Industry Insider:
Bernard J. Mullin

Title: Chairman and CEO, The Aspire Group Inc. (2008-present)
Education: PhD in business, University of Kansas
MBA and MS in marketing, University of Kansas
BA in business studies, Coventry University, UK
Career: President/CEO, Atlanta Hawks (NBA), Atlanta Thrashers (NHL), and Philips Arena (2004-2008)
Vice Chancellor of Athletics, University of Denver (1995-1999)
President/General Manager, Denver Grizzlies (International Hockey League) (1993-1995)
Professor of sport management and marketing, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1977-1986)

Interview conducted by Artemisia Apostolopoulou, associate editor of Sport Marketing Quarterly and an associate professor of sport management in the School of Business at Robert Morris University.

Q: In December 1994, Sport Marketing Quarterly published the profile of Bernard J. Mullin, President/COO of the Denver Grizzlies. What were your expectations for the sport industry at that time? Has the current state of the industry surprised you and, if so, in what way(s)?

Mullin: Wow! That’s such a long time ago, I am not sure that I remember my expectations. I knew for me personally, for my career growth, that if I was going to be a major league team president/CEO I needed to gain experience overseeing the team side as well as the business side, and that’s clearly what I gained the most from those two wonderful years in the IHL.

The current state of the industry has surprised me mainly with how much the size of teams’ “front office” staff has grown and, of course, how much we rely on technology today for everything we do. Probably the biggest area is in performance analytics on both the sports side and the business side.

Q: Of all the positions you have held throughout your career, which one was your favorite and why?

Mullin: The Denver Grizzlies was by far and away the most enjoyable. That’s because of the wonderful owners—David Elmore and Donna Tuttle, the inclusiveness of our head coach, Butch Goring, and the fact that we were truly one small and happy family with no wall separating the team from the staff. Of course going 72-20-6 and winning every trophy the league had to offer didn’t hurt either!

Q: How have sport consumers evolved over the years that you have been involved in the sport industry? What do you think is the key to the heart of sport consumers?

Mullin: I believe that sports consumers are much more sophisticated and much more demanding than ever before, and no longer willing to accept “one-size” fits all. Today, we must “mass-customize” our product and our content. Handling this “oxymoron” is probably the key to sport marketing’s future—produce content and experiences on and off the field/ice or court en masse but at the same time provide bespoke solutions to everyone’s sport entertainment needs and demands. But in this latter respect, nothing has changed—we need to really, really listen to our fans/partners or customers (guests as we call them in the Disney parlance), and then give them exactly what they want ... within reason obviously!

Today’s fan base is more fragmented than ever before, as is society as a whole, and you have to have niche products delivered on so many different platforms (digital, electronic, social, and mass media). The way to the guest’s heart is the “Two Cs.” Give them a connection to the players/coaches and the team brand and provide a sense of community or belonging. In my opinion, MLS is probably doing this right now better than anyone else in North America and probably including all of the rest of the world as well.

Q: Your career has been filled with numerous examples of financial turnarounds and record breaking sales performances. What is your favorite success story? What were some common themes in all those success stories?
Mullin: Oh gosh, I have been very blessed in my career—all of my assignments were fun and even though this might come across as a “cop-out,” they were all my favorites. The Pittsburgh Pirates (MLB), because it was my first work experience after being a professor for almost 10 years was very special—taking the worst team in sports that was only drawing 7,000 fans per game, losing $10M per annum, and had seven players indicted on federal drug trafficking charges was really a huge challenge and we completely turned it around in just three years.

Starting up the Colorado Rockies (MLB) as an expansion franchise and breaking MLB’s all-time attendance record with 4,483,350 fans in our first season—a record that will never be broken—was amazing. Being in charge of the design and initial construction of Coors Field was a great learning experience for me. I’ve already talked about the Grizzlies’ “family experience.”

