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**SBJ** SPORTS  
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 JOURNAL

# FORTY UNDER 40 AWARDS 2020

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**Kobe Bryant:  
Remembering the  
legend's second act.**  
**PAGE 6**

**XFL Preview: Will it  
last? Execs address  
the key question.**  
**PAGE 25**

**Champions: Why  
Marla Messing is  
back in business.**  
**PAGE 20**



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## Expanded Horizons

Anthony Precourt and his new MLS club are putting Austin on the pro sports map.  
**PAGE 16**



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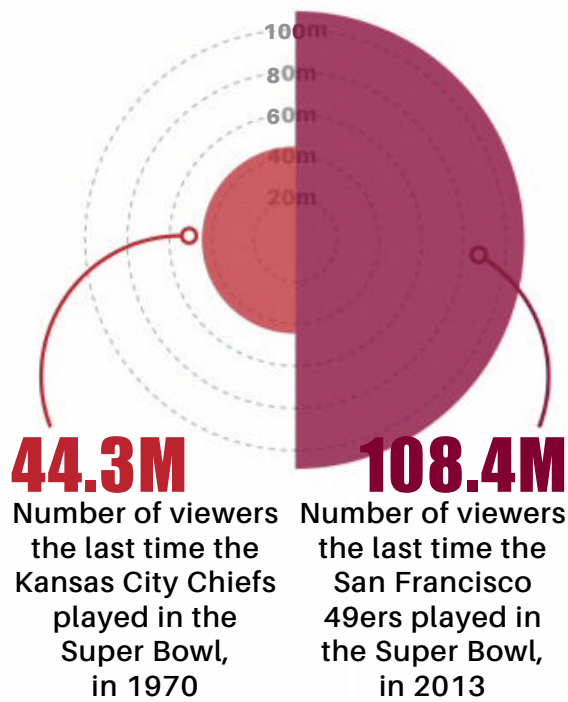


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# STATE OF PLAY

## RATINGS GAME



## JUDGE

MLB is considering letting umpires wear microphones so that they can explain the results of replay reviews to the crowd and the TV audience.



## THE METER

### VERDICT

An arbitrator ruled Cubs star Kris Bryant does not deserve an extra year of service time, delaying his free agency until after the 2021 season.



## Fear Factor

Soccer players greeted each other before a game at Yuanshen Sports Centre Stadium in Shanghai, which sat empty last week due to fears of the spreading coronavirus in China. The disease led to the cancellation of World Cup skiing races set for later this month; all Overwatch League matches scheduled for February and March; the Blue Bay LPGA on China's Hainan Island, scheduled for March 5-8; and the postponement until 2021 of the World Athletics Indoor Championships, which had been set for March 13-15 in Nanjing.

## CASH ONLY

**\$163**  
**MILLION**

Amount Penn National Gaming will pay to buy a 36% stake in Barstool Sports.

## TAKING ATTENDANCE

**47,807**

Crowd for four days of the U.S. Figure Skating Championships, held in Greensboro, where the event's record attendance of 110,787 was set in 2011.

## MONEY TALKS

“If the Team Golf Concept or another iteration of this structure becomes a reality in 2022 or at any time before or after, our members will have to decide whether they want to continue to be a member of the PGA Tour or play on a new series.”

— PGA Tour Commissioner **JAY MONAHAN**, addressing a potential new golf tour in an email to golfers





**ABRAHAM MADKOUR**  
PUBLISHER AND  
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

“One thing I’ve learned from this job is that **the work is never done** — there are always opportunities and challenges that this league will have to address.”

## Goodell stays focused on the many tasks ahead

**O**NE OF the must-attend events of any Super Bowl week is the commissioner’s press conference on the state of the league. It offers a pretty accurate microcosm of the health and perception of America’s most popular sport, and also an insightful view of the leadership of **Roger Goodell**.

This year’s meeting with the media reflected the positive tenor around the league — there wasn’t a lot of heavy lifting, and Goodell offered his usual measured, by-the-book responses to the litany of questions. After 14 seasons leading the league, we know what to expect from a Goodell public performance. He will never be an inspirational, charismatic, ornery or even outspoken orator on the stump. He is not a former lawyer, so he avoids the playful nuance and details around specific legal issues. He knows what he wants to get across and avoids expanding much beyond traditional talking points.

But this year — again going with a sports jacket, open dress shirt and no tie — Goodell showed more traces of humor and smiled more frequently than in previous iterations. He seemed more comfortable, and he should. The league is coming off two straight solid years, and the questions from the media were all ones he could expect and was prepared for. It wasn’t like years ago when he was constantly on the defensive, and an easy punching bag on the various ills or controversies facing the league.

In Miami, he was asked about player safety, domestic violence and hiring diversity; he wasn’t asked about three of the more pressing topics facing the league: the challenges around sports betting; the league’s lowest average attendance since 2004; and a strategy around the league’s upcoming media deals and “Sunday Ticket.”

Goodell’s most interesting answer came when he was asked by *Newsday*’s **Bob Glauber** about his future, and if he was planning to leave after a completed collective bargaining agreement and media rights deal. It’s a topic that comes up with virtually every powerful insider I speak with, and no one seems to have an answer. But Goodell spoke as openly as I can recall about how he sees his tenure.

“One thing I’ve learned from this job is

that the work is never done — there are always opportunities and challenges that this league will have to address,” Goodell said. “Consistent leadership in some fashion is critical for the league. Succession will be an important part of it. But I haven’t thought about retirement. It’s not on my agenda.”

Then he offered what I found to be his most self-effacing and refreshing comment, when he said with a slight laugh, “At some point, I am going to retire. That day is probably closer today than it was yesterday.” But he concluded assuredly, “I’m 100% committed to this job.”

It’s a story I will be watching closely. We all know the peaks and valleys of Goodell’s tenure. It was captured well recently by the Associated Press’ **Barry Wilner**, who wrote a worthwhile profile of the highs and lows of Goodell’s tenure, by summing up that the commissioner is on a nice little run and “what his bosses have sought from him he has delivered in a far more lucrative way than they might have imagined.”

Goodell has settled into his zone and rhythm. He prefers to keep a low profile. He prefers to not deal with the media. He enjoys being out in the markets and has fun mingling and mixing it up with fans. He enjoys leading and operating America’s biggest league, obviously a demanding and punishing chore. He knows that two big deals on the horizon will dramatically impact his legacy — a long-term CBA that could reshape the face and schedule of the league, and new media rights deals that have all the makings of a blockbuster and will shake up the sports and entertainment marketplace. Once those are done, Goodell can focus inward. The ramifications of his decision will be significant — to those league officials jockeying to be his successor and to owners recruiting a replacement. From everything I’m hearing now, owners are open to him staying past his current deal through 2023.

The decision will be whether Goodell, who started at the league as an intern in 1982, wants a new challenge or continues his lifelong journey at the only place he’s ever worked and cements his history at the NFL.

**Abraham Madkour can be reached at [amadkour@sportsbusinessjournal.com](mailto:amadkour@sportsbusinessjournal.com).**

### SBJ/SBD PODCASTS

#### FIRST LOOK & BUZZCAST

Check out our **First Look podcast** every Monday where we discuss the week’s top stories. Also, check out **Buzzcast** in *SportsBusiness Daily’s Morning Buzz*, our daily two-minute look at the stories of the day.



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### THIS WEEK

THE SIT-DOWN ... **15**  
OPINION ... **33**  
CLOSING SHOT ... **34**

Cover image by Gary Miller

#### BASEBALL

##### 9 STILL NO DEAL:

Sources say a change of attitude could help MLB, minor league baseball reach a new operating agreement.

**By Eric Prisbell**

#### COLLEGE SPORTS

##### 10 A GOOD TEST:

‘Everything went fine’ for North Carolina firm that ran the event design business for CFP in New Orleans.

**By Michael Smith**

#### MEDIA

##### 13 SPORTS MEDIA:

Dan Granik joins media consultant David Sternberg to extend the reach of Sternberg’s Claygate Advisors.

**By John Ourand**

#### LABOR

##### 14 LABOR & AGENTS

Henry Ruggs III anchors a deep group of NFL draft prospects for Independent Sports & Entertainment.

**By Liz Mullen**

#### IN-DEPTH

##### 25 XFL PREVIEW:

It’s all about access and affordability as the XFL gets underway. See how teams have approached their markets.

**By SBJ Staff**





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# UPFRONT



## ‘He was a creative force’

What business partners will remember about the uniqueness of Kobe Bryant.

BY JOHN LOMBARDO, TERRY LEFTON, LIZ MULLEN AND JOHN OURAND

**W**HEN KOBE BRYANT was considering making an investment in BodyArmor late in his NBA career, co-founder Mike Repole had a message for the Los Angeles Lakers legend about the challenges a new business faces, especially one taking on an established Goliath like Gatorade.

“I kept telling him how impossible it would be. I told him that it has a 1% chance of succeeding,” said Repole. “He looked at me and said ‘I’ve won five NBA championships, an MVP, a Finals MVP, and Olympic gold medals. Your odds are the best I’ve ever had.’”

Bryant eventually made a \$5 million investment in 2013, one that was later valued at around \$200 million when Coca-Cola acquired a minority stake in BodyArmor in 2018. Bryant’s trademark confidence, combined with his fierce competitiveness and unrelenting work ethic — all part of his famed Mamba Mentality — had earned him athletic immortality and it was making him successful again in a burgeoning business career.

That career came to a tragic conclusion when Bryant was killed in a helicopter crash on Jan. 26 in an accident that claimed the lives of eight others, including his 13-year-old daughter Gianna. The death of the basketball icon at age 41 shocked the world, with tributes pouring in from teammates, coaches and friends. The business community mourned as well, especially those who had worked with him and seen the passion and skill he had for the second act of his life.

“The big difference between Kobe and every other athlete is that with most athletes, it’s transactional. Kobe wanted to be part of something and grow it,” said Mark Warsop, CEO of Panini America, which had Bryant under contract for almost 11 years. “You knew that from the beginning and you almost never get that from athletes. He knew what we wanted to achieve and just wanted to be part of it.”

One of the companies Bryant wanted to be a part of was BodyArmor. The company was eyeing a piece of a sports drink market dominated by Gatorade, and Bryant — who had been an endorser for Repole’s Vitaminwater — was all in. “His fingerprints were all over BodyArmor before we sold our first bottle,” Repole said. “He would sneak bottles of it in the Lakers’ coolers at practices and tell me who and how many players were drinking it instead of Gatorade.



“The vision was to create a better sports drink and Kobe wanted to talk business. He was already a guy with a plan for the next two years, five years, 20 years. After his Achilles injury (in 2013), he could see the finish line of his basketball career coming. He wanted to know every single thing about starting a business. He was pulling as much information as possible and I was like, ‘This guy knows what to ask.’”

That inquisitiveness, combined with an insatiable desire to improve, had helped Bryant dominate on the court and it was helping him find success off the court long before he retired after the 2015-16 season. He was a founding investor in the ad agency Zambezi in 2006 when he was just 27, and he sold back his interest in the agency in 2015.

“He was three moves ahead with everything that he did,” said Chris Raih, Zambezi co-founder and president. “Zambezi was one of many business interests and LLCs that Kobe had in play. From Kobe Inc., to podcasts, to children’s [products] to ‘Dear Basketball,’ all the other multimedia. And it came from things he was personally passionate about, but then he put in the legwork.”

Raih said Bryant took a thorough and methodical approach to his business ventures.

“He worked in four-year increments,” he said. “I think a lot of ballplayers maybe can have a four-month horizon of what they are working on. This guy was totally on the next level. He was very interested in branding and in consumer brands and how athletes are packaged and presented to the marketplace. So much so that he wanted to invest a little bit in his own brand but a little bit in just the intelligence of how brands are built.”

“He would famously just cold call the top people in feature film production or music composition or sneaker marketing. He would call people like Elon Musk, just to have a conversation and pick their brain. Here’s the beautiful part: He knew everyone’s name. If he met you once, he would remember your name the next time he came through. He knew your dog’s name, your kid’s name. There were people who would have Boston Celtics stickers on their laptop and he would give them shit — in a playful way.”

Bryant built a portfolio that reflected the varied interests consistent with someone who spent years of his childhood living in Italy and had earned a reputation as basketball’s Renaissance Man. There were endorsements with the likes of Nike, of course, but he also worked with brands that other players were not as familiar with.

“The agreement we had with him was completely different from others,” said Warsop. “He was our global ambassador. When we first started talking with him in 2009, he knew who Panini was. He’d collected our cards as a kid. It has taken 11 years to get to that place with other athletes.”

Then there was the short animated film Bryant wrote and narrated, “Dear Basketball,” which was based on a letter he had written announcing his NBA retirement that appeared on The Players’ Tribune. The film won an Academy Award in 2018. There were the content creation projects under his Gravity Studios. There was the venture capital fund he co-founded with Jeff Stibel, founder of Web.com, called Bryant Stibel, which reportedly had \$2 billion in managed capital in 2019. Investments in the portfolio included Epic Games, the makers of “Fortnite,” as well as Alibaba, Dell and LegalZoom.



**“I told him that it has a 1% chance of succeeding. He looked at me and said ‘I’ve won five NBA championships, an MVP, a Finals MVP, and Olympic gold medals. Your odds are the best I’ve ever had.’”**

**ABOVE:** Mamba Mentality described Bryant’s work ethic and competitive spirit.

**RIGHT:** His Gravity Studios produced “Dear Basketball,” which earned an Oscar that later donned its own Lakers jersey.

Executives who worked on projects with Bryant saw someone whose acumen meant he would be likely to succeed in any or all of those varied ventures, and he wasn’t shy about bringing his own ideas to the table.

“Kobe was one of the first athletes to really understand the power of storytelling, and he was also ahead of the curve when it came to the integration of athletes and their business portfolios,” said Jaymee Messler, co-founder of The Players’ Tribune. “Kobe was passionate, invested and extremely particular — he had a strong perspective, was very detail oriented and was a true perfectionist. Everything he did was strategic and carefully considered. He was a voracious reader, and an avid consumer of content, which is why he was so invested in storytelling. He was a creative force, and had ideas for days — and they were good ideas. He was a visionary and ahead of his time when it came to content and storytelling.”

Shortly after Bryant retired in 2016, he started talking to ESPN and had a clear message for the media company’s executives: He was not looking to be a traditional in-studio talking head. Having launched Gravity Studios, Bryant was interested in forging his own path in the production business.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8





## ► UPFRONT KOBE BRYANT 1978-2020



### Commitment gave BodyArmor big boost

BY TERRY LEFTON AND JOHN LOMBARDO

**ONE OF** Kobe Bryant's most successful business ventures was his \$5 million investment for a 10% stake in the sports drink BodyArmor in 2013. When Coca-Cola took a minority stake in the company in 2018, BodyArmor reportedly was valued at \$2 billion, with Bryant's stake skyrocketing to about \$200 million.

Here is BodyArmor co-founder Mike Repole's reflections on working with Bryant.

"I can't tell you how much that investment motivated and inspired me. If BodyArmor went belly-up, he would look like he didn't know what he was doing. I felt that pressure. We developed a relationship where we engaged constantly, which was odd, because I wasn't a Lakers fan or a Kobe fan. I went from not really liking him to loving him."

"His energy motivated me. We'd go to trade shows and he would talk to every retailer, even if there were hundreds, and take a photo with everyone. I'd text him at 3 a.m. and he'd text me back at 3:01. I've always been about working 24/7, but to have him as a friend and business partner who understood, that was incredible."

"He was translating that Mamba Mentality over to the business world. I thought that he was going to be more successful in the following 40 years in business than he was in the first 40 years in basketball. We did a million dollars the first year Kobe was involved. This year, we will be a billion-dollar retail brand."

"We were both very obsessive about getting the answer, getting to the solution. We chased perfection, even though we knew there was no such thing. But that chase made us better every single day."

"BodyArmor is going to be Kobe's business legacy. Once he put his mind to something, he was driven to be the best at it. I've never met someone who wanted to be the best in so many different areas. Money was the aftereffect of his success. It was never the goal. It was never about the money. It was about the journey."

