How much did your experience as a collegiate and professional athlete have to do with your decision to pursue a specialization of sport within the architectural industry?

It had a lot to do with it. I was looking for a way to stay involved in sports. It was such a passion in my life for almost 30 years. Wanting to stay a part of that industry was very important when I looked toward a second career.

Billions of dollars have been spent over the past 15 years on the design and building of professional sport venues in the United States. What triggered this growth?

The biggest trigger was the change in the economic model of professional sports and even collegiate sports. In the early to mid 1980s, HOK Sport was designing Joe Robbie Stadium in Miami. Mr. Robbie was looking for a way to privately finance his stadium and collectively we came up with the idea of the club level, an area that charged an upfront premium, in order to help raise capital to fund that project.

Once the industry began to see that you could generate interest, they saw a potential revenue stream that was untapped. It became a part of everybody’s economic or financial model for revenue generation. That need for revenue streams continues and has morphed a bit as people look not only for direct stadium revenues to help enhance their financial statements, but also ancillary revenues from just outside their stadium, their stadium property, or from adjacent property.

If you look across the sport venue landscape at the professional level, a good number of franchises are playing in new venues. Has the industry hit a plateau? How do you address it, if in fact, a plateau has been hit?

There are some in the industry who might feel that way. But when you look at the number of professional sports teams who have either done major renovation projects or developed new facilities, they’re probably two thirds to three quarters of the way built. So there is still the potential for a significant amount of facility development to occur.

To put it in perspective, let’s go back just a little bit. There was a big boom of facility development after the Second World War. There was even some after the First World War. Then in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a wave of these multipurpose stadiums being built. The ’80s started the new era of single purpose stadiums. So that era is moving in on 20 years. By the time this whole model gets built out, in about 10 or 15 years, some stadiums might be 35 years old and who knows what the economic model is going to be like then.

So it is really hard to say. I think there may not be the push or the boom that there was, but I think that it will continue because sports are such a big part of recreational life in the US and even abroad. I think that it is always going to be a relatively strong marketplace. For example, there are some markets that have never really hit a lull. Minor league baseball is constant. There is significant growth in smaller cities that can’t accommodate a major league facility; they’re building midsize arenas and minor league parks. Collegiate facilities have been steady. There is massive potential internationally, absolute massive potential. So when we take a look at the industry, for us, it is more than just a major league industry.

Do you have criteria that you utilize to determine whether of not you are going to bid on a project? For example, are you going to do a high school stadium, or is that something that “hey we don’t go there!”

Actually we do. We have done several high school football stadiums—here in Kansas City and several in Texas. A lot depends on staff availability and location of the project, and whether or not there is or has been a relationship between us and the people in that municipality or school district. You are always looking to help somebody create the best facility they can build
and design, whether it’s 5,000 seats or 100,000 seats. We would always look to do what is right for a project. There really isn’t anything too small or too big.

**HOK S+V+E is an international company. What is the potential for growth in the design and building of sport venues internationally?**

We acquired a firm called LOBB Sports Architecture in 1999. We were competing against them often. Then we were teamed with them and Sir Norman Foster to design the new Wembley Stadium. It was after that project (bid) was won that we found a lot of similarities in philosophy. They have a very, very substantial presence in the international community. The Brisbane office does very well on the Pacific Rim and the London office does very well all through Europe and the Middle East.

You were talking early on in terms of the economics driving projects in the professional area. How much does the marketing component weigh into the design?

We are trying to create the optimal fan experience in a stadium, arena, or ballpark. For example, keeping them as close as possible to the action; giving them the best possible sightlines to the event on the field or court; giving them ease of access in and out of their seat so they can get to the restrooms and the concessions and then get back to their seat; giving them as much room and comfort as possible in their seat, minimizing obstructions from viewing; and providing ways to follow the action when people are out of their seat on a concourse.

Everything that we do as designers is trying to enhance that live experience for people. In addition to that, there are economic engines or revenue engines that have to be a part of these facilities from a business standpoint that we also have become very keen on being able to incorporate with an architectural sense so that the whole experience ties together.

**How unique is each individual project in terms of conceptualizing an idea? What is the thought process there?**

Every project is unique. The process starts with research about where the facility is located, the history of the area, significant elements, iconic features of that area or city, and whether it is urban or suburban. You are trying to determine what your context is and then you must consider the image that the owner wants to portray. It is not necessarily HOK’s image. Many times it is the owner or the city who wants to portray an image and they don’t know quite how to articulate it. That’s why they are asking you to develop that.

So you are looking to the distinctiveness of each individual city or town and develop whether it is going to be a contextual solution architecturally, an iconic solution, or a solution of contrasts. Then you see what comes out when you test different ideas and different orientation styles. For baseball and football there are certain optimal field orientations that begin the process because you know you want to orient things certain ways so that it is the best environment for the player on the field. But other than that, you start to investigate other opportunities.

It is something different for each venue’s unique circumstance. Sometimes it can be a natural feature that already exists on site, like the warehouse in Baltimore. Sometimes it becomes something completely new, like the new Wembley Stadium. At SBC Park in San Francisco, it was taking advantage of the Bay and the potential experience for people who were on the other side of the outfield wall. It is just different for each place.

I don’t know if you can or would answer the question, but is there any one project that stands out in your mind that you are especially proud of?

That is a very, very difficult question to answer.

I guess it is like asking you to choose your favorite son or daughter?

I spend most of my time in collegiate athletics and the balance of my time in the NFL. We have people who spend all of their time in Major League Baseball or all of their time with municipal arenas like NBA and NHL facilities and some who spend most of their time in minor league baseball. So depending on who you ask, they are going to tell you about an experience that they had and why it is Jacobs Field or why it is Reliant Stadium or why it is Gillette Stadium or why it is Beaver Stadium at Penn State or Lane Stadium at Virginia Tech. Everybody will tell you something different because of the vast opportunities that we have had to develop very unique buildings.

*Interview conducted by Dr. Matthew J. Robinson, University of Delaware*