

# The Sports Philanthropy Project

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## *Editors' Introduction*

Many corporate foundations choose to make grants to local nonprofit organizations that do charitable work in the community. They often do not consider that by adopting a more strategic approach they could have a sustained and more meaningful impact. Curt Weeden, a former vice-president of Johnson & Johnson, has advocated a strategic approach to social investing by corporations that can benefit both the not-for-profit organization and the corporation itself.<sup>1</sup> The foundations (or community relations divisions) of major league sports teams are not generally part of the core business of sports, and they tend to fall into the category of foundations that do not do strategic grantmaking.

In this chapter, Digby Diehl tells the story of the development of the Sports Philanthropy Project. Through this project, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation worked with foundations established by professional sports teams, helping them develop their philanthropic skills and become more professional in their approach to grantmaking. The project enabled the Foundation to leverage the cachet of professional athletes and teams to further its own health and health care goals. For example, when the Foundation proposed to Major League Soccer that it join in a campaign to enroll uninsured children in the State Children's Health Insurance Program or Medicaid, league officials immediately saw the mutual benefit of such a partnership. Freddie Adu and Jaime Moreno, two stars of the D.C. United team, served as spokespersons for the campaign, and the teams provided children's coverage days at its games, with space for promotion booths, public service announcements, and materials in game books.

Although the Sports Philanthropy Project has encountered some difficulty in establishing an identity of its own, it shows the potential of harnessing the recognition and influence of athletes, teams, and celebrities. For example, salsa musician Willie Colon made a music video concerning children's health insurance, and the cast of NBC's *The Office* made a public service announcement for Cover the Uninsured Week.

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1. Weeden C. *Corporate Social Investing*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998.

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Standing on the sidelines in Jacksonville's Alltel Stadium at the kickoff of a *Monday Night Football* game between the Jacksonville Jaguars and the Pittsburgh Steelers, the glamour and the excitement are palpable. The ground is literally shaking from 22 large men running and smashing into each other in pursuit of a spiraling piece of pigskin that has been kicked high into the air. Cheerleaders leap and perform back flips. Referees in black-and-white striped uniforms blow whistles and wave their arms. Fireworks explode; confetti rains down; and the roar of 73,000 wildly enthusiastic spectators is deafening.

What could this hedonistic, testosterone-driven scene of violence and emotion possibly have to do with the dignified, plush-carpeted, hushed-toned world of a health foundation in Princeton, New Jersey?

"Nothing," answers Joe Marx with a laugh. Marx is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's senior communications officer and one of the architects of the Sports Philanthropy Project. He continues, "At least, that's what a lot of people at the Foundation thought at first. A typical reaction was, 'These are wealthy owners who build enormous stadiums; the athletes are overpaid. Why should we invest our time and money in *them*?' However, that has changed. Professional sports is big business, yes, but experience has shown that it can also be a big player in driving social change."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has become the first national foundation to try to harness the enormous communications power and public prestige of professional athletics on behalf of health issues. To do so, its staff has had to handle many challenges with patience, diplomacy, and dogged determination over the past nine years. The partnership began with a hodgepodge of well-intentioned ideas, many frustrated efforts, and a few detours. Today, the direction of its work in sports philanthropy has come into clearer focus with specific goals—such as covering the uninsured and fighting childhood obesity—a new administrative structure, and teams committing to sustained health initiatives.

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### Unlikely Genesis: The Jacksonville Jaguars Scoreboard

The seed of this project was planted in 1995 with a telephone call from Greg Gross, then president of the Jacksonville Jaguars Foundation, to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation program officer Michael Beachler. Gross had known Beachler from his experiences in the foundation world of Boston, where Gross had worked with several philanthropic groups. He also was aware that RWJF had made tobacco control one of its high priorities and had launched some large national programs to combat smoking. Even more specific to sports and tobacco, the Foundation was working with baseball Hall-of-Famer Joe Garagiola on the National Spit Tobacco Education Program.

"As Greg explained to me in our phone conversation, the owners of the Jacksonville Jaguars, Wayne and Delores Weaver, wanted to get rid of the Marlboro scoreboard in the new Jaguars Stadium and replace it with an antitobacco message," Beachler recalls. "The stadium was always a nonsmoking facility, and a large part of the work of the Jaguars Foundation was dedicated to informing children

about the dangers of tobacco. The Weavers felt that the scoreboard undermined the work of the Jaguars Foundation.”

