beckon him back one day, as it has many before him. He has committed to the stadium project for five years. So far, he likes it fine.

"There clearly is life," Lamping said, "after working for a team."

— *Bill King*

A former Seattle SuperSonics ballboy who went on to become the team's public relations director, Welts long had missed the unpredictable peaks and valleys that went with a job at a sports franchise. He'd been approached four or five times to return to NBA teams in his 17 years at the league office, but none seemed like the right fit. The Dodgers were an iconic franchise. The job offered him a chance to return to the West. It sounded perfect.


Welts

On this night, Welts was having the sort of splendid time you can have when you're a major player in the nation's largest market. He was seated at a table at the grand opening of the glitzy Staples Center, sharing dinner with the top two executives from Fox, Chase Carey and Peter Chernin. A bit into the evening, Carey and Chernin asked Welts to join them upstairs in a suite to talk business.

They brought news that floored him.

Bob Daly, the outgoing CEO of Warner Bros., wanted to buy a piece of the Dodgers. But he would do it only if News Corp. turned over day-to-day control.

Welts laughed.

Carey and Chernin didn't.

"We might really do this," Carey said.

"But," Welts said, digesting the implications, "that's what I came here to do."

Markets shift. Plans change. At the end of that month, Fox transferred operational control of the Dodgers to Daly, who hired his own team president, Bob Graziano, an old friend and former Dodgers president whom Welts had fired 30 days earlier.

Two months later, Welts resigned, explaining that there really was nothing left for him to do on the team sports front at Fox.

By the middle of the next year, Welts was on to a new project, heading a joint venture between Ticketmaster and sports marketing giant SFX. When that fizzled, he joined Casey Wasserman and Gary Stevenson as a partner in a sports marketing consultancy.

Welts was a bit more than a year into life with that firm when he got a call from Jerry Colangelo, owner of the Phoenix Suns and Arizona Diamondbacks. He told Welts that it was time for him to "quit screwing around" with other businesses and come back where he belonged. He offered Welts the job as president and chief operating officer of the Suns.

"It was like, bingo," Welts said. "If I was ever going to try this again, this was it. … The stars just lined up for me."

For a while, anyway. Remember, this is sports.

Welts made it through a year before Colangelo announced he was selling the team. This time, it wasn't a complete surprise. Welts knew Colangelo was looking for a buyer when he took the job. But he also knew that the sale likely would be staged, with Colangelo giving up his shares, and control, a bit at a time.

The transaction called for the new owner, banking wunderkind Robert Sarver, to keep Welts and the rest of the Suns management in place through a three-year transition.

"The new ownership was kind of stuck with us for a while," Welts said. "Lo and behold, by the time that was completed, they decided they kind of liked what was here. … But this is unusual. I don't know, had we not staged the transaction the way we did, if it would have turned out this way."

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"You can become the fall guy. … There was a certain sense of security in staying at Nike. So it was a difficult decision to say I'm going to jump out here and try something totally new that has a lot more risk involved in it. If it doesn't work out, there's a lot of volatility there. But I've always been someone who is willing to take risk. That's part of the challenge for me."

— LARRY MILLER, PRESIDENT, PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"There clearly is life after working for a team."

— MARK LAMPING, FORMER PRESIDENT, ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"Getting away from the games was also an attraction (when I left the A's), to be honest. Not having your life governed by what, virtually, was out of your control every day. But after a period of time, I began to miss the day-to-day rhythm and camaraderie of a franchise, and the community relations between fans and the team."

— SANDY ALDERSON, CEO, SAN DIEGO PADRES

ADVICE FROM THE PROS:

"It's something you have to deal with. There is a reality that if the team is sold, you may no longer have a job."

— GREG JAMISON, PRESIDENT AND CEO, SAN JOSE SHARKS

It just happens

Andy Dolich was six years into his stint as president of business operations with the Memphis Grizzlies when it became apparent to him that the franchise was heading down a bumpy road he'd traveled before.