**ABOVE:** BodyArmor co-founder **Mike Repole** (right) said Bryant's early investment in the brand provided added motivation.

**BOTTOM:** Bryant spoke at ESPN's upfront presentation to advertisers in 2018. He developed the concept for the successful "Details" series on ESPN+.

**"He would call people like Elon Musk just to have a conversation and pick their brain."**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

In talks with Connor Schell, who at the time was executive producer for ESPN Films, and Kevin Wildes, who ran NBA Countdown, Bryant came up with the idea to produce short films around basketball that ABC ran during its pregame show. The short films were different than viewers normally would see; some were animated; some involved sock puppets.

"It was really interesting and really different," Schell said.

Eventually, Bryant, Schell, Granity Studios producer Molly Carter and WME's Josh Pyatt met to develop production plans for the streaming service, ESPN+, which launched in April 2018.

During the meeting, Bryant told a story about the 2017 playoffs, when the 8-seed Bulls won the first two games against the top-seeded Celtics. Celtics guard Isaiah Thomas sent Bryant tape of those first two games. Bryant watched it, then talked Thomas through the games, offering pointers.

Bryant then looked at Schell and said, "That's the show. Take game footage, and I'm going to watch it as if I'm going to play."

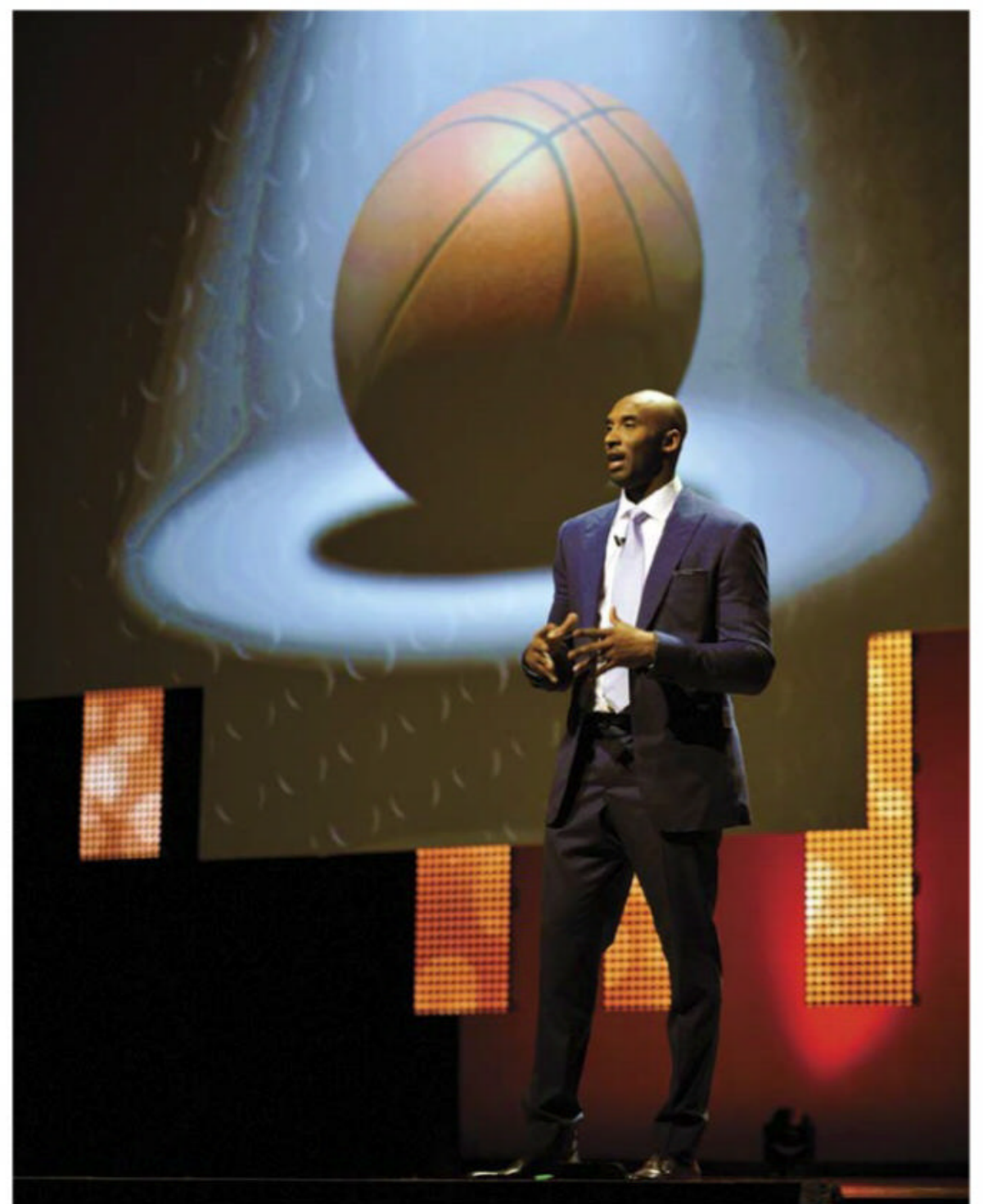
The meeting led to the series "Details," which Schell described as one of the breakout shows on the new ser-

vice. With Bryant's urging, "Details" expanded into pro football with Peyton Manning, college football with Nick Saban, women's basketball with Diana Taurasi and UFC with Daniel Cormier.

"Kobe really built a format and an architecture for a series that will last for a really long time," Schell said. "That idea of mentoring people, being an ambassador for basketball, teaching basketball — those are all elements of what he wanted this show to be."

Bryant once relayed a conversation he'd had with Tesla chairman Elon Musk. "He'll always say the most important thing is imagination," Bryant told CNBC. "You can learn anything you want to learn, you can study all these things that you have in a book, but if you don't have the imagination to take it to another level it doesn't mean anything."

Bryant certainly never lacked for imagination. He imagined himself becoming an NBA star who would be thought of as one of the greatest players of all time, and he became one. He imagined himself becoming a business star, and he was already becoming one. The influence and inspiration he had for millions will be his most impactful legacy, even for those who still can't imagine he's gone. ✖







The Professional Baseball Agreement between the major and minor leagues expires at season's end.

## No formal progress in MLB-MiLB discussions

**CONTENTIOUS NEGOTIATIONS** between MLB and minor league baseball over a new Professional Baseball Agreement have followed a hard-and-fast pattern for nearly four months: public squabbling, pledges to keep quiet, a short-lived truce, more public squabbling, rinse, repeat.

After detailed letters from both sides found their way into the media last week, this much is clear for an agreement to be reached before the current PBA expires at the end of the 2020 season: "The process has to be different than it is now," said a source directly involved in the discussions. That sentiment is shared by sources on both sides who spoke on condition of anonymity because of ongoing discussions.

While sources on both sides also concede that there have been some constructive, informal discussions, no significant formal progress has been made. Almost four months after Baseball America first reported MLB's proposal to dramatically overhaul minor league baseball — which could result in cutting as many as 42 teams — the two sides can't even agree on whether MiLB has presented a formal proposal (it says it has; MLB disagrees).

MLB has presented MiLB's negotiating committee with an idea of moving away from its initial notion of a Dream League — consisting of independent teams composed of unaffiliated players — to be played in towns of contracted teams with another league consisting of players preparing for the draft. MiLB views MLB's evolution on that front as a modicum of progress, though a wide chasm remains.

MiLB believes MLB has lied about MiLB's

positions, which it says has prompted MiLB to stage an aggressive public and congressional campaign to save baseball in communities nationwide. MLB does not believe the current highly public nature of the debate and the intervention of Congress is creating a situation in which an agreement can be reached.

BY ERIC  
PRISBELL

Four members of the House of Representatives introduced a bipartisan resolution last week asking MLB to abandon plans to cut minor league affiliates.

A MiLB source said support for MLB's proposal to overhaul minor league baseball is less hardened among the 30 MLB owners than MLB deputy commissioner Dan Halem described in his eight-page letter. A continued aggressive public and congressional campaign could further weaken support among the 30 owners, the source said, adding that MiLB believes it has crafted a compelling public narrative: "It's Wall Street sticking it to Main Street."

MLB disagrees with that framing of the issue, saying instead that MiLB is disingenuous to claim it is trying to save baseball in communities at the same time minor league teams regularly make unilateral decisions to relocate. In his letter, Halem said that has occurred 77 times since 1990 and that MLB recently learned that the Class A New York-Penn League put the Batavia (N.Y.) Muckdogs into receivership and sold the team to an owner who intends to move the franchise.

"Given the track record of MiLB abandoning communities when it suits the owners' economic interest," Halem wrote, "it is more than a bit ironic that you hold yourself out as the defender of local communities."

## MLS clubs can sell sponsorship rights internationally

BY MARK J. BURNS

**MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER** is now allowing clubs to sell international sponsorship rights outside of the U.S. and Canada beginning with the 2020 season, the league confirmed, making it the second major U.S. professional sports league to do so.

In April, the NBA granted teams the ability to sell global marketing rights as part of a three-year pilot program. Sources characterized the MLS decision as a beta program, one that opens up incremental revenue opportunities for all clubs. The new initiative was approved at a board of governors meeting in December.

A source with knowledge of the MLS situation said that there are some international restrictions, including brands not being competitive with current league sponsors. Additionally, future sponsors with an international component cannot be a gambling or sports betting company, this person said. At this time, there are no restrictions in place around markets or territories.

"The MLS needs to be super clear about who their audience is, because the recipe for disaster is trying to target everybody," advised Tim Crow, an independent sports marketing expert.

Some sources said not to be surprised if there's a minimum spend threshold for brands wanting to leverage international as part of a club relationship. Like with all club sponsorship deals, those including international rights will have to be approved by the league office.

Crow called the decision "a smart move" as the league and its clubs attempt to create further relevance outside of the North American borders, especially leading up to the 2026 FIFA World Cup. He highlighted two of the biggest soccer-playing continents — Europe and South America — and said that there was "total penetration" in terms of World Cup viewership. That may be a starting point for some clubs, he said, but there are other global opportunities, too.

"It all depends if you want to take MLS somewhere that's ripe for growth, and the biggest region for that in terms of soccer is Asia, or whether you take it to big regions where saturation is already there," added Crow of the international opportunities. "It's a pretty wide menu that you can choose from."



Teams like the LA Galaxy, which played in Europe in 2015, can try tapping into a soccer-crazed part of the world.



## The Market

A MEASURED LOOK  
AT THIS WEEK'S  
HOLDINGS

**BUY**



### PRICE CHECK

The **Winnipeg Jets** are immediately rolling out a new price plan in which the cost of certain concessions, including popular items like beer, soda and pizza, will drop by 30% at Bell MTS Place. It continues a trend for more fan-friendly pricing throughout sports as owners and operators respond to feedback in ways that could combat ticket sales concerns.

**SELL**



### TROUBLE BRUIN

**UCLA** reportedly had a \$19 million operating deficit in fiscal year 2019, and with AD Dan Guerrero retiring, the football team struggling under expensive coach Chip Kelly and the men's basketball program likely to miss the NCAA tournament again, it could take a wizard to turn things around in Westwood.

**HOLD**



### CREW CUTS

Rumors that the **Columbus Crew** were considering a name change and new color scheme as part of a rebrand ahead of its move into a new stadium in 2021 were met with significant pushback from fans, but it's clear the team will need to make some changes as it embarks on a new era.

## Two sites undecided in 12-year CFP deal; is Vegas feeling lucky?

The last two years of the College Football Playoff's 12-year contract with ESPN are still without a site for the championship matchup. Although the next four cities are selected, starting with Miami in 2021, the

BY MICHAEL  
SMITH

CFP is not expected to begin the bid process for the 2025 and 2026 games until at least next year. "We have not set a date for the next round, but I'm sure it will be in the next two years," CFP Executive Director Bill Hancock said.

The most recent round of site selection was completed in November 2017, which resulted in championship game hosting roles for Miami, Indianapolis, Los Angeles and Houston in 2021 through 2024.

### CFP championship games

Year	Site
2015	Dallas
2016	Phoenix
2017	Tampa
2018	Atlanta
2019	Santa Clara
2020	New Orleans
2021	Miami
2022	Indianapolis
2023	Los Angeles
2024	Houston
2025	TBD
2026	TBD

From its inception, the CFP made a commitment to move the title game to different markets. Hancock called it the "10 for 10," meaning the game would go to 10 different cities in its first 10 years. The 2024 game in Houston will be the 10th game in a different market. Four of the first 10 have been held in the Eastern time zone, three in the Central and two in the Pacific.

Now that the CFP has fulfilled the "10 for 10" commitment, the championship game could return to a previous site,



LSU celebrates the CFP championship on Jan. 13 in New Orleans, leaving six more years and sites to be selected for the 2025 and 2026 title games.

like Dallas or Atlanta, or it could continue to explore playing in new markets.

Las Vegas is the city most often mentioned among those markets that have not hosted the game before. Allegiant Stadium is scheduled to open this summer for the 2020 football season.

The Rose Bowl in Pasadena, which hosts semifinal games four times in this 12-year cycle, but not in 2025 or 2026, could be an option for the championship game, but it has gone back and forth on submitting a bid.

Other potential first-time hosts could include Jacksonville, Orlando or San Antonio. If the CFP wanted to follow the NFL's lead and visit a cold-weather market, it could look at Minneapolis and MetLife Stadium outside of New York.

A stadium must seat 65,000 to be considered.

## Passing grade: Firm happy with Superdome success

**THE COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF** in New Orleans included a presidential visit to a 44-year-old stadium in need of a makeover that had already hosted a Saints home playoff game a week before the Monday, Jan. 13, title game between LSU and Clemson.

For architectural firm Stewart, it was quite a test of its first experience running event and design at the CFP championship game. Tim Larkin, senior event director and associate vice president at the company's sports and events division, sounded like a seasoned veteran when asked how things went.

"There were a few complexities, but everything went fine," said Larkin, who is in his third year at North Carolina-based Stewart after a lengthy run at Populous. "The president's visit created a few more meetings for the CFP group, but we had a master plan that they could go by and we were really happy with how things turned out."

The event design business epitomizes a behind-the-scenes firm like Stewart. Larkin and his team are there to manage traffic flow, parking, media work rooms,

foot traffic and just about anything else that's considered back of house.

In an aging Mercedes-Benz Superdome, Stewart's challenges largely came down to creating enough space to accommodate the CFP's needs for media work rooms and hospitality spaces. That entailed converting storage space into usable areas. Contents from those massive storage areas were moved across the street into Smoothie King Center.

That's just an example of the work behind the scenes that most of the 76,885 people inside the Superdome for LSU's 42-25 win over Clemson never noticed.

Larkin was in Miami a few days prior to the Super Bowl last week, walking Hard Rock Stadium in anticipation of performing the same duties for the CFP next year when the championship game goes to Miami Gardens, though a deal with Stewart is not yet finalized.

"We hope to be working through an agreement very soon," Larkin said. — **M.S.**





**Greg McElroy** (left) and **Steve Levy** will be the top booth team for XFL coverage on ABC/ESPN.

“The same way you see weather on a telecast and people talk about that, you’ll now see wagering.”

ESPN coordinating producer Bill Bonnell, who worked on the XFL’s first iteration, said that during the scrimmage between DC and the Seattle Dragons he had what he described as 10 “wow moments.”

“It had to do with access and it had to do with audio and sound — being able to listen in to conversations and play calling,” he said. “There are a lot of elements that could potentially be groundbreaking. For a football fan or a football viewer, it’s going to be interesting.”

By the same token, both ESPN and Fox executives insist their telecasts will not be filled with gimmicks.

“We still want it to look like big-time professional football,” Zager said. “One thing we don’t want is people to turn on the XFL and say that it looks too different and isn’t what they’re used to seeing on Saturday or Sunday in the fall. You walk a really fine line in terms of making it unique coverage and making sure we are giving people what they are used to seeing and they’re comfortable seeing in a football game.”