Gross needed some financial assistance for the Jaguars Foundation to remove and replace the scoreboard. More significant, however, he recognized the value of having RWJF imprimatur on the project. Beachler knew that it was a long shot, but it was an innovative proposal. First of all, it was not just a marketing scheme from a sports team. It was part of an ongoing community effort by a sports philanthropy with a proven record, whose work was much larger than this one individual act. The catch was that Gross needed a commitment fast. “After I got off the phone with Greg, I had to make a pitch within the Foundation on one day’s notice, with no proposal from the Jaguars to work from,” Beachler recalls. “I knew that our president, Steve Schroeder, was a sports fan, and I hoped he would see the potential, so I decided to wing it.”

Beachler never got into Schroeder’s office. Catching the busy president for a chance meeting in a hallway, he breathlessly pitched the Jaguars idea. “Literally, it was the fastest grant approval I ever got,” Beachler says. “He listened, and at the end he said just two words: ‘Do it.’ Then I raced back to my office and started working with Greg Gross and Joe Marx on the grant proposal.”

Schroeder may have said just two words to Beachler, but his thought process about the grant was more complex. “To me, it seemed like a risk worth taking, because it combined two major influences in our culture,” Schroeder recalls. “One is sports and the other is the media. The third element I considered is that sports team owners often are beaten up because their athletes do things that are not necessarily emblematic of good citizenship. The Weavers obviously cared about doing some good in their community, and it seemed important to help them. In retrospect, I think it was a substantive grant. If you remove Marlboros as part of the experience of kids going to football games with their dads, you make it a more healthy environment.”

On August 1, 1995, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Board of Trustees awarded a grant of \$137,000 for a new scoreboard and other work with the Jaguars Foundation, as Beachler and Marx were airborne to Jacksonville to help implement the plan. The concept of the Jaguars Don’t Smoke campaign came out of their discussions with Gross; Beachler even contributed the image for the sign. “Michael remembered that the Alaska SmokeLess States campaign featured an Iditarod dog stepping on a pack of cigarettes,” Marx recalls. “He found the artwork, and they turned it into the image of a jaguar squashing a pack of cigarettes that they used for the sign.”

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### **Beyond the Scoreboard: New Health Initiatives in Jacksonville**

Shortly after the installation of the new scoreboard, the Jaguars’ co-owner, Wayne Weaver, talked with National Football League Commissioner Paul Tagliabue about the NFL contract to publish full-page advertisements for Marlboro cigarettes in the game day programs of all NFL teams. Weaver sought and received permission for the Jaguars to opt out of the Marlboro contract the following year. Two years later, as a result of Weaver’s continued discussions with Tagliabue, the NFL cancelled its contract with Philip Morris. This was considered a major step in severing the “glamour” link between smoking and professional sports.

Equally significant for the creation of what was to become the Sports Philanthropy Project, Marx, Beachler, and Gross discussed a range of additional community health ideas sponsored by the Jaguars Foundation. This included their ongoing Honor Rows program, which rewards thousands of Jacksonville children each year with tickets to games, T-shirts, hats, and autograph cards in return for academic distinction or community service and pledges not to use tobacco, alcohol, or drugs.<sup>1</sup> Delores Weaver's Straight Talk program to curb teen pregnancy and AIDS was also marketed through team radio programs and personal appearances.

Back in Princeton, Marx worked with Gross, who was writing another proposal for the Jaguars Foundation. In July 1996 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded \$325,000 to the Jaguars Foundation to expand its youth-oriented tobacco education campaign. Focusing on at-risk children, this grant, with a subsequent renewal, included funds to establish a model elementary school-based health center in Jacksonville, a multiservice youth program in the town's inner city, and programs to increase teaching and accountability regarding tobacco in the schools.

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**Work Begins with Other Teams: The New Jersey Nets**

Beachler, Marx, and Gross soon discussed how the Jaguars' experience could be replicated by other sports teams. "I realized that the Weavers are special people and that the Jaguars Foundation is an exceptional organization, but, most important, I learned how professional sports, as a corporate partner, could be a force for social change like no other," Marx recalls. "Sports teams have such cachet in the community, such market power, and so many other resources. Money is only a part. In the owner's box, I saw political leaders at the state and national level, business leaders in the community—all kinds of decision-makers and influential people who were sports fans."

Marx then organized a meeting in 1996 with Foundation staff members and representatives from the New Jersey Nets basketball team, who were interested in hearing how they might participate in the Foundation's programs to reduce tobacco use among young people. As a result of that meeting and subsequent discussions, a \$164,000 grant was awarded to the Nets on December 1, 1996, to support a tobacco education campaign called New Jersey Breathes, undertaken in conjunction with the Medical Society of New Jersey.