After moving the franchise from Vancouver, getting an arena up and running, and building interest in a team that never quite got there, Grizzlies owner Michael Heisley was planning to blow up the roster and start over.

Dolich hadn't the stomach for it. At the end of the 2006-07 season, he made up his mind that he was done with Memphis, if not with sports. It took his wife, Ellen, to remind him of the realities of his chosen profession.

"She said, 'Hey, idiot, you're the president of an NBA team,'" Dolich said. "'There are not a lot of those around. You don't just pick up the yellow pages.'"

Dolich chuckled.

"So," he said, "I hung in there."

Shortly before this past season started, Dolich got a call from Buffy Filippell, the headhunter whom he'd known for years. The San Francisco 49ers were in the market for a chief operating officer.


Dolich

Dolich, who had worked for franchises in MLB, the NBA, the NHL, professional soccer and lacrosse, spent the longest stretch of his career in the Bay Area with the Oakland A's and Golden State Warriors and as a consultant. He and his family loved it. The chance to run an NFL team there seemed too good to be true.

"A lot of people say, how did you manage that?," Dolich said. "I didn't manage it. It just happened. It's absolutely incredible."

Jamison was in his fifth year as the San Jose Sharks president and CEO — an unexpected promotion that he gladly accepted at the All-Star Game in Boston in 1996 — when owner George Gund came to him with a revelation that every team president dreads.

"I'm going to get out," Gund said.

The good news was that Gund wanted to see Jamison succeed him. He encouraged him to put together a group of local investors to buy the team. That was in June 2001. Jamison began working with former Mayor Tom McEnery to round up the money.

In September, they landed two major stakeholders. By the time they were ready to announce a deal the

following February, the partnership had grown to 11 people, including Jamison and McEnery.

Most importantly for Jamison, the group agreed he should remain as its leader.

"I certainly felt pressure from the time George came to me, partly because I knew that if he sold to someone else, there might not be a place for me," Jamison said. "And I was happy and I really didn't want to leave. Luckily it worked. But I'm convinced that if I had not put the group together, they'd have gone another direction with the sale. And had that happened, there was absolutely no assurance for me."

The president of the Montreal Canadiens, Pierre Boivin, has headed businesses that were sold three times in his career, the latest being the sale of the Canadiens from Molson to George Gillett. He has managed to keep his job each time.

"I've defied the odds, really," Boivin said. "If you're going to go through it four times, the odds are you're going to be the odd man out two or three of them."