Markman agreed. “These are cool innovations, but they are not gimmicks,” he said. “This is not the XFL that people remember from the first iteration. This is going to be serious football broadcasting for us.”

To keep its telecast fresh, Fox made sure that its production crews and on-air announcers had not worked with each other previously, mixing its NFL crews with college crews. Fox’s top booth will have NFL studio host Curt Menefee and college football analyst Joel Klatt. The truck will feature its top NFL director in Rich Russo and its top college football producer in Chuck McDonald.

“We didn’t want them to rest and say that we’d do the same NFL show or same college football show that we’ve done,” Zager said. “We wanted everybody to be a little uncomfortable and push themselves and know that it’s going to be new and different from something that they’ve done in the past. ... We aren’t just moving a generic football broadcast over to the XFL. That was something that we put a lot of thought in.”

Bonnell said he was proud of the production enhancements from the first XFL, something he calls “one of the most exciting projects that I can remember.”

He said this year’s version already has learned from the mistakes of the first one.

“One of the mistakes that we made is that we looked at it first as a television show,” Bonnell said. “It’s hard not to look at it as a television show when you had a marketing genius in Vince McMahon and a legendary producer in Dick Ebersol.

The very first thing Vince learned is that we had to put a football league together first. That’s what they’ve done right this time around.

“We know how to televise football. That’s what I do all year round. That’s what Fox does. The XFL gets that. They know that we know how to cover football. They need to put a football product on the field first. This time around, they’re going to be able to do that.”

# XFL coverage will feature audio breakthroughs

**DURING AN XFL SCRIMMAGE** in Houston last month that was being covered by ESPN, referees ejected a defensive player from the DC Defenders for an overly aggressive hit. As the player walked off the field, one of ESPN’s sideline reporters ran up to him to conduct an interview before he went into the locker room.

During another scrimmage, Fox’s booth announcers stayed quiet on a third down to eavesdrop on real-time communication between Los Angeles Wildcats coach Winston Moss and quarterback Josh Johnson.

BY JOHN  
OURAND

When the XFL launches on Saturday with games on ABC and Fox, producers from both networks insist they will cover the league’s games much like they cover every other football telecast. But viewers will notice new production elements almost immediately.

The 2001 version of the XFL led to several production breakthroughs in video, from Skycam footage to on-field cameras.

This year’s version of the XFL will lead to several production breakthroughs in audio, network executives predicted. Telecasts will have much more access to players and coaches, and the sounds of the game will be amplified.

“The XFL has basically called themselves the league of ‘yes’ to us,” said Seth Markman, ESPN’s vice president of production. “There hasn’t been one idea that we’ve come to the league with that they’ve said no to.”

Networks will interview players and coaches on the sidelines immediately after touchdowns or

turnovers. They will have cameras in the replay review booths and will be able to interview the replay review official immediately after he makes a decision.

For Fox, these added elements are similar to its NASCAR productions, where viewers can hear drivers talking to their pit crews during races.

“Instead of a staged interview at the end of the first or third quarter or during halftime, we can make it much more organic and a natural part of the broadcast,” said Brad Zager, Fox Sports executive producer, executive vice president and head of production and operations. “They just scored a huge touchdown, of course you’re going to hear from the quarterback, and of course you’re going to hear from the coach.”

On its telecasts, Fox will embrace gambling much more than a typical NFL or college football telecast.

“We’ll show lines — over-under and point spread — before the kickoff of every game,” Zager said.



The control room will have unique audio access such as sideline interviews with coaches and players.



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# THE INSIDERS

## SPORTS MEDIA

# Claygate adds Granik and his deep media ties



BY JOHN OURAND

**S**PORTS MEDIA CONSULTANT David Sternberg has partnered with former Turner Sports executive Dan Granik to expand his consultancy business, Claygate Advisors, to two consultants.

At the end of the year, Granik, the son of former NBA Deputy Commissioner Russ Granik, left his job at WarnerMedia where, most recently, he was vice president of sports rights acquisitions and business development for Latin America.

Granik, who has already started working with Sternberg, will remain in Atlanta; Sternberg will continue to be based in Westport, Conn., about an hour north of New York City.

The two met in late 2017 when Sternberg was representing the National Lacrosse League's media rights and wound up cutting a three-year streaming deal with Granik that paid the league a rights fee for the first time.

Sternberg, a former Fox executive, had set up his own shop and was working by himself since 2015, which is when he returned to the U.S. after a stint with Manchester United. The NLL was one of Sternberg's first clients, hired by Commissioner Nick Sakiewicz to put the league on a path to collect a rights fee. In previous years, the NLL had been using time-buys to get on U.S. and Canadian television — deals that left it with little promotional support and low TV ratings.

"When Nick hired me in 2016 to work with

the league, it was with a clear mandate to make it a digital-first property," Sternberg said. "For a few years, we set up and ran on our own OTT platform, really as kind of a beta test and sold some subscriptions. We determined that there was a market of fans — both in the U.S. and Canada — that loved this game and were willing to pay for it."

Sternberg took that data into the market and set up a tender process for the NLL's national media rights. Granik, who had recently started running Turner Sports' rights acquisitions group, was interested in the rights for his company's streaming service, B/R Live.

"It seemed to make a lot of sense for what we were trying to build at Bleacher Report at the time," Granik said. "And we could tie in a lot of real estate to sell from the Turner Sports sponsorship sales perspective."

After announcing the deal in 2018, WarnerMedia took over Turner's parent Time Warner and Granik moved from the rights acquisition group to the Latin America group.

He eventually decided he needed a change. "I just felt like I had to go and try something else out," he said.

Granik told Sternberg he was looking to leave the company by the end of the year. Sternberg was intrigued and was already looking into ways to expand his consultancy business.

"It was pretty evident to me that with Dan and his network of relationships and his experience, there would be an opportunity to meaningfully grow the scope and the scale of what I've been doing on my own," Sternberg said. "I've had a steady flow of long-term client engagements over the last four years, but I was basically maxed out. Teaming up with Dan and adding his brain power and expertise will allow us on a basic level just to do more work."

With Granik on board, Sternberg identified three areas where he

wants to grow:

■ He already works with the American Flag Football League and World Team Tennis, and he wants to continue to work with emerging properties.

■ He wants to expand his business into Latin America, either with Latin companies that want to get into the U.S. market or U.S. companies that want to get into Latin America. "Dan has fresh experience in the region from the work that he's done the last couple of years with Turner," Sternberg said.

■ He wants to get a foothold in what he described as "Tier 1 professional leagues and franchises here in the U.S." Sternberg: "We obviously know that's a competitive field with a number of participants in it now, but we think we can bring unique perspectives given the experience we've had in the OTT and interactive consumer space."

To this end, Sternberg will rely on Granik's relationships that he developed during his eight-year stint with Turner Sports.

"Dan has very deep and long-standing relationships with the NBA, which is something I haven't really had," Sternberg said. "It's a tremendous door opener for us to work in that space with the league and its teams."

*John Ourand can be reached at [jourand@sportsbusinessjournal.com](mailto:jourand@sportsbusinessjournal.com). Follow him on Twitter @Ourand\_SBJ and read his twice-weekly newsletter.*



Dan Granik (left) and David Sternberg met during media rights talks for the National Lacrosse League.



## THE INSIDERS



**Roosevelt Barnes** (left) will rep Alabama's **Shyheim Carter** and **Henry Ruggs III** with his son **Jovan Barnes**.

### LABOR AND AGENTS

## ISE builds for NFL draft, free agency highlighted by Alabama speedster

**I**NDEPENDENT SPORTS & ENTERTAINMENT is representing several high-profile NFL free agents, including Giants defensive end **Leonard Williams**, and a larger than usual class of NFL draft prospects, including speedy Alabama wide receiver **Henry Ruggs III**.

Ruggs is one of several wide receivers expected to be selected in the first round of the draft in April, but he may be the fastest, as he was clocked at 4.25 seconds running the 40-yard dash at Alabama's pro day last year. That's a shade over the 4.22 NFL Combine 40-yard dash record posted by Cincinnati Bengals wide receiver **John Ross** in 2017.

"He'll break the record," said **Roosevelt Barnes**, ISE Football president. "He is one of the the most explosive guys I've ever been around."

ISE is also representing safety **Shyheim Carter** of Alabama; cornerback **Cameron Dantzler** and wide receiver **Stephen Guidry**, both from Mississippi State; Vanderbilt tight end **Jared Pinkney**;

Michigan guard **Michael Onwenu**; Iowa defensive tackle **Cedrick Lattimore**; and Michigan State wide receiver **Cody White**.

Roosevelt Barnes and his son, **Jovan Barnes**, are representing the players. **Austin Parker**, who became certified by the NFLPA last year and is the son of the late NFL agent **Eugene Parker**, is assisting.

It is the largest draft class the firm has signed since Eugene Parker passed away in 2016, Jovan Barnes said.

Eugene Parker and Roosevelt Barnes grew up together in Fort Wayne, Ind., playing sports. Barnes went on to become a linebacker at Purdue, and when he was drafted into the NFL in 1982, Parker became an agent and represented Barnes as his first client.

When Barnes retired from playing in 1985, he joined Parker as an agent and

together they co-represented many great NFL players including cornerback **Deion Sanders**, offensive tackle **Walter Jones**, linebacker **Derrick Brooks**, cornerback/safety **Rod Woodson** and running back

**Emmitt Smith**.

The agent business is cutthroat and when Parker died unexpectedly in 2016 after a short battle with kidney cancer, other agencies used it against ISE in recruiting.

"You know in this business, unfortunately, it's a dog-eat-dog business, and when people see that kind of opening, they take advantage of it and we had to fight through that," Jovan Barnes said. "But now I think we are taking it in stride and trying to keep that momentum going and not just with the draft class. We have a great free-agent class as well."

In addition to Williams, ISE is representing several other players who will be unrestricted free agents if they are not tagged, including Rams outside linebacker **Dante Fowler Jr.**, Eagles wide receiver **Nelson Agholor**, Jets offensive tackle **Kelvin Beachum**, free agent wide receiver **Bennie Fowler** and Las Vegas Raiders running back **Rod Smith**.

Roosevelt and Jovan Barnes are representing the players and Austin Parker is assisting, but he is especially involved with Agholor.

Jovan was NFLPA-certified in 2013. He said that when Eugene Parker passed away, it was tough for both the Parker family and for his father, but they learned from it. "I think my father and I got closer, because he lost his best friend," he said.

Roosevelt, meanwhile, said he is rejuvenated to be working with his son and Eugene's son, as they had often talked about building something for their kids. "Working with Jovan and working with Austin Parker is what we talked about," Roosevelt said. "When we first started out in this business we wanted to pass our business on to our kids."

■ **SPORTSTRUST SIGNS NFL PROSPECTS:** SportsTrust Advisors has signed several players for representation in the NFL draft, including Florida running back **Lamical Perine**, the Orange Bowl MVP.

The agency also signed Auburn defensive end **Nick Coe**, Colorado offensive lineman **Arlington Hambricht**, LSU defensive end **Rashard Lawrence**, Miami wide receiver **K.J. Osborn**, Mississippi State safety **Brian Cole**, Ohio State wide receiver **Binjamin Victor**, South Carolina running back **Rico Dowdle** and Wisconsin wide receiver **Quintez Cephus**. Agents **Pat Dye Jr.**, **Ben Setas** and **Mitchell Moor** are representing the players.

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BY LIZ MULLEN

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# ▶ PORTFOLIO THE SIT DOWN



## Jeron Smith: Content, marketing never stop

From Nike to the White House to Stephen Curry's Unanimous Media, the executive and digital strategist spoke at SBJ's Sports Media & Technology conference about choices, ambition, brand and being hungry, not thirsty.

**I ALWAYS DID THINK** I was going to be in the business of sport. I interned at Nike during my junior year of college, and I could not believe they pay people to do stuff like that. I was like, "I would do this for free. I might actually pay Nike to be a part of some of this stuff."

**Funny story, I'm not super proud of this story ...** but after my [Nike] internship they had an individual, he was like, "Hey, internship went great, we would love to help you kind of get a job here." I was like, "That sounds cool. I appreciate the kind words, but I think I got a shot at going to the NBA so let's table that conversation." ... And he looked at me like I was crazy, and I always say I spent the next 3 1/2 years trying to get back into Nike.

**Basketball never stops. ...** It was really a function of being young at the company and kind of having that young energy but not necessarily understanding the process parameters. ... It was the NBA lockout, and the advertising team had produced a brief around what our brand message was going to be around that time. And I'm reading the brief and it's kind of giving the background and it's like, "Hey, you know, the game continues, the game doesn't stop, basketball never stops." I'm like, "Oh that's it. It's basketball never stops."

**I learned that the consumer decides.** The consumer is the ultimate trump card. Everything starts with the consumer. ... So that was like the most foundational pillar at Nike was everything started with consumer insights.

**I was about 30.** And for someone at that juncture in my career where I think most people in the room could identify, you

work your whole career to get to this plateau. ... So I felt like I worked my whole career to get to that point and to then make a U-turn, take a deviation and cut that two and a half times, to go into a short-term gig [at the White House Office of Digital Strategy],

one that you know you're going to lose your job at the end of the [Obama] administration. ... At Nike I felt like I had been there long enough where anything I really needed to get done I could get done, and I was giving up that familiarity. So that was tough.

**I'm passionate about digital strategy, kind of brand marketing, and that expertise, that function.** To me, this was the ultimate challenge in applying that skill set in an environment that I had never been a part of previously.

**I never got a chance to play [basketball with President Barack Obama].** I used to

play with Obama's chief of staff, Denis McDonough, often on the White House court.

**Stephen [Curry] used to say he hated the word brand.** Right. And I understood it. I understood why he'd say that. And ultimate-

ly you hear the word, probably one of the most overused words in marketing is authenticity, but it's probably overused because it's so pertinent to any type of kind of brand marketing exercise. ... And authenticity was the key. When you think about who he is and what he stands for, it was always being kind of authentic to his foundation and his pillars. And that's kind of carried over into what we're doing with Unanimous.

**Jeron Smith's** hopes for an NBA career didn't work out, but he has found a career path through change and taking chances.

**Family is not only important to [Curry], but kind of everybody that works** in the ecosystem, and when you start to look at the types of

things Unanimous is doing in the media space, you'll see family and kind of people bringing people together as a through line.

**When I think about athletes in the media space,** kind of the first thing is that every athlete is a media company in their own right. An athlete is on social media by definition, they're a media company. They are creating and producing content for a large audience and sometimes that content is monetized.

**The biggest thing I've learned working in Hollywood is that there's an incredibly wide gap between getting a yes and getting something on air.** So the development process is long, it's vast, and it takes awhile to create a great product.

**Read. I would say consume, consume, consume. ...** Consuming as much information as possible, understanding the key players, current trends, what's happening in the industry and kind of understanding everything.

**I always say be hungry, not thirsty. I think when I was young trying to get into the industry,** I definitely fell into the thirsty bucket. Probably a little too persistent, too many phone calls, not enough strategy. ... More strategy is definitely pertinent and there's nothing

wrong with being hungry and really wanting it, but being thirsty is maybe not the best strategy. ... The first question I always ask is, "What can I do for you? How can I help?"

### Jeron Smith

■ **LOCATION:** San Francisco

■ **BACKGROUND:** Co-founder and CEO, Unanimous Media (with Stephen Curry); former CMO, SC30 Inc.; former deputy director of digital strategy, White House; various positions at Nike.

■ **EDUCATION:** Georgetown University, Masters, SIM; Columbia University, MS, Digital Resource Management; Howard University, bachelors of business administration.

■ **COLLEGE BASKETBALL:** Played point guard at Howard.



## THE STORY **FRANCHISE FOCUS**



# Austin City Limitless

BY BILL KING

The biggest metro area in the country without a major pro team is about to shed that label. One year from its MLS debut, the leaders of Austin FC are planning a Texas-sized impact.

