

CAREER SPOTLIGHT: CHRIS BRANDON

Chris Brandon recently returned to FedEx Corporation as Senior Counsel, Marketing and Intellectual Property, following two years with the Tampa Bay Lightning organization, where he led the legal function as Vice President—Legal and Senior Counsel. He is a 2011 graduate of the University of Florida Levin College of Law (LL.M. in Taxation).

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Please briefly explain your career path and what led you to your current position.

I graduated from law school in 2008 during The Great Recession, widely recognized as the most significant financial crisis in the United States since the Great Depression. Nonetheless, I landed an internship with the Orlando Magic organization, which had just started construction of the Amway Center (now the Kia Center). I joined a team of six to eight employees dedicated full-time to the arena project and was able to stay with the team until its completion. This early experience provided me a great introduction to legal issues in real estate development and construction and the opportunity to begin honing my negotiation and drafting skills.

As the Amway Center project neared completion, I began looking for my next job. Although the Great Recession may have technically been over, the unemployment rate had increased to almost ten percent. To strengthen my resume, I decided to pursue an LL.M. in Taxation at the University of Florida. After graduation, I worked as an associate attorney at the Sarasota law firm of Williams Parker for six years, before accepting an in-house position at FedEx Corporation in my hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. I spent three years as a corporate tax lawyer for FedEx before transitioning to the Marketing and Intellectual Property team. At FedEx, I was able to get my sports fix by supporting the sports marketing team with issues related to the organization's sponsorships of Joe Gibbs Racing, Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), the PGA Tour, and other sports properties.

The experience from FedEx led to the opportunity with the Tampa Bay Lightning (Vinik Sports Group), Sport Business Journal's 2022 Team of the Year. In addition to all things Lightning, Vinik Sports Group books and operates AMALIE Arena and the Yuengling Center, home of the USF Bulls basketball and volleyball teams, as well as dozens of concerts and events.

Recently, I made the difficult but exciting decision to return to FedEx Corporation following the retirement of an attorney who had primary responsibility for sports sponsorship issues for many years. By the time this feature is published, I will have transitioned back to FedEx. I'm

looking forward to what the future holds at FedEx, Vinik Sports Group, and throughout the rest of the industry.

2. What was the first professional “win” that made you confident that you belonged in your specific role or the sports and entertainment industry overall?

I can't think of one particular moment that made me feel like I “belonged” in the industry. I have been fortunate enough to have a variety of career experiences, each of which has prepared me for the next. As I discuss below with respect to what I believe to be the most common misconception about the industry, I do not believe that it takes anything extraordinary or unusual to be successful in the sports industry. The skillset of a good in-house lawyer translates well across industries.

3. In negotiating agreements, such as broadcast and sponsorship deals, how do you ensure legal and regulatory compliance while maximizing the franchise's opportunities?

In some companies, the in-house attorney can be viewed as a hinderance to business success, not because others are looking to do things untoward, but because it's not their job to consider relevant legal and regulatory authority in the same way as the legal department.

In my view, it is the attorney's job to build trust and establish an environment of collaboration in order to ensure a successful partnership between the business and the legal department. The attorney who seems to land on “no” too often can end up ostracized and cut out of future conversations. Conversely, the attorney who always says “yes” may garner more favor with management but is not doing the job he or she was hired to do.

I approach every question presented to me in the same way. First, I ask whether there is any legal or regulatory authority that clearly dictates what the answer or decision must be. If the answer to that question is yes, the analysis is complete. Sometimes the result is what the business wants to hear; other times, it is not.

However, there are often times that the law does not directly address a particular question or issue, such that reasonable minds can disagree on the best way to move forward. In that event, I seek to provide legal advice that would lead to the decision that is in the best interests of the company as a whole. It's important to recognize that what is best for the company may sometimes be different than what may be best for the individual(s) asking the question, and (especially in that event) it is important for the attorney to be armed with a thoughtful, logical explanation for his or her position.

Throughout my career, I've found that the best way to build trust is through an unwavering moral compass and an earnest, unselfish desire to see the company succeed.

4. What are the most common legal challenges or issues that businesses and individuals in the sports space encounter, and how did you help the Lightning address them?

Sponsorships, premium seating, and sweepstakes are three areas where the volume of legal drafting work can become somewhat difficult to manage for a small legal team. During my time with the Lightning, we were able to implement some automated systems that helped streamline drafting processes and keep things moving. I believe the answer to almost any challenge is either improved process or better communication (and often it's both).

5. What is one of the biggest misconceptions in your industry?

If you've read many of these features or talked to enough lawyers practicing within the sports industry, then you likely have heard the phrase "there's no such thing as sports law." I certainly agree with that viewpoint. On any given day, I may be working on issues involving real estate, contracts, intellectual property, or a host of other areas of legal practice. My approach to that work is much the same as it would be if I worked for a different medium-sized company in another industry.

Job satisfaction is dependent on the same factors as in any other industry: compensation, work-life balance, and culture. It's no secret compensation levels are generally below those of other industries. (Obviously, there are exceptions, especially at the highest levels of an organization.) Sports and entertainment organizations pay less simply because they can.

On the other hand, for someone who is passionate about sports, work-life balance can be a huge plus. Game tickets, free swag, and the hope that this will be the year the team wins a championship are the types of things that drive the desire to be in this industry.

That leaves what I believe has the most impact on job satisfaction in this industry or any other: culture. A company's culture is defined by its people (not its perks), and I have been fortunate to have worked with many great people throughout my career.

6. How do you stay up to date with the ever-evolving sports law landscape?

It's the usual suspects that keep me up to date: Sports Business Journal (weekly and daily editions), Sportico, The Sports Lawyers Association, various sports law blogs, and LinkedIn, just to name a few. Additionally, my peers in the industry are a great source of information and breaking news. One of the first things I ask myself when a new issue arises is always, "are there people in my network that may have walked this road before?"

7. What is the interaction like between regulatory bodies and a professional league's front office regarding the regulation of individual teams and ownership groups?

Throughout this feature, I have highlighted ways in which the sports industry is similar to any other, but this is one area where sports is somewhat unique. Like any other company, a professional sports franchise is governed by applicable local, state, and federal law and regulatory authority. However, for a professional sports franchise, the league serves as another governing body, and often it is league rules that determine the answer to a particular question or issue. The relevant collective bargaining agreement or standard player contract may (and often does) dictate what must happen in the case of a question or issue that involves one or more players. The league's constitution, by-laws, rules, regulations, and resolutions cover a litany of topics from broadcast rights and territories to rules related to merger and acquisition transactions. It is important to have a solid working knowledge of the league's governing documents and a good working relationship with league attorneys. During my time with the Lightning, I was fortunate to work with many of the NHL's best and brightest.

8. What is some advice you would give to law students interested in working as in-house legal counsel, and what are some action items they can execute now to stand out?

It's an obvious answer, but networking is critical. In my experience, I find that it is much easier to make a connection than it is to keep a connection. Meet as many people as you can and stay in touch with them. Understand that fellow students, interns, and people early in their careers are the industry leaders of the future and network accordingly.

Don't start a conversation with "I was wondering if you have any jobs or internships."