

# PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES AND CEOs: the dynamics of dealing with “Game Over.”

Professional athletes are held up to children as role models they might wish to be like as adults.

As adults, professional athletes are held up to us as sources of inspiration when we seek role models for competition within the rules, team spirit, initiative, and perseverance.

In this article we will examine a third area where professional athletes are role models for senior level executives entering Game Over scenarios.

The inspiration for this paper comes from our work with retired professional basketball players.

## **Game Over Scenarios:**

In every professional life, there is a point when it is time to leave. You are finished in this sport or this industry.

Sometimes your body is the one that screams “Game Over!” Sometimes it is your boss. Sometimes it is a non-competition agreement you signed. Sometimes it is the voice of the marketplace screaming at you with its silence.

Game Over scenarios are difficult for athletes because they often must face it when they are too old to be re-employed by another team yet too young to retire.

With longer lives and an expansion of middle age health into the early 70's, the threat of outliving retirement assets is very real.

### **Game Over scenarios can be Frightening.**

David Ostrowsky (2014) has written an excellent account about how professional athletes reinvent or fail to reinvent themselves when they reach Game Over.

Detroit Pistons' former player Dave Bing articulates the problem faced by athletes:

“The mistake most of us make is that we think we’re going to play forever. Very few guys, I think, prepare for a second career.

“The lifestyle we lead and the position that public puts us in as successful athletes make us think we’re invincible.”

Given the fear associated with Game Over, it is only natural that athletes and senior executives fail to “read” the signs. They do not want to think “Game Over.” They want to think “Job Over.” And the answer to ‘Job Over’ is find a similar job on a new team.

Some athletes and senior executives fail to retain an outside career consultant who can provide them with an honest market assessment.

If the athlete or the senior executive fails to make an appropriate diagnosis (Job Over vs Game Over), it can lead to public humiliation.

Ostrowsky describes the humiliation of baseball legend Willie Mays' leaving the San Francisco Giants for the New York Mets when his powers as a player were gone.

The same could be said of legendary Chicago Bulls' Michael Jordan when he joined the Washington Wizards. Former Boston Celtics great Antoine Walker

once earned over \$100 Million in Boston but ended up playing for the Idaho Stampedes for \$25,000 a year.

### **It is no Different in Business.**

Successful leaders may initially want to believe that they face a Job Over scenario when they actually face a Game Over situation.

For example, some law firms granting a former equity law partner the status of “of counsel.” Some universities grant former professors the title “professor emeritus.” These institutional “gifts of appreciation” allow professionals to avoid having to confront Game Over scenarios.

Whether the person is an athlete or a successful leader, old habits are hard to unlearn.

Like athletes, business leaders have many people in their lives with vested economic incentives to tell clients what they want to hear.

In the absence of a trusted third party to work with, you will have to trust the marketplace to eventually give you the answer.

The question for athletes and for leaders is how willing are you to risk the perceived humiliation if the marketplace gives you an answer you do not wish to hear?

### **Move to Adjacency:**

In professional sports there are several roles that do not involve playing and yet these roles are a natural extension of past activities. Moving from player to coach of players is one example.

Larry Byrd and Yogi Berra made such transitions.

Another adjacency is to move from sports to entertainment.

Entertainment role models might include television commentator Lou Merloni. The former Boston Red Sox infielder made a career in hosting a Boston sports station talk show. Former Red Sox player Jerry Remy

served as color commentator on the New England Sports Network. Jerry Rice, Rebecca Lobo, and Mike Ditka earned income and new professional lives as commentators for ESPN.

Since professional athletes are performance artists, why not find roles in performance art?

Bubba Smith was defensive lineman for the Baltimore Colts. He later played the role of Moses Hightower in the movie *Police Academy*. He also played roles on such television shows as *Charlie's Angels*, *Married with Children*, and *Family Matters*.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was the legendary center for the Los Angeles Lakers in the 1980's. And he later appeared in the comedy movie *Airplane*. He also appeared in *Full House* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.

Joe Louis was the world's heavyweight champion from 1937 to 1949. When boxing career was finished, he also went into entertainment: he was hired by Caesar's Palace Casino in Las Vegas to sign autographs, shake customers' hands, and play golf with special guests.

### **Stop Asking Yourself "Should I Be a Consultant or Coach?"**

The logical adjacency for business leaders is consulting or board work.

At Stybel Peabody, we tell our clients that the question is no longer "should I be a consultant?" The real question is "When I become a consultant, will I make money at it?"

Establishing a consulting practice or developing board options is like going to a bank for a loan. The banking cliché is that the best time to ask a bank for a loan is when you don't need one. The worst time to ask for a loan is when you do.

We apply this logic pattern with our clients in the following way:

The best time to begin the process of establishing board options or setting the stage for your consulting practice is when you are too busy to do it. The worst time is when you must do it.

We see some of our best corporate clients understand this paradox and help employees to resolve it.