Coordinated by Gary Sussman, the Nets director of community relations, more than 2,000 tickets to Nets games were awarded to children who pledged not to smoke. A mass media campaign, including full-page antismoking ads in every issue of the team program, was mounted. Despite sustained efforts to remove tobacco ads from the Continental Airlines Arena, the Nets' home court, stadium ownership would agree only to move the ads out of camera range for television coverage. Nevertheless, members of the Nets organization estimated that the one-year campaign—the first tobacco-education program ever undertaken by a professional basketball organization—reached an estimated 14 million people. On December 22, 1997, a follow-up grant of \$191,500 was awarded to the Nets for a similar program called Smoking Is an Offensive Foul.

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**Linking Philanthropies:  
The First Sports  
Philanthropy Project  
Conferences**

By 1998 other sports teams had indicated an interest in expanding or starting their own philanthropic work. Gross, the Jaguars Foundation president, suggested that the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation hire Greg Johnson, whom Gross had known from Harvard University, as a consultant to work with other teams. Johnson had worked for 17 years running the Phillips Brooks House, a human services division of Harvard, and then with Arnold Hiatt, the chief executive officer of the Stride Rite Corporation, on his Stride Rite Charitable Foundation.

In July 1998 Marx and Frank Karel, the Foundation's vice-president for communications at the time, invited Johnson to a health communications conference in Princeton. "The three of us talked for a couple of hours afterward, and they pretty much offered me the job then and there," Johnson recalls. "They asked me to survey the field and see what I could find. I started by talking with the Jaguars Foundation, which seemed to be the gold standard for sports philanthropy. Then I talked with the Nets and some of the other sports teams that Joe Marx had already contacted. Within a couple of months, it was obvious that rather than me dealing with them one by one, it would be more efficient to bring the interested teams together so they could talk to one another. We invited representatives from 19 teams—community relations directors or heads of fledgling foundations—to the Marriott Hotel in Princeton in July 1999.

"We called it our first Sports Philanthropy Project conference, but it was actually more like a think tank—or an AA meeting," Johnson says. "Many of the teams' staff people wanted to gripe that their management simply didn't get philanthropy. We agreed that the discussions would be strictly off the record, and I think that helped us to make real progress understanding the problems that exist in the sports culture."

Johnson was to coordinate efforts to form strategic partnerships between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and various team foundations. He was also given the task of helping team foundations to become more "mature," so they would operate more like professional philanthropies with many more years of experience.

"What emerged from that meeting was the need to give interested teams some hands-on technical assistance," Johnson continues. "The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded me to work with several teams on some pilot projects to see if I could make a difference. I started with the Nets, and the St. Louis Rams and Baltimore Ravens of the NFL. I lived with each of them for six or seven weeks and built internal infrastructure for communications and networking that they didn't have before." In St. Louis, for example, Johnson worked with the Rams Foundation, which has contributed more than \$5 million in cash and in-kind efforts to community work. In 2006 it joined the Healthy Youth Partnership with 70 other organizations to fight childhood obesity through nutrition and physical activity in the St. Louis area schools. The Rams running back Steven Jackson is an active spokesperson for the program. In Baltimore, the Ravens Honor Rows program is based on the Jacksonville program of the same name that Johnson brought to the Ravens' attention; it rewards students for community involvement with tickets to Ravens games. The Ravens have also enlarged their Rookies Youth Football Clinic program, and the Ravens All-Community Team Foundation continues its commitment to high school football and funds numerous field refurbishments.

One of the first meetings Johnson coordinated was between Schroeder and members of the New Jersey Nets corporate staff. At this meeting, Schroeder explained to the Nets new majority owner, Ray Chambers, that to create an effective foundation for his organization he had to hire someone who understood not only the business of sports but also the business of philanthropy. Chambers and his Nets partner, Lewis Katz, embraced this concept. Johnson then worked with Suzanne Spero, executive director of the MCJ Foundation—Chambers’ family foundation—to find an appropriately experienced person and to help form a foundation for the Nets. Shortly thereafter, the Nets hired Patricia Goodrich, who had previously worked with the ABC television network in community relations.

Although it was clear at this early point that the Foundation was correct in its initial recognition of the potential in sports philanthropy, it was also clear that it would take time to fulfill that potential. In 2000 the Sports Philanthropy Project consisted only of Greg Johnson, his temporary assistant, and a summer intern. That summer, the name “Sports Philanthropy Project” was used for the first time at a Sports Philanthropy Project conference held in Boston. Attended by representatives of 22 franchises in baseball, basketball, football, and hockey, it featured the noted Harvard professor and child psychiatrist Robert Coles as the keynote speaker.

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## Teamwork

Building on the momentum of the 1999 and 2000 conferences, Johnson began expanding the project. Discussions at the first conference made clear the need for education about philanthropy at every level of sports teams, from ownership to community relations organizers. The second conference emphasized the need for technical assistance in helping teams to set up a philanthropic framework. The Sports Philanthropy Project Web site was launched shortly thereafter. Johnson also hired Van Le, an attorney from the Boston law firm of Ropes & Gray. Le came to the Sports Philanthropy Project from a diverse background that included work in the public defender’s office, in a refugee camp in the Philippines, and with Johnson at the Phillips Brooks House.