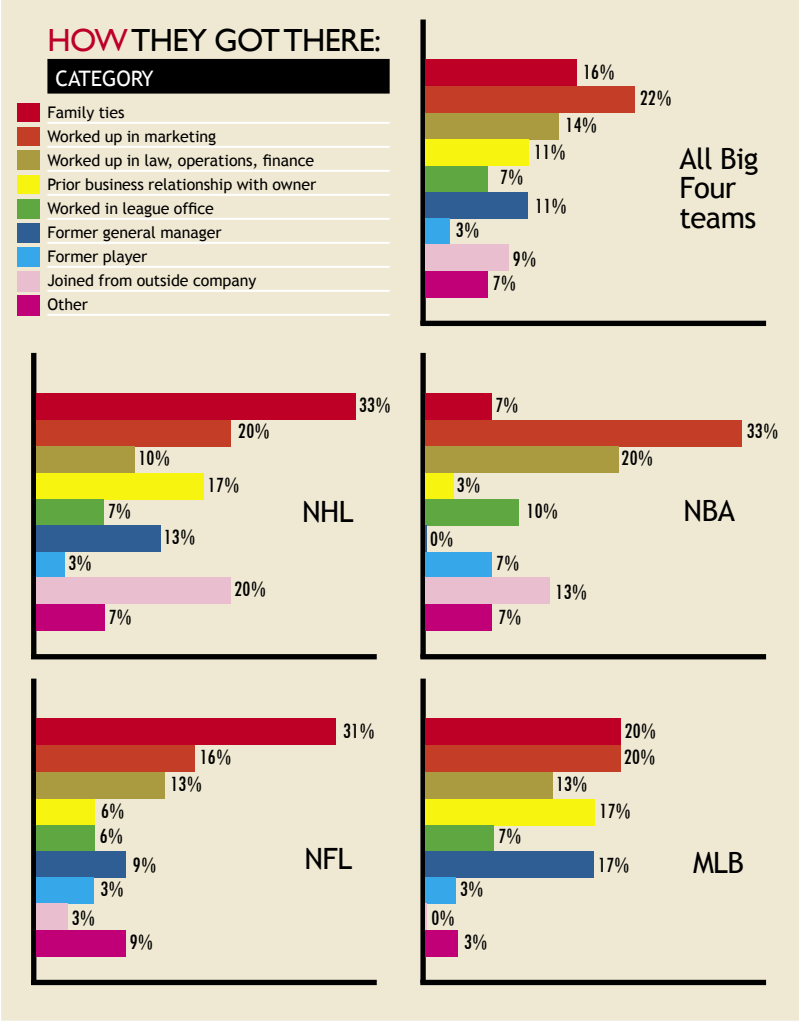
Ranking executives across sports understand the volatility, and generally accept it. They might not have thought of it at all on the way up, but it takes no more than a few days at the top to realize that it's a fact of life.

On the afternoon that the Texas Rangers promoted Jeff Cogen from chief operating officer to president, one of the first calls to his office was from Buck Showalter, the manager of the ballclub. "Congratulations, Cogey," Showalter said. "But I just want you to know, guys like us don't get promoted anymore. We get fired."

Cogen laughed that day with Showalter, a two-time Manager of the Year winner who was fired three times, just as he laughs now as he contemplates the end that awaits most who end up with the vast, well-appointed office to which so many aspire.

"It's risk-reward, like anything else," Cogen said. "It's volatile.

"I'm a day-to-day guy."



Pathways for NBA teams' top execs

TEAM	NAME	TITLE	HOW THEY GOT HERE
Hawks	Vacant		Former CEO Bernie Mullen resigned in January.
Celtics	Rich Gotham	President	After a run with TerraLycos, an aquaintance recommended Gotham to owner Wyc Grousbeck.
Bobcats	Fred Whitfield	Pres./COO	FOM (friend of Michael) worked for F.A.M.E., Nike, Wizards and Brand Jordan.
Bulls	Steve Schanwald	EVP/Bus. Ops	Worked way up the marketing side to EVP job that parallels basketball EVP John Paxson.
Cavaliers	Len Komoroski	President	Former COO of Cleveland hockey team returned to town after stint as SVP with NFL Eagles.
Mavericks	Terdema Ussery	Pres./CEO	Platinum education at Princeton, Harvard and Cal led to law firm, then commish of CBA, then Nike, where headhunter for Mavs owner Ross Perot Jr. found him.
Nuggets	Paul Andrews	EVP/CMO	Started as a Nuggets account exec and climbed rung by rung through marketing department.
Pistons	Tom Wilson	Pres./CEO	Was 28 and in his fifth week in sales when his boss bolted and he was tapped to run the department. Owner put him in charge of then-floundering operation a year later.
