



From the Conference Room to the Locker Room: Lawyers in Sports Operations

Skills and Professional Development

Sports and Entertainment



In the *ACC Docket* July/August 2017 issue, I wrote about lawyers who have transitioned to CEO. During my research, I stumbled upon another interesting career change — specifically, lawyers who transitioned into sports operations with major league teams. Unbeknownst to many, some well-known

individuals, such as Theo Epstein of the Chicago Cubs, Howie Roseman of the Philadelphia Eagles, and Larry Lucchino, who won championships in both baseball and football, are all from legal backgrounds. However, this is also evident on a more micro level with lawyers occupying various positions that are often moving from a purely in-house position to sports operations within the organization.

To get more insight on the topic, I spoke to Julien Brisebois, assistant general manager of the Tampa Bay Lightning, and Kevin Gilmore, former EVP of the Montreal Canadiens. Both began their careers as lawyers and transitioned into an operational role.



Julien Brisebois began his career in Montreal with the law firm Heenan Blaikie, where he was sent on secondment with their client, the storied hockey team Montreal Canadiens. Eventually, the Canadiens hired Brisebois as in-house counsel, then he moved to an operations role. Since 2010, he has been the assistant general manager of the Tampa Bay Lightning. Brisebois never played hockey at a high level nor did he study sports management. In fact, he never even considered a career in sports on a pro level until his career as a lawyer began.

When I asked Brisebois how he made the move from a purely legal one to operations, he replied:

“I asked a lot of questions, worked with plenty of hockey people that were willing to help including general managers. I was also exposed to different facets of the organization from being on the road to being involved in drafts, which helped. Overall, people I worked with were generous.”

What’s more, Brisebois’s law degree and legal experience helped the transition. “Some elements did help such as diligence or double- and triple-checking matters,” he said. “In addition, being able to split up legal issues and just the general reflexes one has as a lawyer. As a lawyer, I knew what to look for in documents and contracts.” However, according to Brisebois, while at one time NHL teams looked for lawyers, today he sees that moving toward analytics and statistics.

Also from Canada, Kevin Gilmore has had an illustrious career in hockey operations. He began his

career as a corporate lawyer for Latham & Watkins in Los Angeles. Later, he moved on to The Walt Disney Company where he led the team that secured the Mighty Ducks franchise and helped build the organization from the ground up, leading to its launch in October 1993. Gilmore later moved on to the Anaheim Angels and LA Kings and returned home to Montreal to work for the Canadiens as executive vice president.



He presently works for [4Sport Consulting Inc.](#), an organization that he founded, which provides consulting services in sports, media, and entertainment.

Gilmore initially aspired to have a career in sports and he went to law school with a goal to work for a team. He said getting there was really “a combination of luck and being at the right place at the right time.” Before his transition to operations, he wanted to make the jump in-house as he believes that “it allows you to touch on various aspects.”

The combination that Kevin mentioned may have happened at Disney, where he collaborated with the strategic planning team and was involved negotiating a variety of sponsorship deals from theme parks to home videos. While at Disney, one his colleagues asked if he knew “anything about hockey” because he was Canadian. This led to working with then-CEO Michael Eisner on establishing the Mighty Ducks Hockey Team over the course of a year.

When I asked Kevin what allowed him to make the jump from purely legal position to operations, he replied:

“[It was] related to working with various individuals, such as those in strategic planning, where my thought moved away from being risk averse and purely ‘no’ to how to make this deal work and thinking of things such as ‘hurdle rate’ etc. It allowed me to look at deals with a different lens.”

For Kevin, the most useful skill from his years as a lawyer was that of diligence, “which had the greatest impact.” He continued to state that “pragmatism, creativity, and training as a lawyer helped the transition as well.” But Kevin cautioned that certain habits also need to be shed:

“As a lawyer, you always see two sides: client and us versus them mentality. However, solution stands with coming together. Don’t create a win at all costs. Basically, if one plus one equals three, how do we get to that?”

In parting, Kevin pointed out that there are many senior jobs in sports apart from general manager, such as CEO, COO, or executive vice presidents, of which there are quite a few lawyers in management positions. “Lawyers will think differently and use a pragmatic analytical approach,” he explained. “This is evident all around beyond in teams but also with commissioners, such as the NHL's Gary Bettman and the NBA's former commissioner David Stern.”

As we can see from the experiences of Julien Brisebois and Kevin Gilmore, lawyers, when trusted to work with closely with management, can quickly become the go-to strategic advisor. From there, one is already at a massive competitive advantage over the many marketing or sports management grads who begin in the mailroom, looking to impress a higher-up.

At times, a law degree will be the ideal springboard to enter an organization and make a splash. Take for example Theo Epstein, the legendary general manager who led the Boston Red Sox and Chicago Cubs to World Series Championships. Epstein studied law at the University of San Diego while working in player development for the San Diego Padres, which according to Epstein got him “[a better seat at the table](#).” Thanks to his background in law, Epstein was invited to take part in high-level negotiations and discussions by the acting general manager, specifically because few in the Padres' small operations division had a legal background to understand contract language. From there, Epstein went on to become the youngest general manager in baseball history.

Like Epstein, Howie Roseman, the EVP and general manager of the Super Bowl Champion Philadelphia Eagles, always wanted to work for a sports organization. Roseman sent hundreds of letters to NFL teams year after year. A general manager replied, advising him to get a law degree to be hired. After graduating from Fordham Law School, he landed an unpaid internship with the Eagles and eventually became the youngest general manager in the league.

Parting tips for those looking to transition in sports entertainment

- Use your skills as a lawyer to distinguish yourself from others in the organization.
- Use the opportunity that will fast-track you to the head of the table, where you can ask questions, learn valuable skills, and be heard.
- Your years in law school or as a lawyer have created natural reflexes that can translate into sports. You may not be able to pick the next Tom Brady, but you will likely be able to have the most important opinion on anything contract related.
- The combination of luck, timing, and being at the right place at the right time doesn't happen by accident. When it does arise, take advantage.

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