“Candidly, in the early days, sports teams were reluctant to allow philanthropy consultants in the door,” Le says. “They were afraid of criticism, so we added client confidentiality agreements to our relationships, which made the teams more comfortable.”

### The Golden State Warriors

Le’s first project, in 2001, was as a consultant to the NBA’s Golden State Warriors, headquartered in Oakland, California. The team had created the Golden State Warriors Foundation in 1997; since then, with CEO Christopher Cohan’s wife, Angela, as president of the Foundation, they have distributed more than \$1.5 million to nonprofit organizations. “When I worked with them, the Warriors had already established an after-school program for children in Oakland, as well as a junior basketball league—with thousands of kids playing under their sponsorship,” Le recalls. “They also contributed to anti-substance abuse initiatives and promoted literacy. In our work, we try to help teams look at the impact of what they are doing. We help them to clarify their mission and to focus on organizing principles. One result of these discussions with the Warriors was that they worked more closely with the Alameda County Public Health program to promote physical activity.” In

conjunction with Kaiser Permanente, the Warriors developed a Get Fit program to fight childhood obesity. Team members visit elementary, middle, and high schools to promote healthy eating and active lifestyles.

### **Reds, Burn, Bills**

Le next spent several months advising three more teams: Major League Baseball's Cincinnati Reds, the Dallas Burn of Major League Soccer, and the National Football League's Buffalo Bills. "In Cincinnati, we were able to help the Reds take a more active role in community relations, to set up an effective team foundation, and to begin a youth program called the Reds Rookie Success League," Le notes. The Reds Rookies Success League targets at-risk eight- to 11-year-olds, offering a summer of coed baseball that is frequently visited by Reds players. It also includes medical, dental, and vision screening.

The Dallas Burn soccer team [later renamed FC Dallas] developed programming within the Latino community that supports youth soccer and aggressive anti-substance abuse efforts. Currently, the FC Dallas Foundation, through its Kicks for Kids program, distributes 1,000 game tickets to community groups and schools to reward inner-city, at-risk, and disadvantaged children in the Dallas-Fort Worth area who have given community service or made pledges to abstain from tobacco, drugs, and alcohol use.

The Buffalo Bills became the first team in the NFL to build a facility dedicated to youth football on the same grounds as the team headquarters. The team supports an active program of youth football and offers tickets to Bills games as a reward for community service efforts through the Buffalo Bills Youth Foundation.

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### **Leveraging Pro Sports for Health**

As the Sports Philanthropy Project developed, its activities became more closely aligned with those of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and it was able to bring the star power of professional sports to important health issues such as combating childhood obesity and expanding health insurance coverage for children.

Lisa Willis, the director of development, began in mid-2001 as the Sports Philanthropy Project director of marketing and communications; like all of the members of the small Sports Philanthropy Project team, she was immediately wearing many hats. "As the title suggests, I began by working on marketing brochures and expanding the Web site," she said. "The second part of my job was organizing our conferences." Willis is especially proud of the Sports Philanthropy Project's work with two Foundation-funded social marketing campaigns: Cover the Uninsured Week and the Covering Kids & Families communications campaign. Her work with Major League Soccer to promote health insurance for children illustrates the way in which professional sports and philanthropy can collaborate for the public good. Willis worked closely with RWJF's coverage team and with the GMMB public relations agency (a subsidiary of Fleishman-Hillard), to enlist support from Major League Soccer and, initially, its teams in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago.

It was a win-win situation. Major League Soccer, striving to develop a market in the United States, gained credibility from its Foundation-connected work to improve community health. For its part, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was able to leverage the reach of Major League Soccer in the Latino community, which has a disproportionately high number of uninsured children. All 12 professional soccer teams, as well as Major League Soccer itself, now engage in promotional efforts to support Covering Kids & Families. These efforts include:

- Events at schools with soccer players;
- Public service announcements during games;
- Informational materials about health insurance at stadium booths;
- Ad space in Major League Soccer game programs.

Alisha Greenberg, manager of client services, joined the Sports Philanthropy Project in January 2002 and began to work with Willis on the Web site, conferences, and, later, social marketing campaigns. The July 2002 Sports Philanthropy Project Conference attracted more than 120 professional sports team and athlete foundation representatives to Chicago, where Greenberg first met representatives from the Chicago Fire soccer team. She later had the honor of kicking out the first ball as part of the Fire's Children's Health Care Coverage Day, which she had helped to organize. The Chicago Fire team foundation has developed a pilot program, the Active Kids Initiative, a comprehensive school- and community-based effort to fight childhood obesity—a high priority of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—in three of the most at-risk Chicago communities: South Shore, South Lawndale, and Bridgeview.