Warriors	Robert Rowell	Pres.	Got MBA at Cal Poly and was working there as associate AD when Chris Cohan bought Warriors and put a Poly guy in as counsel. School connection got him in the door.
Rockets	Thaddeus Brown	CEO	Colgate grad and founder of Streetball Partners joined team as VP and headed successful business deals.
Pacers	Jim Morris	Pres./Bus. Ops	Owner Herb Simon brought in prominant Indy businessman to replace departing CEO Donnie Walsh
Clippers	Andy Roeser	Pres./Alt. Gov.	Ernst & Young accountant landed job as Clippers CFO at 24, and rose to EVP after two years.
Lakers	Jeanie Buss	EVP/Bus. Ops	Owner's daughter is boss on business matters.
Grizzlies	Greg Campbell	Pres./Bus. Ops	CFO replaced departing pres Andy Dolich, beating out former Memphis mayor for the job.
Heat	Eric Woolworth	Pres./Bus. Ops	Georgetown law grad, working at D.C. firm, asked Micky Arison for a job, then worked way up.
Bucks	John Steinmiller	VP/Bus. Ops	Hired as a gopher while at Marquette, he's in his 38th season with club.
T'wolves	Rob Moor	CEO	Was EVP of Los Angeles Kings before his father-in-law, Glen Taylor, bought the Wolves.
Hornets	Hugh Weber	Pres.	Former food service exec is owner George Shinn's brother-in-law.
Knicks	Steve Mills	Pres./COO, MSG Sports	Princeton grad spent 16 years at the NBA office and was recruited away to run his hometown team.
Nets	Brett Yormark	Pres./CEO	Sponsorship rainmaker left the Nets to make name at NASCAR, then came back for top job.
Magic	Alex Martins	COO	Started in PR and moved to senior marketing and communications jobs with Hornets and Browns before returning to lead Magic business operations.
76ers	Ed Stefanski	Pres./GM	Former president of a mortgage company became director of scouting for the Nets at age 45. Sixers hired him as GM and the president title came with it.
Suns	Rick Welts	Pres./COO	Former Sonics ballboy moved from team to league office, where he spent 17 years before leaving to run Dodgers for News Corp. Left when ownership changed, but was back in team sports before long as Suns president.