Courtesy of Austin FC





**“Part of being a successful team off the field is being in the top quartile ... of key business metrics. And we’re in that direction.”**

Majority owner **Anthony Precourt** (center) was joined by four of his six co-owners — **Marius Haas**, Oscar-winning actor **Matthew McConaughey**, **Eddie Margain** and **Bryan Sheffield** — at an event last summer.

**T**HE 360-DEGREE, theater-in-the-round presentation that greets prospective season-ticket buyers at the offices of Austin FC includes the requisite images of a city proud of its richly textured identity: A familiar skyline, statues of music icons Stevie Ray Vaughn and Willie Nelson, and a 500-year-old oak tree steeped in Texas lore.

As the clip draws to its close, the unmistakable voice of one of Austin’s more prominent celebrity residents, Oscar-winning actor Matthew McConaughey, sets an emotional hook.

“We celebrate together, sing together, bleed bright verde together,” says McConaughey, one of six Austin locals who own minority stakes in the MLS expansion franchise. “And in the spring of 2021, it will be ours, right here, in Austin.”

***“Estamos listo.”  
We are ready.***

Seated at a long conference table one day last fall, majority owner Anthony Precourt and two of his

senior executives — team president Andy Loughnane and Dave Greeley, president of parent company Two Oak Ventures — ticked off one business win after another in support of that very contention.

One year after landing the club and one year away from playing its first MLS match, Austin FC has collected upward of 39,000 deposits of \$50 to \$2,000 for season seats in an under-construction stadium that will hold 20,500. All 27 of its suites are leased, at prices expected to set new highs for the league. Loge boxes topping out at more than \$40,000 annually also are spoken for, with twice as many deposits collected as there are boxes. About 400 premium field-level seats priced similarly to some NBA courtside seats also are gone.

They’ve broken ground on a \$45 million training facility, titled by St. David’s HealthCare. And they’ve locked down a soon-to-be announced jersey sponsorship with a young, Austin-based company that a source said will rank in the top tier of MLS, which would place it north of \$4 million annually.

They’ve even turned down what Loughnane called an “extremely generous” 10-year, \$35 million stadium naming-rights offer that would rank in the league’s top 10, confident that the market will yield an even higher price.

The significance of this jackrabbit start is not lost on Precourt. He had endured six trying seasons as owner of the Columbus Crew, which had fallen far behind the revenue pace of other clubs by the time he sold it in an MLS-arranged deal in 2018, partly in exchange for an expansion team in Austin.

In Austin, Precourt sees a market poised to deliver at levels Columbus never approached. The St. David’s HealthCare deal, for instance, delivers more contractually obligated income than Columbus could count on from its stadium, training facility, jersey and suite deals combined.

“We aspire to be a successful team on the field and off the field, and part of being a successful team off the field is being in the top quartile — if not the top one, two, three — in the way of key business metrics,” said Precourt, who stressed that balancing that with a sizable swath of more affordable seats would be crucial if the club is to be broadly embraced in Austin. “And we’re in that direction. The trajectory is strong for us.”



With a metro population of 2.23 million, Austin already is larger than 14 major pro sports markets, including two — Cleveland and Kansas City — that have three teams and eight that have two. Authentically hip and terminally cool, it’s been the nation’s fastest growing major metro area for each of the past eight years, with demos to die for, particularly considering the flavor profile of the suddenly trendy MLS. Austin is a magnet for young, well-educated talent and the tech companies hoping to hire them. Along with the largest percentage of millennials of any major U.S. market (20.6%), it is 35% Hispanic, with both shares expected to continue increasing.

Austin is 80 miles from the nearest NBA team (the San Antonio Spurs), 165 miles from the nearest NFL or MLB team (the Houston Texans and Astros, respectively) and 195 miles from the nearest NHL team (the Dallas Stars). And yet few would have pegged it as a sure thing.

For all its growth, Austin is the nation’s 40th-ranked TV market, which will make it the smallest in MLS and sixth smallest in major pro sports, ahead of only Jacksonville, Oklahoma City, New Orleans, Memphis, Buffalo and Green Bay. Yes, it has a well-paid millennial work force, but its metro area is home to only two Fortune 500 companies, Dell and Whole Foods, a concern for those charged with selling sponsorships and suites.

And then there is the 10-gallon shadow cast by the University of Texas, which with revenue of \$219 million in 2018 maintained its standing as the nation’s highest grossing college athletic program. A football team that draws 97,000 fans per game and a basketball team set to move into a new \$330 million arena in 2022 may not be pro, but they’re certainly major.

You would think the specter of UT would have given Precourt considerable pause. One of the struggles in Columbus was competition, not only from an NHL franchise but also the culturally dominant Ohio State athletic program. But there are notable differences. A typical Ohio State football game draws a Nielsen rating in the 40s in Columbus. In Austin, last season’s colossal Texas-LSU game drew a 28.3 local rating, making it the most watched college football game in the market since 2009.

As the president of Heritage Title and the founder of the chamber of commerce’s economic development engine, Gary Farmer knows the business community and climate well. As a UT alum, he’s also both aware and supportive of the place held by Longhorn sports.

Farmer likes to tell the story of an Austin friend who for years has had seats behind the broadcast table for UT basketball. The friend is a loyal Texas A&M alum, yet he still manages to be “UT proud” as an Austin resident, Farmer said.

“There’s a bunch of people like that,” said Farmer. “It’s what we had, and therefore we embraced it. ... By default, that was our pro team. That’s who we rooted for. And we always will. But we’re alums.”

Hired by Major League Soccer in 2016 to assess the viability of Austin as an MLS market, advisory firm CAA ICON surveyed 3,500 residents and conducted interviews with 35 potential sponsors, finding a market not as beholden to UT as first believed.

“What was interesting in the case of Austin is that, because the market has been growing so fast, there’s a large portion of the population that has little or no affiliation with UT, which is a significant

#### TO-DO LIST

##### Winter 2020

Jersey deal expected to be announced

##### Mid-2020

Stadium naming rights announced

##### Mid-2020

Groundbreaking for training facility

##### Fall 2020

Jersey unveiling

##### Fall 2020

MLS expansion draft

##### Spring 2021

First MLS match

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18



# THE STORY FRANCHISE FOCUS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

factor,” said Dan Barrett, executive vice president of CAA ICON. “There’s a lot of money being spent at UT for tickets and premium seating and sponsorship. There’s certainly competition there. But there is a significant portion of the resident base that really doesn’t have much of an affiliation with UT.”

It helps too that Texas doesn’t have a men’s soccer program. Precourt’s approach is another advantage. He relied heavily on local advisers, including Farmer and others with close ties to UT.

He also brought UT leaders into the conversation early, making it clear that he hoped to collaborate and co-promote with the school’s athletics program, not compete with it.

“There’s opportunity for all now in Austin,” Precourt said. “It’s gotten to be a much bigger tent. There’s room for us to be successful alongside what the university of Texas means to the state and city.”

Another perceived barrier for Austin is its dearth of corporate headquarters. When MLS began its look at the market four years ago, it was home to only one Fortune 1000 employer, making it more comparable to Birmingham or New Orleans in that regard than fellow MLS markets like Nashville, Kansas City or even Columbus.

But Dell and Whole Foods are not the area’s only large employers. The tech sector is especially prominent. Apple recently broke ground on a \$1 billion, 3-million-square-foot campus that will house 5,000 employees, with the potential to grow to 15,000. It already has about 7,000 employees in Austin. Facebook, Amazon, Google and Indeed each have at least 1,000 workers in Austin.

Even those who are high on MLS’s chances in Austin concede that, for a team hoping to sell sponsorships and suites, a company having a large workforce in a city is not the same as it having its headquarters there. Those companies often are less committed to supporting the local community. They also may be less likely to use the local teams as a marketing vehicle.

Farmer has heard similar concerns about Austin. One of his first forays into economic development was in 1995, when he spearheaded a \$3.5 million capital campaign for the Chamber of Commerce. He was told that his outreach should focus on a classic fundraising pyramid; an equilateral triangle topped by a single contribution of \$500,000, followed by two of \$250,000 and five of \$100,000, and spreading out from there.

The campaign exceeded its goal of \$4.5 million without collecting more than \$125,000 from any one company.

“I told the professional fundraisers, ‘I’m not sure of my geometry, but we’re not an equilateral triangle in Austin,’” Farmer said. “We’re more isosceles. Or obtuse. I’m not sure. But our triangle is not the traditional equilateral triangle.”

“You can take that analogy and relate it here. We have great corporate participation in this town. These companies care about the community in which they live. They will support this.”



Precourt would rather not focus on the machinations that brought him to Austin. But they must be understood to appreciate the way he views this op-

**RIGHT:** The **Austin Anthem supporters group** and its several thousand members had been banging the drum for a team long before MLS officially granted the city an expansion franchise last year.

**BELOW:** The yet-to-be-named stadium being built in the northern part of the city will seat 20,500 when it debuts in the spring of 2021.

**FAR RIGHT:** **St. David’s Performance Center**, which is being constructed in Parmer Innovation Center, will house the team’s training facility and its academy clubs and will open in spring 2021.



**“This gives everybody something to get behind. I think that’s probably why it caught fire. Everybody wanted some hometown thing to yell for.”**

portunity.

He bought the Crew from Hunt Sports Group in 2013 for a then league record \$68 million, a price in line with MLS expansion fees at the time. The club drew poorly at an outdated stadium. Precourt wanted and received an understanding that if he couldn’t get the franchise turned around, he could explore a move to Austin, a city he knew well for its cultural and economic potential.

By all indications, Precourt and his staff gave

Columbus a legitimate go. They renovated the training facility, put millions into the stadium, re-branded the team, hired a coach in Gregg Berhalter who now heads the U.S. men’s national soccer team and made the playoffs in four of five seasons. In 2015, they won the Eastern Conference and hosted the MLS Cup, which they lost to Portland.

“The momentum was palpable,” Precourt said. “Everyone was feeling really good. Like, we’ve saved the Crew. We’re going to stay here and be successful.”

Sensing that the winds had finally shifted, Crew management began a 15-month search for a jersey sponsor, asking \$3 million annually, a price in line with similar MLS clubs. Precourt viewed it as the first step toward establishing the credibility he’d need to invest in a new stadium.



# WHAT IS AVAXHOME?



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It didn't go well.

In a market home to a dozen Fortune 1000 companies, the Crew fell short of its asking price by 40%. It was the last straw for Precourt. Done putting money into a club that remained at the bottom of the MLS in all commercial metrics, he turned his attention south.

"At some point we had to double our business in Columbus just to strive for mediocrity," Loughnane said. "And I can tell you, striving for mediocrity is not in our DNA."



Standing at a floor-to-ceiling window at his law firm's downtown offices, the real estate attorney who helped Precourt navigate the wiles of Austin politics pointed to a cluster of ballfields across a winding river that, under different cir-

cumstances, might have emerged as a viable location for a soccer stadium. Swaths of land like this are hard to come by here, in a city that jealously protects its parkland and places restrictions on construction that might block the view of the Texas State Capitol. But Richard Suttle is known for shepherding tricky development deals through Austin's rocky terrain.

He was hired by MLS to lobby for a soccer stadium there, eventually landing a deal at a site that Austin sensibilities would allow and that Austin politicians could support. The land had sat fallow for 20 years, not in the downtown core that MLS generally prefers but still well-positioned in an area about 20 minutes north that is emerging as a second commercial and residential hub, accessible by both road and rail and increasingly affluent.

By the reckoning of city leaders and Austin FC executives, the location should work out fine for both the community and the club.

"We're an adolescent city, just sort of awkward and goofy," said Suttle. "But we're turning into a big city and a big city needs a sports team. Not everybody is a UT fan. This gives everybody something to get behind. I think that's probably why it caught fire. Everybody wanted some hometown thing to yell for."

In the recurring narrative that has played out in U.S. cities for decades, team owners have staked out downtown stadium and arena sites as if they were birthrights. In the case of expansion, a league's itemized request list can take on the tone of a ransom notes. You want to add the distinction of being a "major league city" to your city's sizzle reel? This is what it costs.

That is not how the story was going to play out in Austin.

Austin has minor league baseball, sort of, in the form of the Class AA Round Rock Express, 45 min-

utes away. It has minor league hockey, sort of, in the form of the AHL Texas Stars, in Cedar Park, 45 minutes away. Both would have preferred Austin proper, but got nowhere when they sought stadium funding.

By all accounts, the fact that MLS was major league didn't alter that calculus one bit.

"I don't think this is a city that felt like it needed

a team to complete itself or prove itself, because it's a city that doesn't really feel the need to do either of those things," said Austin Mayor Steve Adler, whose willingness to support even a modest land contribution to attract a team was seized upon by his opponents when he ran for reelection. "The city was not going to offer to finance a stadium for the

same reason that when all the cities in the country were competing for Amazon, Austin didn't submit any incentives. That's just not who we are."

Landing an MLS club would present a similar challenge that would play out publicly. Precourt moved on from the parkland near the river to another site that was shot down, and then another. Eventually, he shifted to asking which sites actually might be in play. When Adler suggested a site well north of downtown, Precourt initially was skeptical. But as Adler and others pitched it, pointing to the density of the live-work-play development that they envisioned as a second urban hub, the owner warmed to the idea.

"The question was always, could you figure out a way to do it that just didn't needlessly run afoul of the culture and the spirit and soul of this place?" Adler said. "And I believed we'd be able to find that, so long as An-

thony was willing to do that, which always seemed to be pending on how badly he wanted to be here.

"My sense was that this was really where he wanted to set up a team."

Navigating a 20-minute

drive up the expressway from downtown Austin to the stadium site, Greeley thought back to the earliest meetings he had as he worked quietly to assess both the market and its appetite for MLS on behalf of Precourt.

Formerly CMO of the Chicago Bears and president of the Chicago Fire, Greeley was hired by Precourt as an adviser when he owned the Crew. Greeley was confident in Austin as a market. He felt sure that MLS would allow Precourt to navigate his way there. What was unclear was whether they could strike a deal to build a stadium.

"Part of getting the deal done in Austin, we were advised early, is that you need to understand that Austin is the coolest kid in town," said Greeley, who said Two Oak Ventures will pursue adjacent businesses and related real estate development. "Austin is an amazing city, but it's also kind of an arrogant city. They don't need you. They don't care

about you. So we adopted the mentality that everything we did was going to be from the ground up. We wanted the people of Austin to want us, but recognized that they didn't need us. And we needed to act in that way."

At the Austin FC offices, a stadium model reveals a series of innovations that appear to be ideal for

the quirky market, signature among them a winged canopy that is five times the size of the roof at FC Dallas and 2 ½ times as big as that of the Houston Dynamo, designed to help fans endure the Texas heat. An entry plaza sets up well for live music.

Along with the uber cool loge boxes and clubs and field seats priced to put Austin FC in the upper tier of MLS financially, the stadium features the requisite supporters area priced in line with the league average. As part of its lease, the club will distribute 1,000 free tickets per game to community organizations and price 200 tickets per game at \$20.

"We have aspirations to be a top club, commercially and competitively," Precourt said. "[But] you need to appeal to all walks of life in this city."

Suttle chuckled when asked what it is that makes Austin different; famously "weird," as it so proudly proclaims in its marketing materials. Represent-

## NEXT UP?

Austin's debut will make these the five largest U.S. metro areas without a major pro sports franchise:

City	Metro Area Pop. (Rank)	TV Households (Rank)
Norfolk	1,728,733 (37)	684,310 (42)
Providence	1,621,337 (38)	543,430 (56)
Richmond	1,306,172 (44)	555,630 (54)
Hartford	1,206,300 (33)	885,890 (33)
Birmingham	1,151,801 (44)	666,170 (44)



ing developers in a city inclined to chase them with torches, he has made a comfortable living from his understanding of it. But he struggles to explain it.

"Look at all the people that wanted an MLS team, and they couldn't get one," Suttle said. "Austin didn't even want it. Austin couldn't have cared less. They said, that'd be cool. And we'll help you, just like we'd help something else that's cool. We're not going to pay for it. We're not going to sell out for it. But we really want it.