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### 2003–2006: Challenges and Focus

By 2003 the Sports Philanthropy Project had received Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funding for five years. The Foundation traditionally uses its resources as start-up financing for programs, with the expectation that recipients will eventually become self-sustaining. Within the Foundation, there was discussion about whether the Sports Philanthropy Project really had the potential to harness professional sports to promote better health, whether it would be able to become self-sufficient, whether it was organized properly, and whether further investment would yield the health results that the Foundation was seeking. “These discussions led us to suggest that the Sports Philanthropy Project bring in outside experts to evaluate its progress to date and help it assess where it was going; that it develop a long-range plan; and that it become self-sustaining—and in doing so, that it consider various scenarios about the future, both with and without financial support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation,” Joe Marx says. The evaluation and strategic planning was contracted to Development Resources, Inc., or DRI, and was headed by Jennifer Dunlap, former senior vice president of development for the American Red Cross.

Even as it was telling the Sports Philanthropy Project that the time had come to consider all of its options for the future, the Foundation awarded the Project roughly two million dollars in 2003 and 2004 to continue the work it had been doing and to carry out the evaluation and strategic planning process. Under the terms of the grant awards, the goals of the Project were refined to address two health concerns—coverage of the uninsured and childhood obesity—and links with additional teams

were to be forged. The grant specified that the Sports Philanthropy Project was to continue its collaboration with the Covering Kids & Families communications campaign and develop programs to promote physical activity and reduce childhood obesity in Phoenix and two additional cities.

### **Potential Support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation**

As a result of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's instruction to seek ways of becoming self-sustaining and the uncertainty about the Project's long-term financial future, in late 2003 the Sports Philanthropy Project submitted a solicited proposal to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation "to strengthen and promote philanthropy among athletes as a strategy for community engagement and leadership development among young people." The application was successful, and in February 2004 the Kellogg Foundation awarded the Sports Philanthropy Project a four-year grant for \$3.5 million. The grant had one major proviso: Kellogg was to take over the running of the Sports Philanthropy Project.

The Sports Philanthropy Project was at a crossroads. As Greg Johnson explains it, there was a financial crisis looming because the future of RWJF sponsorship was uncertain. "I had to look at my staff and the future of the organization," Johnson says. "If support from that foundation was coming to an end, turning the Sports Philanthropy Project over to another funder would be the responsible thing to do.

"The problem was that Kellogg wanted us to work exclusively with individual athlete foundations, and RWJF wanted us to continue the work we had been doing primarily with teams and organizations representing groups of teams," Johnson continues. "Simultaneously, we had been moving toward setting ourselves up as a separate nonprofit corporation and forming a board. One of the first questions we put to the board was whether these two grants could be symbiotic or whether we had to choose. The board, in conjunction with an outside consultant, decided that we should continue to work with teams, as we had been, and to continue our relationship with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation." For its part, the Kellogg Foundation went forward with its intention to work with individual sports figures and their personal foundations. It reorganized its grant as the Athlete Legacy League and continued independently. In 2006 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded \$3.5 million to the Sports Philanthropy Foundation to continue its work through 2010.

Understandably, no one wanted to go on record regarding a widely known problem of individual athlete foundations: they can be capricious and unreliable. There are certainly impressive examples of athlete philanthropy, including the New York Giants football star Tiki Barber, the golfer Tiger Woods, the cyclist Lance Armstrong, the tennis icon Andre Agassi, and the Yankees' star Derek Jeter. They appear, however, to be commendable exceptions. "Even among those athletes with charitable leanings, the record is uneven," Lynn Zinser points out in a thoughtful *New York Times* article on the topic.<sup>2</sup> "Many never advance beyond making appearances, contributing nothing more than time and autographs. Some spend their energy and resources on events like star-studded charity golf tournaments." Others, such as Michael Jordan, begin with good intentions and discover that the foundation is being mishandled or that little money reaches the intended recipients. Jordan closed his foundation in 1996.

### **Sports Philanthropy Project's Giant Step Forward in Arizona**

Early in 2003 Steve Patterson got in touch with the Sports Philanthropy Project on behalf of the Arizona Sports and Tourism Authority, or AZSTA. Patterson, a UCLA basketball star under coach John Wooden and former professional player with the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Chicago Bulls, was working as a consultant to AZSTA through his company, Patterson Sports Ventures. He found Greg Johnson at the Sports Philanthropy Project through the Internet, and after several conversations he invited Johnson to give the welcoming address at AZSTA's First Annual Youth and Amateur Sports Summit.