Developing the NBA’s Team Marketing and Business Operations (TMBO) function as an in-house consulting function was without doubt the greatest learning experience and overall success story in which I have been involved. In four very quick years, we turned around a three-year attendance decline and facilitated league-wide revenue growth by over $200M per annum.

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But if I had to pick one, then starting my own company from scratch (The Aspire Group LLC), and basically creating the outsourced Ticket Marketing, Sales and Service phenomenon for US Intercollegiate Athletics is my most rewarding experience. We have now grown our little start-up company into a multi-million dollar business with almost 150 full-time employees in just three and a half years. And the really fun part is that we are beating our main competitor in just three years.

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Mullin: The system is a rapid-response marketing discipline, encompassing three distinct functions—24 hours: CAPTURE fan contact data, clean and de-duplicate it. 48 hours: COMMUNICATE INTELLIGENTLY—analyze the data and append it and develop a “propensity score” to determine target segments, then match those target segments to the most relevant product offer that is likely to resonate the best. That’s the intelligent part—scoring the target segment and matching it to the right product selected from a full-menu of products. Then communicating that offer using the most appropriate channel/platform (from the customer’s perspective)—digital, electronic, social media, etc. Essentially using very targeted messaging and offers via email, mobile, text, tweet, social network site postings/blogs, etc. on the PDA of the fan’s choice. 48 hours: CLOSE—a sales representative calls the prospect within 48 hours of them receiving the e-marketing message.

The beauty of the 24:48:48 system is that the fan can do three things with these communications, and two of them are positive for the sport marketer. They can purchase, they can open and click-through, or they can fail to open the message. In the first two cases, they receive a customer-service call. If they have purchased, the sales consultant thanks them for buying and then segues into an “Up-Sell” or “Add-On” attempt. In the second case, the sales consultant views this prospect as a qualified lead and calls to build a relationship and gather more information and attempt to close the sell. In both of these cases, the follow-up calls produce extremely valuable market research and typically double the sales ROI when compared to straight electronic marketing.

Q: Tell us about the Fan Relationship Management Centers™.

Mullin: Fan Relationship Management Centers™ or FRMCs as we call them at Aspire are our proprietary customer sales and service centers that handle inbound and outbound ticket sales and service for our 14 client partners worldwide. The centers are fueled by 24:48:48, and essentially execute the CLOSE function. We hire recent college graduates who have a passion for both sports and sales and train them intensively using our “Raise Your Game™” program that helps us in recruiting the best and the brightest professionals who want to become a CEO/general manager or athletic director. As we closely manage, develop and motivate our consultants, the sales revenue results are outstanding.

Q: Compared to other (non-sport) industries, are there areas in which the sport industry is a leader and are there areas in which the sport industry falls behind?
Mullin: I don’t think that there are too many areas where the sport industry is a leader in industry, except in game experience/entertainment and some areas of branding. Companies such as Nike do a superb job with their branding and how they position their product with a total “lifestyle” association. Sport marketing practice is generally far behind the Amazons of the world in e-marketing and re-targeting, etc. And we are all far behind Harley-Davidson in developing the community for our “love-marks” given the sport brand affinity we enjoy, and way behind the casinos and the airlines in their data capture and loyalty programs that are driving repeat purchases.

Q: Over the course of your career, you have interacted with sport professionals at multiple levels and in a wide variety of fields. What characteristics do successful sport managers have in common?

Mullin: At Aspire, we look for WHOPPPP in our candidates and all of our managers and staff. WHOPPPP stands for WORK ETHIC; HONESTY/Integrity; OPENNESS to learning; PASSIONATE; PROFESSIONALISM; and Leadership POTENTIAL.

Additionally, successful sport marketers must know how to really listen, how to analyze data and trends, and how to shape the appropriate strategy. This latter skill involves accurately interpolating these data to build a vision and compelling content. Decision-makers must also know how to meet the needs of multiple segments within the same venue, which is an aspect unique to sport marketing. Finally, they must know how to creatively communicate and sell the experience—and that encapsulates both the art and science of sport marketing.