"That's kind of how it ended up here. I think it's going to be great." ✖









# Back In Business, To Serve A Purpose

After walking away from her career as a top soccer executive, **MARLA MESSING** has returned to rejuvenate a different sport and show others how to make a comeback.

BY BEN FISCHER

**I**T'S ANOTHER PERFECT DAY at the Malibu Racquet Club, with blinding sunshine bouncing off the Pacific Ocean, burgers sizzling on the patio grill, and two of southern California's top 12-year-old tennis players battling through a tiebreaker on court No. 1.

But the score is unclear to Marla Messing when she turns her attention from a business conversation to the match. "This is something that needs to change in tennis: We need to figure out a better method for people walking up to a court and knowing exactly what the score is, right?" Messing said. "Otherwise, it's hard to watch."

Messing was critiquing her own tournament. On this November afternoon, she is in her 10th month as CEO of USTA Southern California, where she has been asked to rejuvenate a declining sport and lead the nonprofit into a massive new headquarters in Carson in 2021.

The entire two-day, 64-player tournament is her idea — a small, elite event for the upper crust of tennis kids, at an upscale club with all the trappings of a professional tournament. It's a nice scene, but

Messing isn't satisfied. Her boss, Chris Lewis, president of the board of USTA SoCal, says she keeps looking for ways to "move tennis forward" and "market the sport, not just run the sport."

Messing, 55, has already done a job like this on the world's biggest stage. By age 36, she had played an integral role in producing the 1994 FIFA World Cup in the United States, helped launch Major League Soccer and, in her biggest feat, led the triumphant 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup, which still holds the record for the highest average attendance for a women's-only sporting event in history.

But not long after the event's climactic conclusion in which the U.S. Women's National Team beat China before 90,000 fans in the Rose Bowl — and with her professional profile at its peak — she decided instead to step away. Aside from a two-month stint with a tech startup in late 1999, Messing spent the next 17 years as a stay-at-

## The Champions

This is the first installment in the series of profiles for the 2020 class of The Champions: Pioneers & Innovators in Sports Business. This year's honorees and the issues in which they will be featured are:

Date	Champion
<b>Feb. 3</b>	<b>Marla Messing</b>
Feb. 10	Tommie Smith
Feb. 17	Jim Delany
Feb. 24	Jon Spoelstra
March 2	Marvin Demoff
March 9	Jim Steeg

home mother to her three daughters while her then-husband, Brett Messing, worked in the financial industry. Though both the WNBA and the U.S. Olympic Committee came knocking about senior roles, Messing instead focused on her family. But with her children now grown, she's trying something that might be harder than selling 1.2 million tickets to a women's soccer event in the 1990s: relaunching a high-end executive career after an extended hiatus.

"I don't want to overstate this, so hopefully you'll modulate what I say, but there's a little part of me that wants to succeed

on behalf of all of those, let's say women, who step out of the work force to raise their family," Messing said. "It'd be nice to accomplish that, to have a good career after a period of not working, and to show people that yes, if you really want to do this, you

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22



## ► CHAMPIONS: MARLA MESSING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21  
can.”



After graduating from the University of Chicago Law School in 1989, Messing joined Latham & Watkins in Los Angeles. Her career in sports started in 1992 as a third-year associate, when she worked on a floor with just five other attorneys, including partner Alan Rothenberg, who also happened to be president of U.S. Soccer and the chairman of the 1994 World Cup organizing committee.

Both early risers, Messing, then 27, and Rothenberg, then 52, became friendly over 6 a.m. coffees in the winter months of '92. Around then, Rothenberg realized he needed help with his unpaid soccer duties. He put word out around the firm that he was looking for an administrative assistant. “Fairly low level,” he recalls. “She came into my office, with her typical forthrightness and moxie she had, and said, ‘I want to do this.’”

Within 18 months, Messing had earned her way onto the four-person management team. “It took me about five minutes after she got to the World Cup for me to promote her to chief of staff, and five minutes later, I realized she was even better than that, so she became executive vice president,” Rothenberg said. “She really was my go-to person for any project that didn’t fall into anyone’s portfolio.”

It was far from certain the U.S. could even effectively produce a men’s World Cup. Americans with real soccer business experience were rare, and at times, the project seemed to hang in the balance — with a ragtag group of young, unproven business minds in charge.

Messing’s first big project was the final draw in Las Vegas, in which teams would be chosen for their groups. She nailed it. Then there was ticketing. Messing secured help from M&M Mars to computerize records from local soccer associations across the country, turning those loose-leaf directories into valuable sales leads.

Sales ultimately went well, but distribution was in utter shambles just a few months before the Cup, recalls former U.S. Soccer Federation president



As CEO of the Women’s World Cup Organizing Committee in 1999, Messing led the event’s ground-breaking financial success.

Sunil Gulati, who became close friends with Messing in those harried days. Mailing was complicated by new venue-specific and team-specific packages that required new levels of coordination.

Rothenberg put Messing in charge, and she helped rent out an old bank in Century City, where they could securely process 3.5 million paper tickets for FedEx shipment. Gulati recalls walking into the bank to see Messing on the floor, literally surrounded by tickets that had a cash equivalent of \$275 million — nearly 80% of the committee’s \$350 million budget.

“If anyone knew what was going on at the time, and you were a ticket buyer, you’d have said ‘There is no freakin’ way I’m getting my tickets,’” Gulati said.

Messing started by getting the big orders off her plate — such as FIFA, other countries and sponsors — and then gradually whittled away at the smaller orders. Tickets got out on time, revenue started flowing, and by the time the USWNT hoisted the trophy, 3.5 million fans had witnessed the event.



In the aftermath of the successful '94 World Cup, Rothenberg asked Messing to stay on and help launch Major League Soccer. Despite the momentum from the World Cup, it was tough. The 1995 target date was delayed until 1996, and even when the league did kick off, success was no sure thing. The team charged with the launch never thought failure was likely, said Kathy Carter, now the CRO of Los Angeles 2028 and an early member of the MLS founding team.

“Outside of Alan and probably Randy (Bernstein), the truth is, not a lot of folks we had at the time had a tremendous amount of experience in sports,” Carter said. “Honestly, some entrepreneurial spirit is naiveté, and I think we had a healthy dose of

that.” With an established life in Los Angeles, Messing stayed in L.A. when MLS moved its offices to New York in 1996.

Even then, Messing was developing a reputation as a hard-driving closer. Carter said the 1999 World Cup depended on both a bold vision and that tenacity. “Sometimes people run into a wall, and they fall back, and Marla’s not that kind of person,” Carter said.

The first part of the U.S. Soccer plan — the audacious belief that women could fill American football stadiums — came out of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, when Rothenberg and Messing watched the USWNT win the gold medal in front of a robust crowd at

“Sometimes people run into a wall, and they fall back, and Marla’s not that kind of person.”

University of Georgia’s Sanford Stadium. They thought FIFA’s plans for the '99 World Cup were too small, confined to small stadiums in the northeast, and they pleaded with FIFA leadership in Switzerland for permission to go big.

FIFA said OK, but “That’s about all they did to support it,” says Rothenberg, who then tapped Messing to write a business plan. At his request, she became CEO of the Women’s World Cup Organizing Committee in January 1997.

FIFA and American journalists may have assumed there was more risk because it was women’s sports, but Rothenberg remembers they were confident because of the lessons learned from the '94 Cup. They just had to execute — and work around a pregnancy or two.

“I turned in the business plan to Alan on Tuesday, Nov. 5, 1996, and my first child was born on Thursday, Nov. 7,” Messing said.

### MARLA MESSING

**CEO, U.S. Tennis Association, Southern California, Feb. 2019-present**

#### Past roles:

- Consultant, LA Football Club, 2018
- VP/Executive director, Los Angeles 2024 bid committee, 2016-17
- President & CEO, 1999 FIFA Women’s World Cup, 1996-99
- SVP, Major League Soccer, 1995-96
- Executive Vice President, 1994 FIFA World Cup, 1992-94
- Associate, Latham & Watkins, 1989-92

■ **Born:** Chicago, 1964

■ **Education:** University of Michigan, 1986; University of Chicago Law School, 1989

■ **Lives:** Brentwood, Calif.

■ **Family:** Daughters Natalie, 23; Samantha, 21; Morgan 19.



The team Messing built also came together quickly.

"The way she staffed up that organizing committee is still a sight to behold," said Aaron Heifetz, the longtime USWNT publicist. "Everyone has a miss here or there, but for the most part it was a lot of great people, young women that had a foot in the game, so to speak."

Two years later, Messing was pregnant again. She attended the men's World Cup in France before a doctor "grounded" her, she recalls. On Aug. 13, she finally left work after midnight, with a planned C-section delivery the next day. She went into labor on the way home and her daughter Samantha was born.

Two weeks later, she was in Boston for a promotional event with the women's team. "I wanted to have a child in that time period, and I also didn't want to lose momentum on what we were doing," Messing said.

That promotional event was an inflection point. It was when Messing decided their big gamble

was going to pay off, and that there really was market demand and interest. Why? Because when she had asked Arn Tellem, then the agent for Nomar Garciaparra, if the Red Sox star shortstop would appear with the team, "He said yes. Immediately," Messing said. "That had never happened before. Even with the men's tournament, this was an uphill slog a lot of the time. But then it felt like maybe things were tipping." (It turned out to be an important day for Garciaparra, too. That was the day he met U.S. star Mia Hamm. The two married in 2003, have three children and are still together.)



In interviews, Messing's compatriots from this era tell the story of a young leader who was learning the softer side of business on the job. At the beginning, she had her enemies, said Gulati. She was young, a woman, extremely opinionated and rapidly rising in her

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

## MARLA MESSING ON ...

### Favorite memory from the 1994 World Cup:

"Once, Sunil [Gulati], Alan [Rothenberg], Alan's wife Georgine and I took the helicopter from Boston to Giants Stadium so we could attend the next match. There was a lot of crazy stuff like that. It's such a cliché, but the best thing about those events, and the work in that 10-year period, were the people that I got to know, and became friends with: Richard Motzkin, Randy Bernstein, Ivan Gazidis, Mark Abbott, Kathy Carter ... and I'm probably forgetting some names. We were all mentored by Alan, and I'm really proud and very appreciative of being part of that group."

### Favorite memory from the 1999 Women's World Cup:

"It had to be when Sepp Blatter and FIFA asked me to go down on the field with Sepp to hand out medals and the Women's World Cup trophy. That was not something I expected to do. It was a huge honor, and incredibly exciting way to cap off that event. I think at that point, FIFA had an appreciation for the tremendous amount of effort that went into it, and that was their

way of thanking me for what we'd done."

### Advice for someone re-entering the professional world after a family hiatus:

"I think you've just got to put yourself out there. You've got to get as current as you can, and put yourself out there, and keep making calls and sending emails, and talking to as many people as you can."

### What did you miss most about work life while you were with your family?

"Honestly, I was pretty busy in those years with my kids, I was very engaged with their school as a trustee, so I don't think I missed much. It was really when these life-changing events [in 2016], especially my kids going off to college, and my days being much more available, that I started to want to do something more interesting than just get up, go for a run and walk the dogs. But I think during most of those years, I wasn't really missing it. I was pretty happy with that life I'd carved out, as a busy stay-at-home mom."

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**MARLA MESSING**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

CHAMPION PIONEER INNOVATOR

*"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."*

*Pres. John Quincy Adams*





## ► CHAMPIONS: MARLA MESSING



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

boss' esteem. "Marla and I had some wars, some major battles Alan had to mediate," Gulati said. "She could be tough, and I came to respect how she did it." Rothenberg appreciated it, but he said "she had a capacity for being brutally honest, sometimes for her sake to a fault."

But those edges had apparently softened by the late 1990s. Kathryn Schloessman, president and CEO of the L.A. Sports & Entertainment Commission, started in 1997 and recalls being intimidated by Messing's rapid ascent and powerful presence. But she was disarmed. "She's a nice person and she doesn't come across as a know-it-all. She wants to be helpful," Schloessman said.

The '99 Cup ended with a \$4 million surplus on a \$30 million budget, and the senior staff got bonuses. Heifetz remembers Messing suggesting he buy a new car. "I drove a 1984 Rabbit GTI for the entire time — it was the car I had in college," he said. Marla didn't just use the bonus as one last chance to mock his ride; she went with him to Santa Monica Toyota and did the negotiating for him when he bought a brand new Toyota 4Runner.

"It was hard when you've never bought a car before; these guys will do anything to pull one over on you," Heifetz said. "I still thank her for that."

Broadband Sports to help develop its marketing plan but left after a couple of months. In 2001, she interviewed for the vacant top job at the U.S. Olympic Committee but didn't get the post.

There was no need to work, though, and her brief break turned into a lengthy hiatus. She poured her energy into her daughters — Natalie, now 23; Samantha, 21; and Morgan, 19 — and their elite private institution, Brentwood School. She served nine years as a volunteer trustee, including terms as vice chair and chair of the advancement committee. "That is a tough crowd," said Andy Knox, founder of Chelsea Partners, the search firm that placed her in the USTA SoCal job.



When Messing walked away from the business world, there were no smartphones. Social media was virtually unheard of. Big data was in its infancy.

With one daughter off to college and newly separated from her husband after 26 years of marriage, Messing decided in 2016 to jump back in. She applied for a vice president position with the L.A. 2024 Olympic bid committee, connected with bid CEO Gene Sykes through a mutual acquaintance and

know how to get my laptop unsecured from the desktop; I didn't even know it would come off."

Still, her business acumen was as sharp as ever, so it was no surprise that Messing blossomed in the role. She organized a group of influential California technology leaders to support the bid, and wrote plans designed to portray the L.A. plan as especially technologically savvy and accommodat-

Messing's re-entry into the workforce has been cushioned by her boundless work ethic and trademark confidence.

ing for athletes, both efforts to sway IOC members to vote for L.A. over Paris. After LA24 agreed to accept the 2028 Games and transitioned to an organizing committee, Messing left for a consulting role with LAFC and FC Barcelona about developing a women's club team in Los Angeles under the Barcelona brand. It stalled out, but it paved the way for the tennis position.

Knox proposed Messing for the USTA section job. While her long break from the professional world was a complicating factor, her consistent success on a range of high-stakes projects shows a resilience and competence that doesn't fade, he said.

"She's been associated with organizations and people that are exceptionally successful, have very high standards and are exceptionally demanding," Knox said. "So we know Marla doesn't wilt under pressure, and that she's up to the task. ... Also, there was a lot of enthusiastic support around Marla, by very savvy people in this community who a) wanted her to succeed, and b) believed she would."

Lewis acknowledged hiring her was a risk after the time off. "You don't know if someone's going to want to really work. That's obviously a concern." And indeed, Messing says the sheer fatigue of full-time work was a hard adjustment.

But as Messing marks her first full year at USTA SoCal's headquarters on the UCLA campus, things are already looking up: customer experience at tournaments has improved; relationships with sponsors, members and schools are better. And tournaments look more polished. "There really are a variety of things that have begun to move forward," Lewis said.

Still, Messing isn't ready to declare victory in her climb back into the professional ranks.

"I don't feel like I've accomplished that yet," she said from court side at the juniors tournament, where Jagger Leach — Lindsay Davenport's son — has just been crowned 12-and-under boys champion. "I feel good about what I've done in this role, but I don't think I'm this huge success yet. I would

"I feel good about what I've done in this role, but I don't think I'm this huge success yet. I would like to ... demonstrate that it's possible to have another career."



After the World Cup, Messing knew she'd take a break. She had spent most of the 1990s on urgent, major projects and needed to relax. Initially, there was talk of her joining the WNBA as chief operating officer under Val Ackerman, but a move to New York was out of the question. Just before the turn of the millennium, she joined the dot-com bust

started in August 2016.

She brought her trademark confidence to her new role but knew her shortcomings: She'd never heard of Slack, the office messaging app. The mostly digital office had just one printer that no one ever used, so she bought her own to maintain her 90s-era paper-centric reading.