AZSTA had been created in 2000 to handle four very large interrelated projects:

- Construction of a new \$380-million stadium for the Arizona Cardinals;
- Administration of the Cactus League spring training facilities for Major League Baseball, including refurbishment of existing stadiums and building of more stadiums and facilities;
- Funding of tourism development in Maricopa County;
- Distribution of a projected \$73.5 million over 30 years for youth sports facilities.

These projects had been approved under the terms of Proposition 302, a controversial bond issue that was passed by a narrow majority of Arizona voters.

"The group I addressed was a cross-section of the public, many of whom were unhappy with the Cardinals stadium and AZSTA," Johnson recalls. "I was candid. I asked those people to make demands of the team, of AZSTA, and to use this opportunity in a wise fashion rather than squander it. I also offered to have the Sports Philanthropy Project do some *pro bono* work with Steve to design ways to make this situation work for the entire community."

The offices of Ted Ferris, the CEO of AZSTA, are in the colossal new Cardinals stadium. This state-of-the-art facility has features that wow all first-time visitors. Most astonishing, its natural grass playing field is fully retractable; beneath it lies 160,000 square feet of column-free space, ideal for conventions and trade shows. The entire roof rolls back for open-air events; otherwise, the high-tech environment is fully air-conditioned against the blazing Arizona sun. With 63,500 fixed seats and 10,000 more that can be added, this stadium was ready for the annual Fiesta Bowl, this year's Super Bowl, and almost any gathering or event you can name.

"I think we are making this situation work rather well for the entire community," Ferris comments. "We have the world's biggest and best multipurpose arena, and it is already bringing in tourism tax dollars for Arizona. We are continuing and enlarging the spring training facilities for Major League Baseball teams, with two proposals for building new stadiums, as well as rehabilitating the existing stadiums. I can't take credit for putting together the excellent community efforts—that credit goes to Steve Patterson, Greg Johnson, and Van Le—but I will take some credit for listening and being open to their good ideas."

In working with the community, there was a great deal of initial resistance to be overcome. "I was asked to go to Phoenix to help put together a coalition of people who would be interested in

working on childhood obesity,” Van Le says. When he arrived, he found that the term *coalition* was premature and that a lot of people were not satisfied with the AZSTA’s \$73-million grant program.”

This was new territory for the Sports Philanthropy Project. AZSTA clearly was not a team foundation. However, the problems of understanding focus and sustained effort on behalf of a community issue were the same. Le realized that AZSTA was not really set up to handle this undertaking. He suggested the formation of an independent, broad-based community coalition tasked with more than just handing out money.

“The mission I proposed was sponsoring physical activity and fighting childhood obesity in Phoenix,” Le recalls. “We suggested that the coalition be composed of professionals in the field, from public health to youth organizations to park districts. David Morse, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s vice-president for communications, arranged a one-time grant of \$75,000 to get the coalition going, which was matched by the Arizona Cardinals and AZSTA. At that point, we created the Maricopa Council on Youth Sports and Physical Activity—MCYSPA, which is pronounced ‘Mickey Spa’—and hired Shawna Bradlich as the executive director. AZSTA administers the grants, but the rest is handled by MCYSPA. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s participation gave the project credibility with other foundations.”

Bradlich notes, “By vouching for the validity of such an innovative concept—a community body participating in the allocation of tax dollars—the Foundation triggered a domino effect for other funders at the table.”

MCYSPA ostensibly functions as an advisory group to AZSTA. As a result, although 100 percent of its recommendations are accepted by the AZSTA board, MCYSPA is not set up as a separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Consequently, executive director Shawna Bradlich works with the Arizona Community Foundation, which encompasses more than 800 funds with combined assets of \$560 million, according to Deborah Whitehurst, chief operating officer of the community foundation. “We are the fiscal agent for MCYSPA, but we also are sometimes involved in programmatic advisory roles,” Whitehurst says. “We are able to reach out to other people who might want to fund the coalition or partner in certain projects.”

An example of coalition funding is presented by Dr. Jonathan Weisbuch, former public health director of Maricopa County: “When I joined the board of MCYSPA, it became clear that by joining forces with this organization, not only would we have an opportunity for funding, but we would also have an opportunity for input. For example, one of the exciting things that Steve Patterson had already organized for MCYSPA funding was an extraordinary Geographic Information System program at Arizona State University. One of the computer guys there showed us how he could identify on the map of Maricopa County all of the athletic fields and exercise resources available to individuals, and he could link them to information such as field schedules, when the games were played, the names of coaches, and so forth. You can cross-reference that with the population density, the ethnic mix of people in the area, and all sorts of information with health implications. There are more than 2,000 facilities and programs already mapped. They are working on a program like that for the whole state of Arizona.”

