

PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

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and the

LAW

Wells Balances Being Spurs General Counsel with Partner at Bracewell

JTullos Wells was about what you would expect as the general counsel and chief legal officer of the San Antonio Spurs — professional, but not too flashy. There was no NBA Championship ring adorning his finger, even though he has four of them stashed away in his San Antonio home.

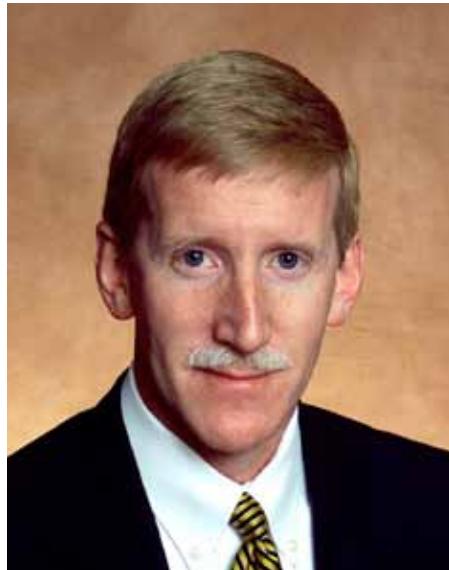
After all, Wells has been at the legal helm of what some call a “boring” franchise for the better part of 20 years. But there’s nothing boring about winning, and Wells’ role in the organization, which is the chief reason we picked him as our interview this issue.

Question: While you serve as general counsel for the Spurs, you also have the dual distinction of being a senior partner at Bracewell & Giuliani, an international law firm with approximately 500 lawyers. Have you ever considered cutting ties with the law firm and just becoming the team’s full-time general counsel?

Answer: No, I have never had an interest and the team hasn’t either. I have tried to get the team to hire an in-house general counsel and they basically said no, we would end up paying them and you, too.

Q: Can you talk about your relationship with the other general counsels, who are typically more in-house than you?

A: If you looked at all the major professional sports franchises, the majority



J. Tullos Wells

have in-house counsel, but there are still a number of organizations who have an outside counsel. The Indiana Pacers just changed to the outside counsel model. People do it differently. I’m probably one of the last outside guys. The idea behind it is to not only have a relationship with the league and team attorneys, but also the business lawyers and contemporaries.

Q: Do you ever have conflicts with other law firms because of your relationship with Bracewell?

A: Over the years, I have spent a gazillion dollars on other law firms on behalf of the Spurs. When we built our building, I

hired the Winsted Law Firm because they had done a bunch of these buildings. They became our point people in the negotiations, dealing with everything from our development agreement to our naming rights agreement as well as a host of things. It’s been an advantage for the team, since I know how to manage outside lawyers because I am one. The Spurs know and trust that if Bracewell can do the work most efficiently, then great. If not, I will hire someone who can do it better.

Q: When did you know you wanted to practice sports law?

A: I never thought about practicing sports law. In the early 1990s, when Red McCombs owned the team, the team hired me to do some work and it grew from there. In 1995, after Red sold the team, they brought in a guy named Jack Diller, who had been GM with the Rangers and had done some work with Madison Square Garden. Jack and I got to know each other and he decided he wanted to have someone fill that role.

Q: Did you practice any sports law before that?

A: So much of what I do has nothing to do with sports law. It just happens to be for a sports entity. I had been volunteer general counsel for the San Antonio Sports Foundation. I had helped with some of the Olympic festivals. So I had some

familiarity with sports issues. And like a lot of sports lawyers, I had great interest in playing sports and absolutely no talent. It was serendipity that the Spurs needed someone and Jack and I had gotten to know one another.

Q: *Are you a fan?*

A: You can't be as close as I am to the organization and not be a fan. It is interesting, many people look at what I do and say it must be great to spend all that time with the players. But the fact is I don't spend a lot of time with the players. One of the things I am mindful of is that it can be an adversarial relationship with the players. When we have franchise players like Duncan or Ginobili or Robinson or Parker, it's a little different. But being a sports junkie isn't that helpful to being a sports lawyer. The Spurs have been very, very good to me. We have four championships. I have four championship rings.

Q: *Do you have any interaction with GCs in other sports?*

A: When we were building our build-

ing, other teams were in front or behind us in line and we would talk. The labor situation brought us together as well. It's not day-to-day, but it is a very collegial relationship with the other GCs.

Q: *What advice would you give students or young lawyers who want to get into sports law?*

A: It's most useful to do two things. The first is make sure that you are really well grounded in commercial, transaction, finance, corporate structures, the things that any business cares about. The second is you probably ought to go to law school, some place where you have an opportunity to intern for a professional or collegiate entity. There are so many opportunities at the collegiate level that if you really want to get into the business that is one of the best places to start.

Q: *What is the biggest challenge with your job?*

A: The breadth of it. I'm in charge of everything from speeding tickets to antitrust issues. I've even been named

as an indicted defendant in the civil context because of my role in developing the AT&T center. It's a broad range of things. And I'm not particularly good at any of those, but I can dance fast enough to provide some value across the board. That's a challenge for most of us. Specific to my job, because we are in a small market, there's an extra layer of sensitivity to what we do. So there are challenges above simply knowing the law and being able to tell your clients what their options are.

Q: *What's the most rewarding aspect of your job?*

A: Twofold. First, I'm flattered to have the relationship I do and they have been gracious to me for a long-time. The second is that this is just a terrific organization. If you look at what the Spurs have done over the last decade, being identified as one of the best franchises in professional sports, I really am enormously fond of the people I work with. Very close relationships. Pop has been there off and on since 1992. Peter is on the team since 1996. We have grown up together. ●