"I showed up at the meetings, and everyone would come with their laptops, and there I was with a legal pad and pen," Messing said. "I didn't even

like to be able to demonstrate that it's possible to have another career."

Messing's task today isn't so different from what she did in the 1990s. "I think she'll prove, for future generations of women, that there are ways to get back in, which is kind of consistent with what she's always done: Break the mold," Carter said. "One of the things she was so good at was looking at the usual way and saying, 'to hell with that, let's do it the way it's going to work.'" ✕



## IN-DEPTH XFL KICKOFF



## TIME TO PLAY

It's game time for the XFL as the league attempts to build fandom and staying power.

BY BEN FISCHER

## INSIDE THIS SECTION

► **FANS:** From game day elements to rules on the field, see what's in store for fans going to an XFL game. *Pages 26-27*

► **WHAT THEY'RE SAYING:** Sports business executives give their expectations for the XFL for season one and beyond. *Page 28*

► **THE TEAMS:** It's all about affordability, access and building strong community ties. *Pages 29-32*

**T**HE XFL'S FATE won't be decided on its Feb. 8 opening day or even in 2020, league president Jeffrey Pollack said, but league offices and team operators will be watching fan feedback closely for early signs of success or struggle.

Owner Vince McMahon's second attempt at breaking the NFL's monopoly on pro football is among the biggest gambles in sports business history, and industry eyes are on every step. Partly because McMahon is willing to spend \$500 million over three years to get the league going, Pollack can afford to ask for patience instead of making big promises.

"This is what we're trying to accomplish: Start to earn our stripes and build a fan base, that is fundamentally what we need to start doing," he said. "And that is going to take more than a first game, a first weekend or the first season. It takes time to earn fandom, and we're prepared to invest that time."

The XFL is avoiding any public expectations for TV viewership on rights holders Fox and ABC/ESPN, or for live attendance. Industry sources say the broadcasters will be content with a 1.5 million average on broadcast and 800,000 on cable.

TV ratings will have the most direct financial ramifications for the league, but healthy, vibrant environments at home games in each of the eight markets are critical, too. Team leaders have made inroads with local political leadership, and local sports media is covering the teams, Pollack said, which are good early signs.

The XFL expects to average between 10,000 and 12,000 fans per game on its opening weekend of Feb. 8-9, Pollack said. They expect Seattle and St. Louis to clear 20,000 at their home openers on Feb. 15 and 23, respectively.

"Having a live audience is important, but we understand it's

going to take time to build the crowds we want, and that's OK," Pollack said. "People need to sample us before they make real commitments to us, and we understand that." Later, he noted: "The first Super Bowl didn't come close to selling out, right, and look at it now. That's the type of perspective we're keeping in mind."

The league's goals in the early days, Pollack said, are to build a fan base; support TV partners; and "begin to welcome our fans to our form of game day" and "learn as we go. Mistakes are OK, mistakes come with doing something new and fresh."

One of the most important indicators will be feedback from the XFL's Football Advisory Network, dubbed "F.A.N.," a group of fans who have volunteered to act as a sounding board on rules, game presentation, the fan experience and broadcasts.

That feedback gets to one of the most important questions the XFL will face in the early days, an "eye test" of sorts — is the product worth a second look? Given McMahon's wealth, ticket sales and other revenue streams can take time to develop, but consumers will make snap judgments about the product's viability early on.

The XFL wants to be seen as fast-paced, fun and affordable, and the feedback panel will help the league gauge, in near real time, whether it's meeting those goals, and to drive changes if it's not. So far, feedback led the New York Guardians to hold an open practice at West Point rather than two other possible locations, and validated the league's release of its rules designed to speed up the game.

"For all sports properties, sports marketing fundamentally begins on the field of play, and we're very focused in designing a game we believe our fans want to see," Pollack said.

The XFL launches Feb. 8 when Seattle visits D.C. on ABC.



## IN-DEPTH XFL KICKOFF



Seattle Dragons head coach **Jim Zorn**, a Seahawks legend, signs autographs for fans at a meet-and-greet event.

# Access, intimacy and affordability to define the XFL fan experience

BY KARN DHINGRA

### XFL STADIUMS AND WHEN THEY OPENED

**THE XFL'S** agenda for the game-day experience will take on a local flavor that gives fans at all levels access to the game and teams.

The league believes this first season is an opportunity to earn its stripes and build a fan base by focusing on the quality of the on-the-field product along with providing a game-day experience rooted in getting fans as close to the game as possible, said league president Jeffrey Pollack.

The XFL is making a point of noting how ticket prices will be affordable and family-friendly. Four people can sit in the lower bowl for \$100 or less leaguewide.

"That's a fundamental form of access," said Derek Throneburg, the XFL's senior vice president of team business operations.

Pollack added that the league's eight franchises will take into account the fan experience at the pregame, in-game and postgame levels.

Before all XFL games, fans can expect at least one team or league-sponsored tailgate party. Tailgaters can expect local bands, food and beverage offerings and merchandise. Over time, the parties could feature sponsor activations.

"Don't be surprised if at that tailgate, some of our players stop by to say hello before they head into the locker room," Pollack said. "And while that tailgate's taking place, there may

be some flag football games on the field before our players warm up."

Indeed, there is likely to be a large quantity of fans on the field as well. "You'll probably see fans forming a tunnel that the players run through as they enter the field, and you may even see fans on the field as part of the [national] anthem activities," Pollack said.

During games, an in-house DJ and host will interact with the crowd. With

a 10-minute halftime, fans will not have the traditional halftime entertainment experience. Attendees can expect to see the home team coach's halftime speech, or interviews with coaches and players on the field coming in and out of halftime, broadcast on the stadium's video board.

"It's really about giving people an opportunity to stretch their legs, go get a beer or a hotdog, catch the half-

time speech from the coach, get back in their seat and we're back in action," Pollack said. "And this all goes to not only is our game an up-tempo experience, but I think our game-day experience will be up tempo as well."

The XFL will not ticket every seat in the stadiums where its teams will be playing games, Throneburg said.

"Our in-game experience will feel intimate," he said. "Fans will be close to the players and the action and able to see, hear and feel the emotion of the game."

Postgame, XFL fans will see players linger on the field to say hello to fans and take pictures with them and thank them for attending the game.

"We're still sorting out exactly what that's going to look like, but the thread through this is giving our fans an opportunity to get inside the game in a new way through player interaction, through content and through the overall game-day experience," Pollack said.

On the concessions front, the XFL plans to work with food and beverage operators already in place at venues that have existing agreements, Throneburg said.

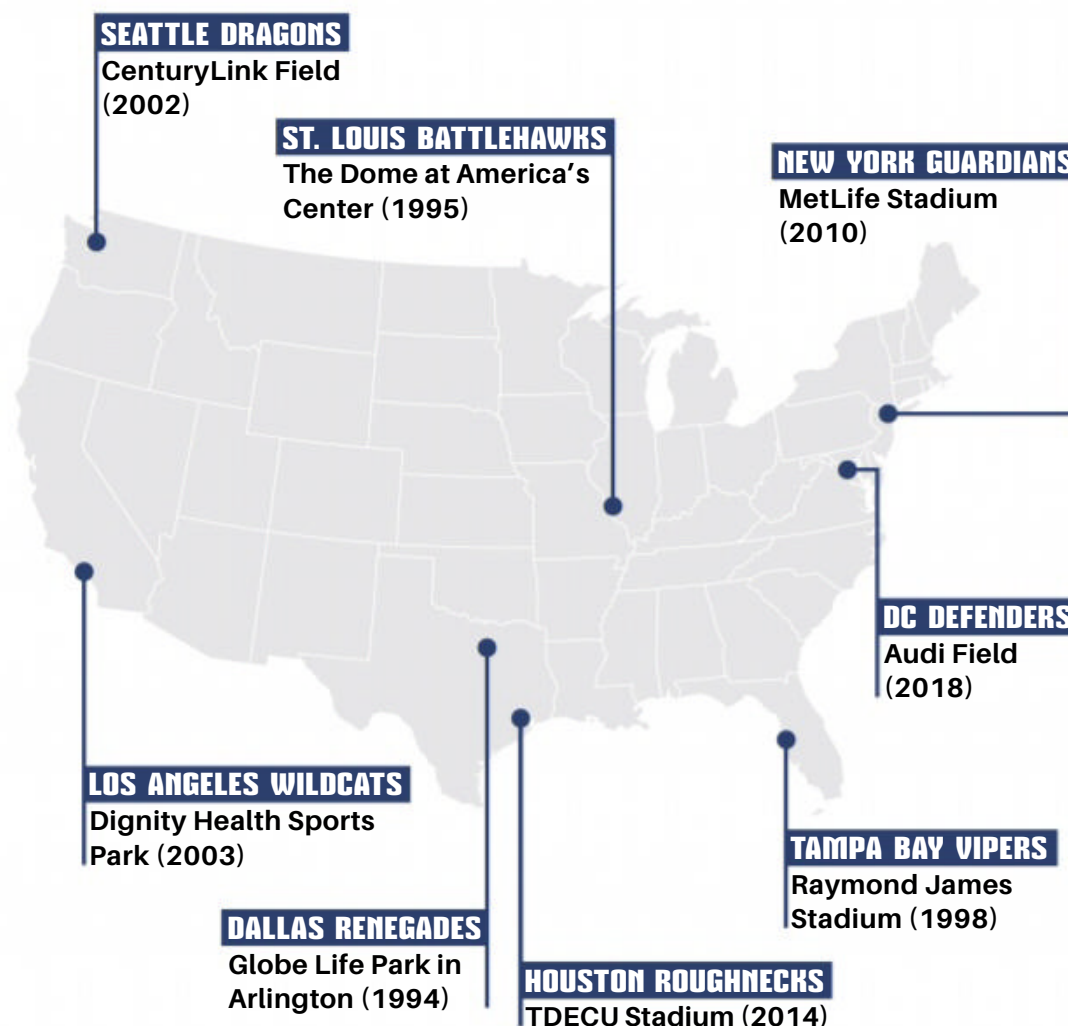
"We recognize that food is an important part of the fan experience, and our venue partners know how to deliver," Throneburg said. "A family of four should be able to park, eat and drink for about \$100, as well."

For league merchandising, the XFL will work with the following companies: Delaware North in New York and Dallas; Fanatics in Washington, D.C. and Houston; MainGate in St. Louis and Tampa Bay; and Rank + Rally in Los Angeles. Seattle will operate its merchandising business in-house.

As part of the league's effort to build loyalty, founding season-ticket members of the XFL across all markets will receive a pregame or postgame field pass, Throneburg said.

"And we certainly have premium experiences available and are working with the venue partners, with the current suite holders that are in each of those venues, we have established those relationships, but we also, as the XFL, have the ability to create some experiences that are high end as well, and what you may see in a couple of our venues is seating on the playing-field level that brings fans closer to the game," Throneburg said.

XFL executives were scant on details for all of the teams' premium ticket packages. But Throneburg said that some premium-ticket packages include sideline seats on the field for about \$200, along with traditional suites. All premium options will include access to players and coaches.





# 5 ways the XFL is shaking up the rules and getting fans closer to the game

BY ERIC PRISBELL

## 1 EXCITING KICKOFFS AND POST-TOUCHDOWN PLAYS:

The kicker will kick off from the 25-yard line. The coverage team will line up on the return side 35-yard line, and the return team will line up on the 30-yard line. Players can move only when the ball is touched by the returner, or three seconds after the ball touches the ground. The goal is to make kickoffs safer for players while preserving its excitement. Following touchdowns, the XFL is doing away with the point-after kick. Teams can run a play from the 2-, 5- or 10-yard line. If the play is successful, it will be worth one, two or three points, respectively.

## 2 FAST FOOTBALL:

Instead of using a 40-second clock like the NFL, the XFL will implement a 25-second play clock. A dedicated ball spotter — that's his only job — will help minimize time between plays. The XFL hopes to play each game in less than three hours, so outside of the last two minutes of each half, the game clock will run even after incomplete passes and out-of-bounds plays. What's more, halftime will be only 10 minutes long.

## 3 FAN ENGAGEMENT:

Details are still pending, but the goal is to bring fans closer to the action and humanize players. The league has been discussing giving portions of the fan base — perhaps season-ticket holders — access to the field pre- or postgame. Fans may be able to get autographs from players before the game. The XFL has also been working on having groups of children on the field with the players before each game for the national anthem.

## 4 IN-GAME INTERVIEWS:

Fans won't have to wait until the end of the game to hear from the star player. The broadcast partners will have the opportunity to conduct sideline interviews with players and coaches, especially following key plays such as a touchdown drive or momentum-shifting turnover. Fans in the stadium will see in-game interviews broadcast on the video screen.

## 5 SOUNDS OF THE GAME:

Multiple players are expected to wear microphones to give fans a better idea of what is occurring on key plays, especially if players offer off-the-cuff verbal reactions while coming off the field. It's another example of how the XFL is trying to humanize players and create a narrative about how the game is unfolding in real time.





# IN-DEPTH XFL KICKOFF

## WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

We asked executives in the sports industry to share their expectations for the XFL in its first season and how many years they expect the league to be in operation.

### RICK BURTON

*Syracuse University David B. Falk professor of sports management*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "I have a great deal of respect for (XFL Commissioner) Oliver Luck's business acumen and believe there is an unmet need for (more) pro football. If history repeats itself, the XFL could be this century's AFL. A league that is doubted at first and then embraced more widely."

**OUTLOOK:** "They have funding, from what I'm told, to get through the first two years. If the U.S. economy stays strong and sport wagering aficionados embrace this league, they could secure the traction they need to get beyond year five."

### STEVE HOROWITZ

*Partner, Inner Circle Sports*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "I was a big believer in XFL 1.0, and I assume there were lots of lessons learned. I expect strong television numbers and great attendance in St. Louis, but some struggles at the gate in L.A. and NYC."

**OUTLOOK:** More than five years.

### BILL SUTTON

*Principal, Bill Sutton and Associates*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "My expectations have been tempered not only by the AAF's demise but also with the lack of effort by the XFL to attract and capture attention. In a year with more established NFL QBs in a free-agent position (thus no tampering or lawsuits) — there have been no signings and also no attempts (as of yet) to sign an elite college QB similar to the successful signing of Joe Namath pulled off by the AFL. So surprised that someone as gifted in manufacturing attention as Vince McMahon hasn't done what I believe he is capable."

**OUTLOOK:** "I believe it survives Year 1 — although (with) significant market changes after the season to hopefully better performing markets. I think it is unlikely it survives into a third season unless it is able to attract significant on-field talent that captures the attention and interest of football fans."

### GORDON WHITENER

*Founder, chairman and CEO, The Whitener Company*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "I think the XFL is poised for an exciting new beginning. They obviously have the capital and strong, experienced leadership. I am sure they learned a lot of lessons from their previous experience. Having said that, the NFL is the strongest league in the world and hard to compete with. I do think there is a place for more football."

**OUTLOOK:** "I thought the AAF had a chance as a developmental league for the NFL, but the money and support wasn't there. The XFL is different, and I think has a three-year window to make it or not."

### WHITNEY WAGONER

*Director, Warsaw Sports Marketing Center*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "A football-first product, less of the shock + awe from the first time around. Professionalism from the executive leadership team. Healthy curiosity from fans and a strong debut. Ultimately, though, football quality will be lower than the NFL, which will fail to deliver a sustainable league in a very cluttered and competitive marketplace."

**OUTLOOK:** 3 years.

### CHRIS LENCHESKI

*CEO of Winning Streak Sports, Phoenixia Sport and Entertainment*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "Simply to provide a family focused event; good football with access to players previously not contemplated in a high-level league football format whilst keeping both entry and in-venue expenses low per head against national comps (i.e, parking, tickets, F&B and merchandise). More on a minor league baseball level comp structure."

**OUTLOOK:** "Provided they address non-performing markets ASAP as in Year 1. St Louis will lead the league across the board on most every metric for sports event planning. Multiple other markets like Albuquerque, Boise, Knoxville, Mobile, to name only a few should be ready to pitch XFL leadership should certain current markets not come to the offering."