Everywhere in Maricopa County, there are projects funded by AZSTA. At the Golden Gate Community Center, AZSTA has funded the renovation of a large gymnasium, which is shared by children and adults—all into exercise. “At Avondale Friendship Park,” says Don Davis, the director of Avondale’s Parks, Recreation, and Libraries Department, “we established these multipurpose fields three years ago, and now they are in use so often year-round that we have to reserve time to allow the grass to grow back. In 2006 AZSTA provided the funding to set up night lights on several fields, so that we have more hours available to the community.” Similar multiuse fields surround the Cardinals stadium in the suburb of Glendale, which are maintained jointly by the City of Glendale, the Fiesta Bowl parking authority, and AZSTA. At the South Mountain YMCA, located in an area identified as having a high prevalence of childhood obesity, the Arizona Cardinals’ All Kids Can Club is providing healthy exercise classes and nutrition counseling to children ages five to 13.

At the Peoria Sports Complex, a spring training facility for the Seattle Mariners and the San Diego Padres, Jon Richardson, the executive director of the Peoria Diamond Club and a MCYSPA board member, explains how his organization works with the coalition: “We’re a nonprofit that operates the ballpark and the training facilities. During the spring training season, the two teams play about 30 home games in a row between them. We’ll see about 115,000 people in those 30 days, and our biggest crowds can be up to 13,000. In the off-season, we have concerts, youth games, local and out-of-area tournaments and championship games, graduations, RV shows, boat shows, custom car shows, and a big Fourth of July fireworks show. We generate a lot of tourism dollars, and we also do a lot for the community. The money we make we give to youth organizations in Arizona.”

According to Richardson, the facility gives away 100 percent of its profits to youth organizations, some of it through MCYSPA. “Jon is a major player in another initiative of MCYSPA,” Shawna Bradlich notes. “The Summer Youth Program Fund is a new coalition, made up of 11 funders, including the Peoria Diamond Club, that will award about half a million dollars in 2007 for summer youth programs, and we are just getting started. He has brought in his Fiesta Bowl contacts, his Phoenix International Raceway contacts, and his friends at the other spring training facilities. This allows us to offer more programming support, whereas our role with AZSTA is more facility support.”

Steve Patterson began his basketball career at UCLA as a key player on three national championship teams. After graduation, Patterson played for the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Chicago Bulls and coached several basketball teams in Arizona, including Arizona State University’s. He formed Patterson Sports Ventures with his wife, Carlette, to link players, teams, and sports foundations with social causes. Shortly after his death from lung cancer on July 28, 2004, at the age of 56, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Sports Philanthropy Project established an award in his name.<sup>3</sup> Patterson’s coach, the legendary John Wooden, observes, “It is quite appropriate that an award of this type, one that represents someone committed to giving, be named for Steve Patterson, who truly spent his life giving.”

“Steve saw his philanthropy work as an extension of coaching basketball,” Carlette Patterson says. “It is *life* coaching. If you think about the amount of money that the athletes and the leagues have available today, it is enough to make incredible changes in our society. When athletes come from the areas that need change, you are asking them to get involved and give back to their communities, their cousins, their neighbors, their friends, kids just like them.

“Sports philanthropy is basically in its rookie years,” she observes. “It is first-generation money. This is a huge paradigm shift—even talking ‘sports philanthropy’ is a new language that we didn’t

have 10 years ago. That is what's so exciting about this field, especially now that the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Sports Philanthropy Project are engaged. We are just beginning to see the best part of sports helping the whole society. I am really proud that this award continues Steve's legacy."

The first Steve Patterson Sports Philanthropy Award was presented in 2005 to the Philadelphia Eagles Youth Partnership for its pioneering Eagles Eye Mobile program, which provides free eye exams, glasses, and other services to young people who otherwise could not afford them. The program was begun at the initiative of Jermane Mayberry, an Eagles guard and tackle from 1996 to 2004, who donated \$118,000 to launch the program. Mayberry suffers from amblyopia, or underdeveloped optic nerve, and is legally blind in his left eye. He wanted other children to have early eye exams, which might have prevented his condition. Since 1996 the Eye Mobile has examined more than 100,000 children and continues operating today.

John Lumpkin, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation senior vice president, called the Jacksonville Jaguars Foundation "a model philanthropy" at pregame ceremonies for the 2006 Steve Patterson Sports Philanthropy Award in Jacksonville, Florida. The award received national attention on the ESPN *Cold Pizza* show following a *Monday Night Football* game. Citing the Jaguars Don't Smoke program, Lumpkin noted, "You have applied the power of your position in the community strategically and effectively—facing tough issues, seeking solutions over the long haul, and improving the health and strength of the Jacksonville community."