For example, one of the world's great strategy consulting firms does not permit its partners to be on any boards, even nonprofit boards. As partners move towards retirement in 18 months, the firm wants to encourage them to pursue board options before they leave the firm. It even aids partners to make the transition. In doing this, the firm is not merely being generous. It wants to seed boards of companies with friends of the firm. From the perspective of this firm, it is engaged in a business development exercise and not an HR cost.

### **Reinvention:**

Much of GAME OVER OR GAME ON focuses on how athletes move from a physical-oriented environment to the more intellectual –oriented pursuits of business, politics, or community development. The book contains inspiring stories but the message that comes through is that these reinventions are not really reinventions.

Professional athletes are known for their competitiveness, diligence, and perseverance. Athletes are simply taking these skills into new areas.

Earlier we mentioned former Detroit Piston's star Dave Bing.

During this professional career in sports, he spent eight consecutive summers as a management trainee for the National Bank of Detroit. Bing knew his basketball career had a looming expiration date.

He used the off season as a time to learn a new craft before he needed to engage in that craft. This is a concrete example of "the best time to ask for a loan is when you do not need one."

After his athletic career was over, he became an entrepreneur. The Bing Group was an auto supply business with four workers and \$180,000 in loans. In 2009 the Bing Group had annual sales of \$300 million and he sold the business.

Once again, Dave Bing had the courage to reinvent himself. He launched a political career and became Mayor of Detroit from 2009-2013.

## **Why Am I Alive?**

While not a professional athlete, we find Viktor Frankl a fabulous Game Over role model.

Prior to German's invasion of Austria, Frankl had a comfortable life as a physician in Vienna. That game was abruptly over when he was imprisoned four different labor/death camps between 1942 and 1945. His parents, pregnant wife, and brother were all killed by the Nazis.

As a concentration camp prisoner, Frankl observed that some of his fellow inmates gave up on life. Some even sought it through suicide. And yet others managed to preserve under seemingly hopeless conditions. Why?

Frankl's book **MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING** was his attempt to make sense of the senseless. And yet it has great value for those finding themselves in Game Over.

He argues that we cannot avoid suffering. We can only make a choice about how to find purpose in suffering.

Frankl's purpose in life became the desire to observe how his fellow inmates dealt with unbearable suffering and then to write a book about surviving suffering. **MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING** is the consequence of that purpose. It has sold more than 10 million copies in twenty-four languages.

The fundamental question Viktor Frankl leaves us with is the need to put aside "how am I going to live?" to focus on the more uncomfortable "why" am I alive?

This is THE fundamental question to ask when confronting a Game Over scenario.

### **A Case Example:**

As a child, Tom was sickly and thin. He majored in accounting and in middle age became CFO of a chain of drug stores. During this period, a doctor discovered that Tom had an allergy to a certain type of protein

commonly found in milk products. Tom changed his diet, joined a gym, and got an MBA. He was larger, stronger, and more confident.

The owner of the drug store franchise had an idea that Tom opposed. Tom continued to oppose this idea despite the CEO's insistence on it. Eventually, Tom was fired by the CEO.

Tom's original focus was his anger over being fired for simply doing his job: providing objective counsel about the financial consequences of a strategic decision. He also focused on the humiliation of being fired, and how would he ever get re-employed.

Our intervention, however, focused on the meaning of the firing in Tom's life.

He had reinvented himself through a new diet, exercise, and an MBA. Perhaps Tom had been hired by the drug store chain CEO because he knew that Tom would bend to the CEO's demands. But that was the "old" Tom. Tom's firing was a "red badge of courage."

We designed a job search campaign around the theme of Tom not being afraid to speak truth to power.

Game Over became Job Over.

### **Game Over or Game On:**

If we are lucky enough to live long enough, we will reach the Game Over stage. Athletes reach it earlier than most of the population. But it will come.

Not long ago, the answer to Game Over was "retirement." But for professional athletes and for many leaders that is not an appropriate response. There is a natural temptation to not wish to think about Game Over but diagnose the situation as Job Over. Impartial counsel may be critical to avoid public humiliation. There are too many people who are too willing to tell you what you want to hear.

Game Over options include finding adjacency options or reinventing yourself.

These are important “how” questions. The more important consideration is ask “why am I alive?”

Answer that question first and then design your New Game plan like Tom did.

**References:**

Frankl, V. E. (1985). **Man's Search for Meaning**. Simon and Schuster.

Ostrowsky,D (2014) **Game Over or Game On: how pro athletes leave sports and enjoy the game of life**. Mill City Press.

###



Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. Its mission is to allow corporate clients to provide “Leadership and Career Success” for its valued senior level leaders.

Core services revolve around retained search, coaching, and executive outplacement. Stybel Peabody was voted “Best Outplacement Firm” by the readers of MASSACHUSETTS LAWYERS WEEKLY for three years in a row.

For a free 30-minute consultation, contact:

Maryanne Peabody  
[peabody@stybelpeabody.com](mailto:peabody@stybelpeabody.com)  
stybelpeabody.com  
boardoptions.com