Pathways for NBA teams' top execs (cont.)

TEAM	NAME	TITLE	HOW THEY GOT HERE
Blazers	Larry Miller	President	MBA with accounting background built Brand Jordan for Nike and was recruited by Blazers.
Kings	John Thomas	Pres./Bus. Ops	Former Rockets EVP was tapped by Maloofs when they bought the Kings.
Spurs	Vacant		Spurs owner Peter Holt considering reorganization after longtime EVP stepped down in June.
SuperSonics	Danny Barth	Pres./CEO	Six years as CFO put him in position when Clay Bennett bought team and Wally Walker resigned.
Raptors	Bryan Colangelo	Pres./GM	Son of former Suns ow ner worked in both business and basketball before earning president's title.
Jazz	Randy Rigby	President	Elevated after 20 years in the organization, most recently as SVP of sales and broadcasting and CMO.
Wizards	Peter Biche	Pres./Bus. Ops	Finance guy got biggest piece of promotion when longtime team boss Susan O'Malley stepped down.

Pathways for NHL teams' top execs

TEAM	NAME	TITLE	HOW THEY GOT HERE
Ducks	Michael Schulman	CEO	Managing director of Samueli family's charity and investment arm led negotiation to buy team from Disney and was then put in charge of it.
Thrashers	Vacant		Former CEO Bernie Mullen resigned in January.
Bruins	Charlie Jacobs	EVP	BC grad is son of owner Jeremy Jacobs.
Sabres	Larry Quinn	Managing Partner	Successful developer landed an arena for former owner Seymour Knox, left when Knox sold the team, then came back five years ago.
Flames	Ken King	Pres./CEO	Former newspaper publisher, active in campaign to keep team in Calgary, tapped to run it in 2001.
Hurricanes	Jim Rutherford	Pres./GM	Former Red Wings goaltender was running owner Peter Karmanos' youth and juniors programs when the Compuware boss bought the Canes.
Blackhawks	John McDonough	President	Popular marketing guy hired last year from Cubs.
Avalanche	Pierre LaCroix	President	Former player agent spent 11 seasons as GM before relinquishing that job last year.
Blue Jackets	Mike Priest	President	Trusted family financial guy brought in after firing of founding president and GM Doug MacLean.
Stars	Jeff Cogen	President	Former Ringling Bros. marketing director calls himself "a salesman with a fancy title."
Red Wings	Ken Holland	EVP/GM	Team added SVP of business affairs last year, but NHL's winningest GM has higher title.
Oilers	Patrick LaForge	Pres./CEO	Former VP of international marketing for Molson was running Canadian Olympic ski organization when new Oilers owners asked for his help.
Panthers	Michael Yormark	Pres./COO	Rainmaker was the first active employee to hold the title in six years.
Kings	Luc Robitaille	Pres./Bus. Ops	Team's all-time leading goal scorer learned the business at AEG before taking over the Kings helm.
Wild	Doug Risebrough	Pres./GM	Former Canadien went from ice to bench to assistant GM to GM, added president's title in 2003.
Canadiens	Pierre Boivin	President	Search firm pointed team owner Molson in direction of the CEO of Nike Bauer Hockey.
Predators	Ed Lang	Pres./Bus. Ops	New owner David Freeman elevated finance guy from previous owner's troika of EVPs.
Devils	Lou Lamoriello	CEO/Pres./GM	Providence AD was hired to be president and GM of the Devils 20 years ago, and since then has worn almost every hat with franchise.
Islanders	Charles Wang	Owner	Supported by a pair of SVPs.
Rangers	Steve Mills	Pres./COO MSG Sports	Basketball guy added hockey responsibilities when MSG restructured executive chain.
Senators	Roy Mlakar	Pres./CEO	Talked his way into part-time work with a minor league hockey team when he was 19 and now is in his third stint as an NHL team president.
Flyers	Peter Luukko	Pres./COO	Noted arena manager added team responsibilities when Comcast-Spectacor Chairman Ed Snider promoted him to COO in 2005.
Coyotes	Doug Moss	Pres./COO	Former president of MSG Network landed first team president job with Sabres in 1994 and ran the IHL and Ducks before taking this job.
Penguins	Ken Sawyer	CEO	Spent 14 years as the NHL's CFO before taking job running Pens for Super Mario in 1999.
Sharks	Greg Jamison	Pres./CEO	Hired as EVP and COO by the Sharks in '93 after running business operations with the Pacers, he now holds a stake in the team as managing partner.
Blues	Peter McLoughlin	CEO	Spent 21 years at Anheuser-Busch before joining Blues two years ago.
Lightning	Ron Campbell	President	Accountant from Bill Davidson's glass company became Pistons CFO, then led purchase of the Lightning and was tapped as president.
Maple Leafs	Richard Peddie	Pres./CEO	Former packaged goods exec was first CEO of SkyDome, became president of the NBA Raptors.
Canucks	Chris Zimmerman	Pres./CEO	Joined Canucks in '06 after three years as CEO of Nike Bauer Hockey.
Capitals	Dick Patrick	Pres./Owner	Joined Abe Pollin's ownership group, found buyer for Pollin and took a 5 percent stake himself.

Pathways for MLB teams' top execs

TEAM	NAME	TITLE	HOW THEY GOT HERE
D'backs	Derrick Hall	President	Interned with Dodgers, then worked for team in Vero Beach before returning to Los Angeles to run communications department. Took same job in Arizona, then rose to president when boss Rich Dozier left.
Braves	John Schuerholz	President	Moved into role in October after 26 years as a GM.
Orioles	Andy MacPhail	Pres./ Baseball Ops	Former Twins GM got president's title and seat at owners meetings when he moved to the Cubs.
Red Sox	Larry Lucchino	Pres./CEO	First job as lawyer at Williams & Connolly led to relationship with Skins and O's owner Edward Bennett Williams, who moved him over to teams as general counsel.
Cubs	vacant		Longtime marketer John McDonough left last year and hasn't been replaced with team for sale.
White Sox	Howard Pizer	EVP	Lawyer worked with owner Jerry Reinsdorf on team purchase and has been EVP ever since.
Reds	Phil Castellini	COO	Owner's son replaced departing COO John Allen after a stint as SVP of business operations.
Indians	Paul Dolan	President	Owner's son assumed title in 2004, after three years in the front office.
Rockies	Keli McGregor	President	College roommate of owner's son worked his way up with Rockies after brief NFL playing career and four years as assistant AD.
Tigers	Dave Dombrowski	Pres./GM	Highly sought-after GM parlayed success into bigger title in Florida and then Detroit.
Marlins	David Samson	President	Owner's stepson is attorney who ran Expos, then navigated Marlins swap with MLB.

