



TACKLING the OPPOSITION

The truth of team spirit told by Jim Irsay, Owner of the Indianapolis Colts.

Is the penalty of owning an NFL team blamed on ego or family matters? Toss out the old ideas of these team owners—at least for now.

text by Robyn Linn Weinstein

“We’re spiritual beings having human experiences. We’re all ONE—we come from the same source.”

It’s a multi-billion dollar corporation that acts as a business yet poses as a game: the NFL. As the richest sporting league in the world, the National Football League has maintained its success because of team owners in the league. The players might be the reason fans line up and pay top dollar to cheer on their team, but it’s up to the team owners to drive a powerful organization, maintaining their own legacy.

Each season, 32 teams anticipate their run at becoming the next championship team, competing during the golden era in the business of sports. However, it remains in the hands of the club owner to create a dynasty. There’s even a trophy for the best of the best, which some believe is the goal of the game. But not all team owners feel this way.

“There’s much more to just winning and losing. We have to win—to keep the fans happy—but there is much more behind our earthly pursuits. You never do see a hearse pulling a U-Haul, now do you?” says Jim Irsay, Owner of the Indianapolis Colts.

Aware of a higher power beyond the game itself, Irsay embraces his team as a fabric within the community, and a leader among children. His humble and caring nature is exemplified through his generous gift-giving to homeless and charity organizations, as well as honoring his fans for supporting his team. “We’re spiritual beings having human experiences. We’re all one—we come from the same source. There’s interesting twists, things that happen in our lives that lead us to where we are today; it’s what I like to call a magical fabric,” says Irsay.

The fabric Irsay speaks of is personally connecting, not only the members of his team, but to his fans, the public, and those in need. Valued at \$911 million, Irsay is enormously grateful for his father’s dedication and his grandparents’ persistence to make a difference in the world—one person at a time. He acknowledges his grandparents’ struggle through poverty and gives to the homeless and needy every chance possible. “We’re given a platform or a stage in the professional league; it’s a great opportunity to impact the lives of others,” says Irsay. Robert Irsay, Jim’s father, made his money in the ventilation and air conditioning business and purchased the Los Angeles Rams as a pleasurable entity. Then, he traded them for the Baltimore Colts—later moving the Colts to Indianapolis. Robert Irsay may have believed owning the Colts was a secondary business venture, but

his son sees the team as a platform to influence others and raise awareness for the greater good.

Irsay is one of those owners that will travel to most, if not all of the games with his team. On a visit to San Francisco, while his team played the 49ers, Irsay noticed the abundance of homeless in the city and immediately stopped by the local homeless shelter to write a check for \$25,000. Influenced by John Lennon, Irsay says that—like sporting teams—Lennon used his gift to make the world a better place; he seized his opportunity and used his platform to influence a greater good for humanity. “People can feel what’s real. Sitting with my father during the early games, I can remember how nurturing the fans can be. We are playing for the fans, so we should keep them engaged.”

As a second generation NFL team owner, Irsay was passed down the rights to the Indianapolis Colts after a legal battle with his stepmother over rights to the team in 1997 following his father’s death. At the time, Irsay was 36, it was a milestone in this young man’s life to become the youngest owner of an NFL team. Indeed, a true life story that has shined a bright light within his heart. “Humility and grace are what we strive for. To be in a position of ‘so-called’ power, it’s our right, our duty to use this power for a higher good,” says Irsay.

Now in his 36th year in the business—or game—Irsay doesn’t mock others who were not as privileged as he was to have been groomed for the position of ownership. It was just in the cards for him, and he knew it. “I had a big advantage growing up with the league. Being associated with the game is such a thrill. I feel privileged to belong to this league; I always have,” he continues.

Reminiscing of his early years, Irsay finds it unique that he was able to sit in board meetings with his father from the age of 12, while most of his friends were riding bikes and chasing girls. The profound life stages from one experience to the next have allowed him to grow in this industry, rather than be thrown in it like most people. In fact, for Irsay, the Colts are his main priority, business-wise. “It’s much more difficult for other businessmen who choose to enter, not being immersed in the game,” Irsay says.

Whether winning or losing, the club owner must be ready to take immediate action. Irsay has definitely been able to prove his love for the game while maintaining a solid

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business. He believes that his team must win to keep the organization financially competitive, but not necessarily because he himself is competitive. “When you win, it’s great, but I never take credit for winning—it’s a team effort. When you lose though, that’s when the finger points right at you as the owner. It’s tough when you don’t win, but there is much more to life than winning a football game,” says Irsay.

Perhaps his love for the game is what preserves his whimsical and carefree disposition during the season, while most club owners are nervous wrecks or over struck by ego. Irsay sees himself as a caretaker or steward, not as a front man. “I’m behind the curtain or radar; the players are the stars, and the coach is the head support team. A big part of success is that it doesn’t matter who gets credit, as long as it all goes well. Even if it doesn’t go well, we must keep our spirits high and keep going,” says Irsay.

Keeping it in the family.

Another second-generation owner is John Mara, who assumed ownership of the New York Giants from his father, Wellington Mara. His father purchased the team in 1925 for \$500. John Mara has served as the club’s Executive VP and COO since 1991, sharing half of the operation and managerial duties with Jonathan Tisch, whose family purchased 50 percent of the club for \$150 million in 1991. Tisch is also Chairman and CEO of Loews Hotels. Wellington Mara may be best known for his dedication to the NFL and allowing small-market teams to compete with big-market teams. “In the early 1960s, when his Giants had a rich local-TV deal, Wellington Mara agreed to a plan under which the league would negotiate a national TV deal that all teams would share equally,” reported Forbes.com in a special report on “The Business of Football.”