Q: Undeniably, advances in technology (including the Internet) and the popularity of social media are revolutionizing the field of marketing. What do you consider to be their impact on marketing and sales operations of sport organizations as well as on the relationship between sport properties and sport consumers/stakeholders?

Mullin: Yes, the impact of technology is massive, but it’s both good and bad, in my opinion. We can receive instantaneous sales response and feedback on customers’ reaction to our product, our offers, and our communications, etc. That reaction sometimes can be the opinion of just a very small group of people who may or may not be paying fans. There is also the chance that the message of this group will be fanned out of proportion using mobile and social media. Consequently, we have to constantly monitor these channels/platforms in order to protect our brands and shape opinion.

In essence today, every individual on the planet has their own global broadcast network provided that they are connected to an electronic communication device. This is simultaneously an extremely exciting and very terrifying fact. Each person is their own TV network using YouTube and their own radio/print media outlet, using texts/blogs/Facebook postings, etc. Our ability to instantly access and reach the world is empowering, but as the recent riots in England demonstrated, a small group’s ability to mobilize people in violent acts, create misinformation, or inappropriately shape mass perception are problems we will increasingly have to deal with. Most notably with respect to player texts and tweets, etc.

Not surprisingly, given the amount of time some people spend on these electronic channels in isolation with their electronic devices, in my experience a high proportion of the visitors to such sites and high frequency posters/bloggers and tweeters are not ticket buyers. We therefore must be very careful not to think these voices represent our mainstream consumer.

Q: What do you see as the biggest opportunities and the biggest challenges facing sport managers today?

Mullin: I think the challenge is the same as it has always been—stay focused on what is important, and that’s what the consumer, the fan, wants. The way to do this is constantly interact with your fans and listen to what they are saying. We can do this electronically because sport is an in-person experience. So get your “daily dose of reality” by sitting in the cheap seats not just the suites and stand at the ticket windows and the gates and see who your customer is, and how it changes from game to game.

Q: Please indulge me: If you were MLS commissioner for a day, what are the three things you would do to create a greater interest in and love for the sport of football/soccer in the United States?

Mullin: I think MLS Commissioner Don Garber and his staff are already doing it. Slowly but surely they are gaining an increasing foothold, particularly in the younger demographics in North America. The technical quality of the product on the pitch (field) needs to continue to increase without player payrolls ruining the economics of the sport. I would never begin to second-guess one of the best sports commissioners there is in the world, particularly as he took his NFL training and took it to an even higher level with MLS.

Q: In your opinion, how can a journal such as Sport Marketing Quarterly best serve sport industry professionals?

Mullin: It is simple, in my opinion. SMQ must be relevant and it must be very applied and practical. Namely, add real value for the practitioner and don’t include the esoteric research that does not generate...
revenue or make the sport marketer a better or more informed decision-maker. I believe your contributors should ask the practitioners what our biggest challenges are today, go away and conduct relevant research and then come back with cost-effective solutions.

Q: And, finally, I would like to ask; what do you see yourself doing in the next 10 years?

Mullin: I will probably never retire. My guess is that 10 years from now I will be doing a lot less traveling (I am currently logging almost 200,000 air miles per year). I would like to still be the Chairman of The Aspire Group but probably not the CEO. I would like to be doing more book-writing and lecturing, and, who knows, maybe going back to being a professor at a university. Developing young minds has always been the most fun and rewarding part of my career. As an example, watching two of my former students Dennis Mannion, President of Palace Sports and Entertainment and the NBA’s Detroit Pistons, and Peter Luukko, President of the vast Comcast-Spectacor empire, is very gratifying. The thought of continuing to play a small part in growing the professionalism of this industry and developing what we call “next practices” (future best practices) would be very gratifying. Without doubt the greatest satisfaction for me looking back, and the source of my energy and drive every day, has been sowing the seeds of greatness in so many students and staff and watching them grow into giants in our industry.