Pathways for MLB teams' top execs (cont.)

TEAM	NAME	TITLE	HOW THEY GOT HERE
Astros	Pam Gardner	Pres./Bus. Ops	Left ad agency for job as Astros communications director, then worked up through marketing side.
Royals	Dan Glass	President	Owner's son spent five years in baseball operations and is in his ninth as team president.
Angels	Dennis Kuhl	President	Owner's fraternity brother and longtime colleague at billboard company.
Dodgers	Dennis Mannion	COO	Former Phillies marketing VP rose to No. 2 spot with Ravens, then moved to top non-ownership job with Dodgers.
Brewers	Rick Schlesinger	EVP/Bus. Ops	Harvard law grad was attorney at Disney who moved to sports with Angels. Met then Brewers president Ulice Payne at World Series and was hired as No. 2.
Twins	Dave St. Peter	President	Went to work out of college as manager of a stadium retail store and worked way up via marketing and PR departments.
Mets	Jeff Wilpon	COO	Son of owner Fred Wilpon has day-to-day oversight, though his uncle, Saul Katz, holds president's title.
Yankees	Randy Levine	President	Was Rudy Giuliani's labor commissioner when MLB hired him to negotiate CBA in '96. He kept close ties to baseball.
A's	Mike Crowley	President	Duke MBA met A's owner Steve Schott at a dinner party. Conversation led to job as team's CFO. Named president 14 months later.
Phillies	David Montgomery	Gen. Partner	Wharton MBA went to work in Phillies ticket office in 1971 and acquired ownership interest after 23 years with the team.
Pirates	Frank Coonelly	President	Recent hire impressed owners while in MLB labor office.
Padres	Sandy Alderson	CEO	Harvard law grad was working as attorney for fellow Dartmouth grad and Marine officer Roy Eisenhart when he bought the A's. Started as team's legal counsel, then rose to GM and president. Joined Padres from MLB office.
Giants	Larry Baer	President	Team marketing director left to get Harvard MBA, then was key player in keeping team in SF. Promoted from COO to president when Peter Magowan retired in May.
Mariners	Howard Lincoln	CEO	Nintendo of America boss migrated to M's when Nintendo chair bought the team.
Cardinals	Bill DeWitt III	President	Owner's son followed dad's path through Yale undergrad and Harvard B-school and spent last 12 years learning the front office.
Rays	Matt Silverman	President	Harvard economics grad met owner Stuart Sternberg when both were with Goldman Sachs.
Rangers	Nolan Ryan	President	Ryan is first Rangers president to have authority over both business and baseball.
Blue Jays	Paul Godfrey	Pres./CEO	Toronto politician led quest to bring baseball to town, then was newspaper publisher when billionaire boss bought team.
Nationals	Stan Kasten	President	Ran into Ted Turner outside Busch Stadium and asked for a job. Started as Braves in-house counsel and was Hawks GM at 27.