### JAY SHARMAN

*Founder and CEO, TeamWorks Media*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "Despite Vince McMahon's significant changes and lessons learned from XFL 1.0 and the AAF, it's hard to see how the league succeeds with an inferior football product. It's also an uphill branding challenge as fans have come to expect alternative football leagues to fail. The reported \$500 million war chest of investment threshold at least gives it a shot to succeed as it will take deep spending (read: buying distribution at a premium over time) to survive."

**OUTLOOK:** "I'll take the under on 3 years."

### PHILLIP DE WINTER

*Head of business development, Americas, FanHub Media*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "There have been many others that have tried to do similar things to what the XFL is attempting and failed. So from the outset they are up against it, but they have deep pockets behind them and the backing of ambitious leadership. So if anyone is going to pull it off they have as good a chance as anyone. In Year 1, I think we will see them push the boundaries of the traditional experience much harder than those that have tried this before."

**OUTLOOK:** 3 years.

### JESSICA BERMAN

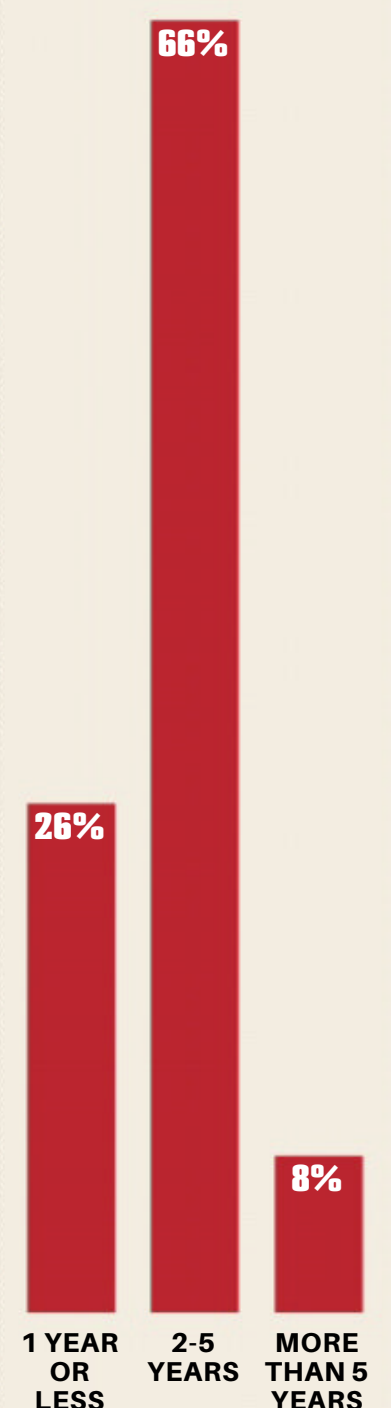
*Deputy commissioner, National Lacrosse League*

**EXPECTATIONS:** "Building a league is challenging, but I expect the XFL to make a splash in Year 1 given the investments they have made in hiring impressive industry professionals. Ultimately, it's your people who create, lead and oversee the implementation of your strategy, and they have certainly hired talented men and women. There is little doubt the talent on the field is there, and they have surpassed that in the leadership on the front office."

**OUTLOOK:** More than 5 years.

### WHAT YOU THINK

*Our Reader Survey last fall asked: The XFL will be in business for ... ?*



Responses: 1,016



# MEET THE TEAMS

## DALLAS RENEGADES

**HERE'S HOW** Grady Raskin sums up Texas' fabled love affair with football: When he speaks to groups outside the state, the Dallas Renegades' team president says the XFL is not trying to replace the football you watch on Saturdays and Sundays. But when he talks to groups in Texas, he makes sure to include Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

This is the land of 20,000-seat high school football stadiums (see Allen, Texas) and where 47,818 fans attended a Texas 6A Division I high school state championship game in Arlington in December. With football serving as the lifeblood for the more than 7.5 million residents in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, the Renegades assembled a staff that not only grasps that insatiable football appetite but is uniquely positioned to embrace it.

"Football is king in the United States but certainly in North Texas and Texas in general," Raskin said. "But it's got to be good, and it's got to be credible."

Regardless of their win-loss record, the Renegades nailed the credibility element. Born and raised in Dallas, Raskin since 1996 has had long stints with the Texas Rangers and most recently the Dallas Stars. Isaiah Stanback, the team's community engagement manager, was a fourth-round draft pick of the Dallas Cowboys in 2007 and has grassroots contacts throughout an area he has called home for more than a decade. And Rob Carolla, the team's head of communications, can lean on important relationships in North Texas media circles because of his tenure running communications efforts for Big 12 men's basketball.

The biggest trump card the Renegades can play, of course, is having their coach, former national

title-winning Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops, signing autographs and taking questions from sometimes as many as 200 fans at town hall meetings. His name resonates with even the most casual North Texas football fan — and certainly among almost anyone within a half-day drive from Norman, Okla.

"Coming from Coach Stoops' mouth, it really helps solidify everything we are talking about," said Courtney Oversby, the team's marketing director. "No gimmicks, it's just fun, fast football at affordable prices. It's a league of opportunity."

Beyond meet and greets with Stoops and/or quarterback Landry Jones, the Renegades have aggressively pursued cultivating relationships with grassroots organizations, connecting with those with the largest reach including YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs and the Union Gospel Mission, a charitable organization that assists with homelessness and addiction, among many others. The Renegades helped serve more than 500 families over the holidays, Stanback said, and they are holding a "Little Renegades" skills camp in association with USA Football.

"We're coming in asking, 'How can we have the biggest impact?' That's one thing I want us known for — being in the community and not of it," Stanback said.

Also of note is the Renegades' home field, Globe Life Park, which was home



to the Texas Rangers since 1994 before they moved into their new ballpark, Globe Life Field, this year. The reconfigured Globe Life Park remains in sterling condition and has long made for fun family outings.

"I can't tell you how many fans in Arlington come up to us and say how excited they are that the ballpark is being repurposed," said Kristin Harwood, the Renegades' director of corporate sponsorships. "The ballpark really has become a historic icon for the people of Arlington. ... And we have definitely felt the love." — *Eric Prisbell*

The Renegades will open the season at home Feb. 9 against St. Louis.

### DALLAS RENEGADES

- **GRADY RASKIN**, team president
- **ISAIAH STANBACK**, community engagement manager
- **COURTNEY OVERSBY**, marketing director
- **KRISTIN HARWOOD**, director of corporate sponsorships
- **BOB STOOPS**, head coach and general manager

## LOS ANGELES WILDCATS

**HAVING JUST** helped launch MLS club LAFC, Heather Brooks Karatz has some experience to draw from in her latest undertaking: establishing the XFL's Los Angeles Wildcats as a viable and competitive pro football organization in one of America's most crowded sports markets.

Karatz is the team's president, but the title hasn't stopped her from reaching out to L.A. sports fans directly through a series of meet and greets. The events grew organically from an early social media post, before the team even had a name, logo or colors, asking if fans wanted to gather and talk about the franchise and the league.

"We said, 'We've got to find our fans,'" Karatz said.

From those initial conversations came a focus on making L.A. Wildcats home games, all of which are on Sundays, affordable. A family of four can buy tickets to see the team play at Dignity Health Park for \$100.

Over half of the stadium will feature tickets costing \$30 or less per game with season-ticket packages ranging from \$100 to \$425 per seat. For a limited time, the Wildcats even offered season-ticket purchasers a VIP pass to access the playing field before or after one of the five home games.

Karatz didn't share how ticket sales are going or whether the

Wildcats have landed any sponsorships. The team has a local radio deal in the works, but it's not been announced.

Karatz said she gets asked all the time about the Wildcats becoming L.A.'s third professional football team. L.A. Times columnist Arash Markazi said he's not sure how the region's fans, spoiled with multiple teams from all of the biggest sports leagues, will respond to a team from a not-yet-established league like the XFL. He said the Wildcats' hiring of Karatz, after her success with LAFC, is a good start, though.

Karatz hopes the team's affordable ticket pricing, along with its spring season, will differentiate it from the NFL's Rams and Chargers. "We really stand out in this market because we are a product that not only appeals to the avid football fan, but really the family," she said.

Perhaps drawing a bit from her LAFC playbook — she was LAFC's executive vice president and helped create one of MLS's best stadium environments in the club's first year — Karatz mentioned the word

"community" a dozen times during a recent interview about the Wildcats.

To that end, the XFL team hosted a block party for fans on Jan. 25 at Dignity Health Park, and Wildcats coaches will volunteer with local high school football teams this fall during the league's first offseason. Expect more community-focused events as the XFL's first season progresses.

"This is about building a really solid foundation ... to grow over time," said Karatz. — *Bret McCormick*

### LOS ANGELES WILDCATS

- **HEATHER BROOKS KARATZ**, president
- **LISA MILNER GOLDBERG**, director of public relations
- **HALEY GRAVES**, social media manager
- **WINSTON MOSS**, head coach and general manager



## IN-DEPTH XFL KICKOFF

### ST. LOUIS BATTLEHAWKS

**THE PHRASE** “Born and Raised” has become both a marketing focal point and rallying cry for the St. Louis BattleHawks, who, when they take the field on Feb. 23 as the XFL’s eighth and final team to host a game, will do so as the city’s first homegrown professional football franchise.

The team’s grassroots outreach includes several initiatives to allow fans to experience the brand in person. First, it divided St. Louis into four quadrants: Metro East and Illinois, the city of St. Louis, St. Louis County and the surrounding Missouri counties, and then committed to attending high school football games in each of those quadrants. The initiative has since expanded to 55 total games at 51 area high schools.

The connection to local high schools will run even deeper on game day at The Dome at America’s Center, the former home of the NFL’s Rams. “What we’re doing, to really highlight those four quadrants of St. Louis, is in each of the corners of the dome, we’re going to have a high school band or a drum line and they’re going to keep the energy going,” said BattleHawks President Kurt Hunzeker, a St. Louis native.

Mark Taylor, director of marketing and community engagement and another St. Louis native, cited

the team’s red carpet marketing events in which the team shows up at local businesses and rolls out a literal red carpet, stanchions and rope. “Like a red carpet premiere, it’s the first time you’re going to get to see our helmet and our jersey and the new XFL ball that is different,” he said. The team has conducted 26 such events and expects to reach 50 to 60 by the home opener.

As of Jan. 23, the BattleHawks had secured two St. Louis-based founding partners: Anheuser-Busch InBev and energy provider Ameren. A-B is the team’s official malt beverage provider, while its Bud Select brand is the team’s official beer and presenting sponsor of the BattleHawks’ Happy Hour Plus (+) program that engages the community at local bars and restaurants. Ameren will serve as presenting sponsor of the BattleHawks’ home opener, with fans in attendance receiving branded rally towels.

The reach of the league’s national

media rights deal has allowed the team to adopt a multichannel strategy locally instead of signing on with “official” TV and radio outlets to exclusively broadcast games and content. Rather, the BattleHawks will explore different avenues to deliver content to different consumer segments on TV, radio and podcasts.

For example, the team will have dedicated 30-minute pregame shows on KTVI-Fox for a select number of games, but not just the ones that are on Fox. Meanwhile, multiple radio outlets will be set up in the BattleHawks’ official tailgate area. Hunzeker: “It’ll kind of look like Radio Row.”

As the home opener on Feb. 23 approaches, Hunzeker said he is encouraged by the results of these efforts, whether it’s purchases of BattleHawks gear or season tickets. Tickets begin at just \$20 per game, which Hunzeker said opens the doors for families. Hunzeker: “We know because we are raising our families here and because we grew up here.” — *Andrew Levin*

#### ST. LOUIS BATTLEHAWKS

- ▶ **KURT HUNZEKER**, president
- ▶ **GABRIEL RENDON**, director of corporate partnerships
- ▶ **MARK TAYLOR**, director of marketing and community engagement
- ▶ **BRIAN STULL**, director of communications and media relations
- ▶ **RJ LANDERS**, director of business operations
- ▶ **ED KACZYNSKI**, director of ticket sales and experience
- ▶ **CATHERINE BOYLE**, senior marketing and communications manager
- ▶ **CAT DAAKE**, marketing and community engagement specialist
- ▶ **JON HAYES**, head coach and general manager

### DC DEFENDERS

**ONCE THE** Super Bowl concludes, a void on the field remains for months before training camp begins in July. The timing of the XFL season, and introducing the league to new fans, especially younger generations who maybe were priced out of attending football games, has Erik A. Moses optimistic about the kickoff for season one.

“That has me pretty jazzed,” said Moses, the president of the DC Defenders, one of the XFL’s eight initial teams. “We are filling that football fix and giving them three more months of high quality professional football.”

The Defenders will play in the XFL’s first regular-season game as they host the Seattle Dragons on Feb. 8 on ABC. Moses knows the sports passion that runs throughout the “District of Champions,” fueled by the Washington Capitals’ Stanley Cup victory in 2018 and the Washington Nationals’ World Series victory last year.

Moses was the senior vice president and managing director of sports, entertainment and special events for Events DC, and was on the mayor’s bus during the Capitals’ victory parade in 2018. He witnessed the tens of thousands of fans lining the D.C. streets. “It was other-worldly,” he said. “That halo effect is something that’ll benefit us.”

Moses declined to provide specifics on season-ticket sales and would say only that he expects a strong turnout for the first game at Audi Field, which holds about 20,000 fans at full capacity.

“We’re new, so we’re going to have to earn our fans. We’re going to have to earn them on and off the field,” he added. “If the excitement that I hear when I talk to people one on one, that my ticket reps are hearing on the phone when they talk to people,



#### DC DEFENDERS

- ▶ **ERIK A. MOSES**, president
- ▶ **MICHAEL PRESTON**, director of communications and community engagement
- ▶ **RAINBOW KIRBY-STEARNES**, director of marketing
- ▶ **TROY MACHIR**, director of content
- ▶ **GARY GARCIA**, director of ticket sales and experience
- ▶ **ADELLE BLAND**, director of event operations
- ▶ **PEP HAMILTON**, head coach and general manager

if that excitement translates to attendance and people coming out, we’ll be pleased.”

Moses said he and his staff will have sponsorship conversations throughout the first season. At this time, though, the team has no deals to announce. He characterized year one as a “proof-of-concept” to possible partners, saying that the Defenders are “planting seeds.” Conversations with local and regional companies have centered around how they could best support the inaugural season.

“Year one certainly won’t look like what year two, year three or year five looks like in terms of the number of partners and the size and scope of those relationships,” he said. — *Mark Burns*

The Defenders will have to fight for attention in a market that has seen recent championships by the Capitals and Nationals.





## TAMPA BAY VIPERS

**AS THE** Tampa Bay Vipers prepare for their first season, President Josh Bullock has made an effort to hammer home one thing: It's all about the football.

"We are doing this for the love of football, that's at the core of everything we're doing. That's driving every decision we're making," Bullock said. "When we focus on the love of football, everything else has been falling into place."

Despite the sentiment, a lot of coordinated effort has gone into building the Vipers from the ground up, and getting them ready for kickoff. Part of the efforts to connect to the community is reflected in the Vipers' partnerships with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Tampa Bay, Hillsborough County Public Schools and Tampa Bay Youth Football League, among others. The Vipers' plan is to first engage with youth-centric groups in the community, then follow with local sponsors.

To make the Vipers an affordable, family friendly experience, season tickets for games at Raymond James Stadium start at just \$20 per game. But the appeal goes beyond affordability, and the Vipers plan on using their idyllic location to their advantage.

"In the spring when the weather is beautiful, to be close to this new and exciting team is really resonating well with fans," Bullock said. "Giving families the ability to be outdoors, in

the spring, with an affordable ticket price, and the opportunity for relationship building and the community to be part of that, it really comes back to the love of football."

An initial series of fan meetups throughout the Tampa area gave fans an opportunity to get to know team personnel and players, and vice versa. Those meetups grew into monthly "Happy Hour Huddles" in which the team goes to sports bars to discuss XFL rules, how the roster looks going into the season and to swap football fandom stories.