Other owners and co-owners make owning a team a second job or even a hobby. This can become difficult when priorities are split, but some club owners feel they can maintain the struggle. Robert Irsay was able to share the glorious experiences of the NFL with his son. He was able to pass along traditions that most second- or third-generation team owners aren’t as privileged to receive. “It becomes an enormous challenge when you are not an expansion team. The Steelers and Packers have done an

outstanding job competing in a larger-market, family-owned franchise,” says Irsay.

Denise DeBartolo, current Owner of the San Francisco 49ers is affiliated with the team because of her bloodline. Denise resides in Ohio 99 percent of the year, paying others to handle the dirty work. Her brother, Edward J. DeBartolo, Jr., purchased the team in 1977 for \$11.7 million and transferred 45 percent ownership to his sister in 2000. Team ownership may perhaps be considered a business-within-a-business depending upon how each owner individually handles day-to-day management, if at all. In this case, the San Francisco 49ers struggle to maintain its foundation—not because of poor players or a lousy head coach, but because of team ownership. Currently worth \$799 million, it will take much more than dishing \$118 million out for players to reverse the 49ers’ standing as the lowest revenue generators in the league. If Denise DeBartolo doesn’t make changes, it shouldn’t be long before a new club owner will come in to sift through the rubble.

A family affair: For the love of money or the game?

Many team owners are bringing in family members to take care of business. They, too, may be well on their way to becoming the next second-generation team owners, but there’s no telling what the current owners will do. Currently, the Dallas Cowboys are the most valuable sports team, worth \$1.5 billion. Owner Jerry Jones bought the team in 1989 for \$150 million and must be doing something right. Hopefully, his decision making his eldest son, Stephen Jones, the team’s Executive VP will keep the franchise in the family.

The Chicago Bears, worth \$984 million, are the seventh richest franchise in the NFL with current Owner, Virginia Halas McCaskey. She has owned the Chicago Bears since her father (George Stanley Halas, Sr., nicknamed Papa Bear), died in 1983. The McCaskey family bought the team in 1920 for \$100. Her brother, George McCaskey, Jr., was originally in line to own the team, but died from a heart attack in 1979, which left Virginia to affirm ownership. McCaskey’s children and grandchildren now control 80 percent of the team; however, they have been unsuccessful in the business.

Now in its third generation, Michael and Bill Bidwill, Jr. currently run the daily operations of the Arizona Cardinals, while their father, William Bidwill, remains current owner after taking over from his father, Charles Bidwill. The Cardinals are worth \$888 million, but have had only one winning season since Michael Bidwill’s takeover in 1984.

A rather busy club owner is William Clay Ford, Sr. of the Detroit Lions, who purchased the team in 1963 for \$4.5 million and is now worth \$870 million. Ford, Sr. is the grandson of Henry Ford, the creator of the Ford Motor Company. His son, Bill Ford, Jr., serves as Vice Chairman, as well as Executive Chairman for the Ford Motor Company.

Art Rooney II took over as President of the Steelers in 2003. His father, Dan Rooney, took over the team from his father who founded it in 1933 with a price tag of \$2500. The team, now worth \$929 million, has been managed well by the Rooney’s, a small-market franchise that continues to remain competitive.

The Kansas City Chiefs are owned by the Lamar Hunt family, who bought them for \$25,000 in 1960. Clark Hunt took over last December after his father died. Currently in the process of revamping his team, it will only be a matter of time before Hunt finds his way.

The San Diego Chargers are run by a majority of the Spanos family. Alex Spanos does indeed own the Chargers, but son Dean is currently in charge. The club was purchased by Alex in 1984 for \$70 million and is now worth \$826 million.

And then there’s Robert Kraft and his son, Jonathan (President and COO), who are obviously getting along well. Kraft purchased the New England Patriots in 1994 for \$172 million; now, the Patriots are worth over \$1.2 billion. According to Forbes.com, the Patriots shout out \$125 million in player expenses—obviously worth the risk. Jonathan Kraft is also Owner/Investor of the New England Revolution soccer team and both President and COO of the Kraft Group, specializing in paper and packaging, real estate development, private equity investments, as well as charity and philanthropy.



Jim Irsay, Owner of the Indianapolis Colts, with Quarterback Peyton Manning.

And the crowd went wild.

“Why would a logical businessman, successful in what he’s doing, throw himself into a field in which he is a neophyte, with no experience dealing with some of the lamebrains in the world—the sporting class?” asked Furman Bisher, NFL reporter for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Many NFL experts and reporters believe most NFL owners are predominately wealthy, egotistical, and lousy businessmen. Perhaps Bisher just likes to antagonize and probe at the public, throwing out defensive statements to which he may receive a blunt outburst in turn creating an argument for the press’ sake.

“The ‘luxury’ of such an affiliation is vastly exaggerated, unless you’re looking for a tax loss. I’d rather own a horse racing stable. At least the animals don’t have agents,” says Bisher. “Why own an NFL football team? Ego.” As far as Irsay is concerned, he was not surrounded by ego and does not affiliate himself with those who have one.

“We need to set an example and serve others and God; like Lennon said, ‘check your ego at the door;’” replies Irsay. As far as those who believe team owners of the NFL have a second agenda, there’s one owner to definitely keep off that list; that would be Irsay. “We control less than we think we do. For those that use the term self-made man, that’s an arrogant term. The way our lives unfold [is not due to our own efforts], we’re all connected,” concludes Irsay. ■

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