## 2006 and Beyond: The Future of the Sports Philanthropy Project

We live in a celebrity-driven culture, and it is natural for many people to be dazzled by the accomplishments of individual athletes. Teams and athletes have important roles to play as model citizens and community leaders. They can have tremendous impact, perhaps more than politicians. To channel this respect—adoration, even—into something that will benefit the health of the community, the Sports Philanthropy Project has worked with teams and with community coalitions associated with teams. The idea is a winning one, but the execution has not lived up to the full promise until recently.

Since its inception, the Sports Philanthropy Project has carried out a variety of well-intentioned activities, some of which had an impact, others of which did not. The Project did not have a consistent focus and lacked an identity. The evaluation by DRI, which was presented in April 2005, zeroed in on this problem. "What is the Sports Philanthropy Project—A consulting practice? An association? A membership organization? A technical resource?" asked team representatives and other stakeholders quoted in the report. The report concluded that "the Sports Philanthropy Project must define and commit to who it is and what it will do."

After the 2005 DRI evaluation, the Sports Philanthropy Project ratcheted up its efforts to develop a clear identity. Greg Johnson articulated what he saw as the role of the Sports Philanthropy Project. "I began to understand that sports philanthropy is really corporate philanthropy with a special twist," he says. "Sports teams are large corporate franchises that also have special assets that allow them to have considerable impact on the culture. I learned to see our role as middlemen who partner with the teams to leverage their special assets on behalf of public health missions created by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For example, initially we worked on substance abuse and the uninsured, but as the Foundation added a focus on physical activity and obesity issues for youth, so did we."

The Project has been working to develop a coherent strategy and structure that will raise the ethical standards of teams, serve the community by improving health, and provide the Project with a clear and understandable identity that will give it the visibility and credibility to attract funds. The Sports Philanthropy Project's work in Phoenix is serving as something of a model for teams and community coalitions. As Joe Marx points out, "In many ways, the Phoenix project is a key to the future of the Sports Philanthropy Project. It is important because in Phoenix, sports teams joined hands with local businesses, government, foundations, and other community groups to focus on the problem of childhood obesity. It is important because the commitments are long-range and already are beginning to show benefits for the health of children." For its part, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's \$3.5-million grant, awarded in 2006, will ensure the Project's financial stability through 2010 and will enable it to help the professional sports teams' foundations become more strategic and effective in their activities.

The Sports Philanthropy Project has formed a board and become a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. "There have been discussions about renaming the organization once we cease to be a 'project' of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and I think that will happen," Johnson says. To channel the power of professional sports in the service of social change, the Sports Philanthropy Project is focusing on a number of discrete activities:

- Coalition building and program development;
- Social marketing;
- Direct technical assistance;
- The Steve Patterson Sports Philanthropy Award;
- Conferences, workshops, and "Webinars";
- A Web site.

Recently, several encouraging developments have occurred at the Sports Philanthropy Project:

- Greg Johnson was invited to participate in a symposium on "Corporate Social Responsibility in Professional Sports" at the 2007 North American Society for Sport Management conference.
- The 2007 Steve Patterson Sports Philanthropy Award was presented at the Associated Press Sports Editors convention in St. Louis to both the Memphis Grizzlies Charitable Foundation and The Moyer Foundation.
- A nationwide survey of sports philanthropy conducted by the Sports Philanthropy Project was published in 2007.

The most recent news, according to Greg Johnson, is that "we have met with executives of Major League Baseball and submitted a proposal to examine the philanthropic efforts of all the teams and work with the owners in 30 cities. That could be a huge step forward in sports philanthropy—if it happens."

As it has been from the start, the potential of the Sports Philanthropy Project is great. Perhaps the best example is that of its collaboration with Major League Soccer, which has a unique ability to reach an audience of uninsured Latino children that is particularly important to the Robert Wood

Johnson Foundation. Although only some of that potential has been reached to date, more can be expected in the future. The optimistic vision of the Sports Philanthropy Project is that sports teams in the United States can become engines of healthy physical activity, sportsmanship, and good citizenship. It is a vision worth pursuing.

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**Notes**

1. Parker S. "The Sports Philanthropy Project: A Training Ground for Sports Foundations." In *ADVANCES, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Quarterly Newsletter*, 2, 2002.

2. Zinser L. "Athletes Practice the Giveback." *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 2006. Another recent article offers individual athlete foundation financial information: Bondy F. "Charity Cases: Athlete's Gifts Don't Always Build Strong Foundations." *The Olympian*, Feb. 26, 2007.

3. More information about the Steve Patterson Sports Philanthropy Award is available at the Web site [www.stevpattersonaward.org/](http://www.stevpattersonaward.org/).