Pathways for NFL teams' top execs

TEAM	NAME	TITLE	HOW THEY GOT HERE
Cards	Michael Bidwill	President	Owner's son is third-generation NFL.
Falcons	Rich McKay	President	One-time ballboy went against father's advice and jumped from general counsel to GM in '94; landed president title, but stripped of GM duties last year.
Ravens	Dick Cass	President	Attorney who represented Jerry Jones in Cowboys purchase did same for Steve Bisciotti with Ravens. Put in charge when Bisciotti took over control.
Bills	Russ Brandon	COO	Local boy rose through the ranks to EVP and added COO title in January, adding oversight of football side to his responsibilities.
Panthers	Mark Richardson	President	Owner's son is president of team; Mark's brother, Jon, is president of family-owned stadium.
Bears	Ted Phillips	Pres./CEO	First non-family member to hold the job was a low-rung accountant who worked on the Bears tax return. Hired as controller and worked up from there.
Bengals	Mike Brown	President	Owner's son took over the office when his father, a football legend, died in 1991.
Browns	Mike Keenan	President	Hired out of league office to be CFO in 2005, and then elevated earlier this year to fill the vacant position.
Cowboys	Stephen Jones	EVP/COO	Owner's son has 18 years in league under his belt.
Broncos	Joe Ellis	COO	Left as Broncos marketing director to get MBA, went to league office before taking EVP job in '98.
Lions	Matt Millen	Pres./CEO	Bizarre path from the playing field to the broadcast booth and then straight to top job at a team.
Packers	Mark Murphy	Pres./CEO	Redskins All-Pro safety got MBA while playing and law degree soon after, and ended up as AD at Northwestern, where search firm plucked him for this job.
Texans	Jamey Rootes	President	Work building MLS franchise caught eye of NFL expansion franchise, which hired him as top marketer.
Colts	Bill Polian	President	Highly regarded GM got the title when Jim Irsay hired him away from Carolina.
Jaguars	Wayne Weaver	Chairman/CEO	Owner is flanked by a trio of SVPs.
Dolphins	Joe Bailey	CEO	Huizenga hired Bailey's search firm to find coach and CEO. Huizenga landed on Bailey.
Chiefs	Carl Peterson	Pres./GM/CEO	Former UCLA coach broke into NFL as Eagles director of player personnel, then jumped to USFL. When league folded, Chiefs owner offered him total authority.
Vikings	Mark Wilf	Owner/Pres.	Younger brother of chairman Zygi Wilf is responsible for daily management of the family football business.
Patriots	Jonathan Kraft	President	Has been at father Robert's side since he bought the team 20 years ago.
Saints	Rita Benson LeBlanc	Owner/EVP	Owner's granddaughter spent summers with team while in college, emerged as boss after Katrina.
Giants	John Mara	President/CEO	Oldest son of fabled owner Wellington Mara.
Jets	Vacant		Jay Cross resigned to head real estate project.
Raiders	Amy Trask	CEO	Berkeley grad interned with team while getting law degree at Southern Cal.
Eagles	Joe Banner	President	Former clothing store owner has been friend of owner Jeffrey Lurie since both were teens.
Steelers	Art Rooney II	President	Third-generation NFLer took title from father in '03.
Rams	John Shaw	President	A year after inheriting the team, Georgia Frontiere hired the 30-year-old CPA on advice of a board member.
Chargers	Dean Spanos	President/CEO	Owner Alex Spanos appointed his son CEO in 1994, 10 years after buying the team.
49ers	Andy Dolich	COO	Marketer behind "BillyBall" campaign for A's ran two NBA teams, worked in every major team sport.
Seahawks	Tod Leiweke	CEO	Paul Allen hired savvy marketer who headed Minnesota Wild, Houston Rockets and Golden State Warriors.
Buccaneers	Joel Glazer	EVP	Owner's son shares EVP title with his two brothers.
Titans	Steve Underwood	Sr. EVP/COO	Owner Bud Adams holds most titles, but his trusted attorney since Oilers days runs the organization.
Redskins	Mitch Gershman	COO	Former exec from owner Dan Snyder's company moved to Redskins when Snyder bought the team.