"We felt if we could help make a connection with a group of people at a sports bar who might be sports fans, that they would be receptive to our message," Bullock said. "The more we're in the community, the more we're doing projects, either giving back or just doing these events, it just helps add fans one, two, three, 10 at a time, and we're going to keep doing that as long as we can."

After starting the season on a two-week road trip, the Vipers' first home game will come on Feb. 22, when they host the Houston Roughnecks. Bullock is confident fans will be there to support their new team.

"I'm excited," he said. "I'm really happy about where we are, and I'm excited to share Vipers football with the great people in Tampa Bay and to see it come to life is something I'm really anxious to see." — *John Aceti*

Like other XFL teams, the Vipers will use low-priced tickets to lure families. Florida's ideal spring weather could further drive them outdoors.

### TAMPA BAY VIPERS

- ▶ **JOSH BULLOCK**, president
- ▶ **ALLEN BARRETT**, director of communications and community outreach
- ▶ **KRISTY CHASE-TOZER**, director of marketing
- ▶ **JULIA WYMAN**, director of team business operations
- ▶ **ANDREW SAMSON**, director of content
- ▶ **JEFF BERRYHILL**, director of ticket sales and experience
- ▶ **MARC TRESTMAN**, head coach and general manager

## HOUSTON ROUGHNECKS

**FROM THE** Texans' J.J. Watt and Deshaun Watson to the Rockets' James Harden and Russell Westbrook to the Astros' Jose Altuve and Alex Bregman, Houston is a city of megastars.

In a market chock-full of captivating stars and personalities — all on playoff-caliber teams — how will the XFL's Houston Roughnecks find their niche?

One Roughnecks executive who understands the uniqueness of the Houston market is team president Brian Michael Cooper, who has worked more than 20 years as a sports attorney, agent, executive and adviser, and who moved to The Woodlands just north of Houston in 2002.

"Historically in Houston, the love of sports figures and sports teams has been one where they make that community connection with the city," said Cooper, who most recently served as a partner in the Houston and Denver offices of Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith LLP and as a member of the firm's entertainment, media and sports practice. "From the [NFL's Houston] Oilers to 'Clutch City' with the Rockets and then the Texans, they have great players and also great leaders who have made that impact. That's going to be important. Reciprocity is a word I keep coming back to."

The prime example of that is what Texans defensive star Watt did in raising more than \$37 million to help rebuild Houston after Hurricane Harvey. The greater Houston area, Cooper said, reciprocated with an outpouring of love and support specifically for Watt and also more broadly for the Texans.

On a smaller scale, the Roughnecks want to create an environment where fans can connect with the players on a personal level. A recent example saw Roughnecks kicker Sergio Castillo wow a crowd of elementary school-age children with a poignant, inspirational speech about never giving up.

Cooper said media coverage of the Roughnecks has been "outstanding." All four local network stations attended the first news conference last spring as well as the logo unveiling, he said. Fox 26 Houston provided extensive coverage of the team's uniform reveal (an oil derrick is fused with the letter "H" on the helmet, a nod to the old Oilers logo).

The Roughnecks' community outreach has run the gamut. The team has developed relationships with the Special Olympics, Houston Food Bank, YMCA and Ronald McDonald House, among others. Cooper said they are taking part in Team Up Houston, which guides students toward careers in sports business. And the Roughnecks have a robust relationship with Houston's youth football organizations.

Since July, the Roughnecks have held periodic fan events, with the most recent ones each drawing more than 100 fans. The events include a question-and-answer session with fans, many of whom ask about gaining more access to players.

"We want to show the city of Houston we care about what they do," Cooper said. "I think they will reciprocate with great support." — *Eric Prisbell*

### HOUSTON ROUGHNECKS

- ▶ **BRIAN MICHAEL COOPER**, team president
- ▶ **JENNIFER GERMER**, marketing director
- ▶ **JUNE JONES**, head coach and general manager



# IN-DEPTH XFL KICKOFF

## NEW YORK GUARDIANS

**HOW DOES ONE** go about building an XFL team, from franchise to fan base, in a market with not one, but two storied NFL franchises? That was the question facing the New York Guardians as they prepared for the XFL's revival, and President Janet Duch has been enacting her vision to answer it.

Now, only a few days before the Guardians host the Tampa Bay Vipers in MetLife Stadium, the team is still putting the finishing pieces in place for kickoff. Duch is confident in where the team stands going into the season, saying that the New York market and surrounding tri-state area have been supportive.

Picking up the theme common among the other XFL franchises, Duch said the Guardians plan to be an accessible team that brings fans closer to the game. Part of this effort has been through affordability, with season-ticket packages starting at just \$25 per game. Another focus is on creating the ideal game-day experience for fans, with affordable lower bowl seats, club and premium seating options, and fast-paced play on the field.

Though she would not disclose specific figures, Duch said the team's ticket sales were pacing with expectations, and new ad campaigns should help boost those numbers even more as Week 1 approaches. The Guardians are still in negotiations with potential sponsors and plan to announce them closer to the start of the season.

"We know that we're kicking off, and there's a little bit of a wait and see approach," Duch said. "Folks want to see it before they come out and experience it live and pay the money for it."

To accommodate that desire, the team has held fan meetups across the tri-state area. At one event, Duch joined head coach Kevin Gilbride and ESPN's Dianna Russini to mix it up with early adopters of the XFL, football die-hards and those just curious about the team. Duch said, "New York fans are New York fans, they want to talk football. There have been so many metrics with fan engagement that we continue to see grow, from our digital channels, to merchandise, all the way back to ticket sales."

One unique effort the Guardians are taking to establish themselves into the hearts of local fans is the "Guardians of the Game" program, in which fans can nominate and vote online for members of the community, from first responders to good Samaritans, to lead the team onto the field before every home game. Duch said the idea naturally came from the Guardians name itself, and the area's strong connection and appreciation for everyday heroes.

"When we announced our name, what really resonated was this Guardian and being a watchdog around the tri-state area," Duch said. "Everyday heroes is really reflected within our brand name, and that connection just makes sense for us." — *John Aceti*

### NEW YORK GUARDIANS

- ▶ **JANET DUCH**, president
- ▶ **ANTHONY ZUCCONI**, head of marketing
- ▶ **GINA ANTONIELLO**, head of communications
- ▶ **CRAIG GLAZER**, head of corporate partnerships
- ▶ **BRANDEN COBB**, head of content
- ▶ **TOM FRENCH**, director of sales and experience
- ▶ **KEVIN GILBRIDE**, head coach and general manager



### SEATTLE DRAGONS

- ▶ **RYAN GUSTAFSON**, president
- ▶ **CHRIS SAVIO**, senior director, corporate partnerships
- ▶ **MICHELLE DELANCY**, senior director, marketing and events
- ▶ **PETE TENNEY**, director, content and production
- ▶ **JIM CHRISTMAN**, director, communications and media relations
- ▶ **TAHITI BELLOT**, director, ticket sales and experience
- ▶ **JIM ZORN**, head coach and general manager

## SEATTLE DRAGONS

**XFL FOUNDER** Vince McMahon chose a different plan of action than the AAF when selecting the locations for the league's new franchises, placing seven of the eight teams in NFL markets. It's a strategy Seattle Dragons President Ryan Gustafson believes in, and while it's too early to tell if it will work, he's optimistic the franchise can grab a foothold in the city alongside the Seahawks.

"Seattle has the best sports fans in the world, and there's no shortage of demand for more football in this market," Gustafson said.

Since the team's launch in August, Gustafson and his staff have worked to ensure everything runs smoothly ahead of the Dragons' season opener against the DC Defenders at Audi Field on Saturday. In advance the Dragons have employed a grassroots marketing approach to build brand awareness in Seattle and get fans excited for the upcoming season.

"What we've tried to do is just tell the story of the XFL and build our fan base one person at a time," Gustafson said.

One message that has resonated well in the market has been the season-ticket prices for the Dragons' inaugural season at CenturyLink Field. More than 70% of the season tickets will be \$45 or less per game, with 27% going for \$25 or less. Season tickets with club access and covered seats begin at \$45 per game.

"Having more football at CenturyLink Field under head coach Jim Zorn, who's a local legend in the marketplace, at \$20 a ticket, is a message that

our fans are just eating up and they're really excited about it," Gustafson said.

The Dragons are projecting more than 20,000 fans for their Feb. 15 home opener against the Tampa Bay Vipers. Gustafson said the main goal in year one is to establish trust among the fan base and create a sense of attachment.

"The XFL and us as a franchise are not looking to just be a one-year thing; this is building a 100-year brand," Gustafson said. "If we do this the right way, I know that people are going to really attach themselves to this team, not just in the short-term but in the long-term as well."

The XFL preaches accessibility for its fans, so the Dragons have been finding ways to connect with the community. The team held an open practice on a Saturday morning in December that drew over 1,000 fans. Gustafson also does a weekly segment through the team's Facebook page where he answers fan questions live.

Local media coverage has further spread the word about the Dragons. Gustafson said the team's TV broadcast partners, KCPQ-Fox, KOMO-ABC and ESPN Radio 710 Seattle, have been supportive in telling the franchise's story, allowing him to appear almost on a weekly basis on their shows to give updates on the Dragons.

"That's one thing that we're incredibly blessed to have — media who are excited about us, excited about telling our story and our players' stories," Gustafson said. — *Lucas Smith*



## ► OPINION

# Foundation of collegiate, pro sports is falling into disrepair

**I**T WAS ANOTHER BANNER YEAR for superstars in 2019, when the sports gods bestowed contracts with a total value of more than \$2 billion to seven individuals (baseball players Nolan Arenado, Gerrit Cole, Bryce Harper, Manny Machado, Stephen Strasburg and Mike Trout and Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers). They will collectively take in \$228 million annually. Good for them — I hope they all do great things with their financial reward.

The future looks even brighter. The value proposition of big-time sports, along with the commencing riches, seems to have no end in sight.

BY PETER  
FITZPATRICK

Here is something else that happened in 2019, albeit with little fanfare. For the first time in 30 years, in its annual survey, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported a decrease in overall athletic participation at the high school level. Of note, football declined for the fifth year in a row to the lowest mark in 20 years. Surprisingly, boys and girls basketball also dropped, with the latter category falling to its lowest number since 1992-93! Numerous studies have tried to explain this decline, but a common theme in all of them is “tough economics.” In other words: there’s not enough money. Let me say that again: not enough money! “Pay to play” has become the norm in more than half the high schools in the U.S. according to Coach and AD Magazine’s 2020 State of the Industry Report, January 2020. Over 80% of high school athletic directors are “concerned with reduced funding,” according to this same report.

High school athletics in America are the primary foundation for every professional team and league, every college conference and university athletic program. For all the future riches enjoyed at the top level, we can thank the development that took place in high school. Beyond athletic development, the overall good of

**For all the future riches enjoyed at the top level, we can thank the development that took place in high school.**



high school athletic participation is far too important to capture here. Simply put, it is an amazing asset to our society as a whole.

Yet it is struggling financially and it needs to be fixed. Sound the alarm!

I’ve been around the sports industry for a long time and seen many marketing messages in which leagues, teams, brands and athletes pour their hearts out in support of youth athletics. However, at the macro level most of it is window dressing. While I realize that there are many individuals at this level who do wonders in their own way, the problem is getting worse.

There are 19,500 high schools within the NFHS; \$25,000-\$50,000 annually per school would, we believe from high school ADs, nearly eradicate “pay to play” across the nation. To fund this would cost \$250-\$500 million annually. Chump change for the industry.

Are there leagues, teams and CMOs with some real CHUTZPAH?! Because that is what this will take. Can you imagine the reward if you helped solve this problem for every school and family in the U.S.? That would not be window dressing. Any takers?

*Peter Fitzpatrick is president and CEO of DistrictWON.*

## Liverpool FC shows us a proper path to success

LIVERPOOL FOOTBALL CLUB are the current European Champions and the Club World Cup Champions, and, they seem destined to soon add the English Premier League to the trophy case. Beyond this success lies a terrific case study on how to build and run any business. I think this comes from commitment in four areas.

First and foremost, they have developed a culture of cooperation. “You’ll Never Walk Alone” is more than just an anthem sung from the

terraces. It represents a commitment to their fans and their community.

Second, they represent diversity both in personnel and in thought. A team owned by a company in Boston, run by a Liverpoolian, coached by a German, whose best players come from Scotland, Brazil, Egypt, Holland and Senegal. All staff are solely judged on their ability to add value. On the pitch, the player lineup is flexible and individual creativity is encouraged.

Third, they have leaders at all levels who are willing to take responsibility. Does leadership rest with Fenway Sports, or with the President Peter Moore, or coach Jürgen Klopp or team captain Jordan Henderson? The answer is

all of the above.

Last, there is a commitment to constant improvement. When they take the lead, many teams would go into a defensive mode and try to “hold on” to their advantage. Liverpool do the exact opposite, they look for ways to widen their advantage.

Many teams will now look to mimic the success of Liverpool by trying to adopt their style of play. However, I believe it will be equally important to study their system of management and their culture.

*Gordon Kane  
Chicago*

**HOW YOU  
SEE IT**



# CLOSING SHOT



In addition to his role at the ACC, **Gene Corrigan** served as NCAA president and as the athletic director at Notre Dame, Virginia and Washington and Lee.

## Remembering a Leader

Former ACC Commissioner Gene Corrigan was an intense administrator who embraced growth and understood the tremendous revenue and marketing potential of having schools work together.

BY MICHAEL SMITH

**MORE THAN 20 YEARS** passed from the time Gene Corrigan retired as ACC commissioner in 1996 until his death at age 91 on Jan. 25, but his fingerprints are still evident on the conference he loved.

Corrigan was remembered as an intense administrator who recognized and embraced the business side of college athletics and also as an affable character who could defuse tense situations, partly because he didn't take himself too seriously.

"He's still the only man I've ever seen wear a tux with no socks," said current ACC Commissioner John Swofford, laughing.

Corrigan did it all in college athletics. He played lacrosse at Duke and later coached the sport at Virginia, where he transitioned into administration and became athletic director.

Hired by Notre Dame in 1985 to fix the school's football program, Corrigan replaced struggling coach Gerry

Faust with Lou Holtz the following year and the 1988 Fighting Irish won the national championship, although Corrigan had since left for the ACC.

During his decade as the league's commissioner, Corrigan oversaw new TV contracts with ESPN, the addition of Florida State in the early 1990s and equal revenue sharing from bowl and TV money among the conference's members.

"Gene is among the five most important people in my four decades" in sports media, said former ESPN executive Len DeLuca, who put Corrigan on a plane with former commissioners Jim Delany and Roy Kramer as well as the late Dave Gavitt and Walter Byers.

Corrigan, who also spent two years as NCAA president in the mid-1990s when the position rotated, spearheaded ACC expansion that continued after he left the ACC, first with Miami and Virginia Tech joining in 2004.

"What a lot of people may not know is that we had started talking about conference expansion long before it happened," Swofford said. "Gene was very bullish on bringing in Miami

**"Gene understood that we all competed on the field, but we should work together off the field. ... He really understood the power of the conference."**

when Florida State came in. It obviously didn't happen then, but it did later."

Ben Sutton, the former IMG College president, worked in athletics at Wake Forest in the late 1980s when Corrigan

was commissioner. Corrigan was among the first to see value and revenue potential from aggregating marketing rights in the days before multimedia rights.

"Gene understood that we all competed on the field, but we should work together off the field," Sutton said. "He saw that if we brought our rights together, we could be so much stronger. So we created a collective marketing group, which really became the predecessor to ACC Properties. He really understood the power of the conference."

Swofford often leaned on Corrigan.

"I was lucky because I came into a situation where the conference was in great shape," Swofford said. "One of the biggest things I thought about was how to maintain things from a cultural standpoint. His legacy in my mind will always be the relationships he built and how he treated people, regardless of their position." ✕



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