



After the Buzzer Transcript: Bob Wallace's interview with Eric Stisser, Vice President of Corporate Sponsorship of the St. Louis Blues
Episode posted: July 29, 2019

Bob Wallace: Today we have a special guest, my good friend, Eric Stisser, Vice President of Corporate Sponsorship for the 2019 Stanley Cup Champions St. Louis Blues. As all of St. Louis knows, the Blues just completed one of sports' most dramatic turnarounds, going from last place to winning it all. It was the first championship for the Blues after 49 years in this pursuit. The run invigorated downtown St. Louis and taxed much of the region. Eric has experienced this before. He was Director of Corporate Sales and Marketing for the St. Louis Rams when they made a similar run and won the Super Bowl in 2000. Eric and I will talk about those runs and the similarities and differences. Eric has been with the Blues since 2006 and is responsible for managing and developing the business relationships and generating revenues in corporate partnerships, advertising sales, stadium signage, media promotions and executive suite sales. Eric also works closely on the development of special events and the overall marketing and branding for the Blues and Enterprise Center, including the recent renaming of it. In addition to the Rams, Eric has worked as an Assistant Director for Business Development for the Continental Basketball Association. He received his Bachelor's Degree in Communications from DePauw University where he played quarterback on the football team. He's a little small for that, but I guess... That's his claim to fame. In 2001, Eric received his MBA from Washington University. It is my pleasure to welcome back to After the Buzzer. Eric? Tell us about the run to the Stanley Cup. How was that?

Eric Stisser: Well first of all I just want to say it's great to be here. Bob and I go back 20 years. I interviewed with Bob probably back in 1998 and we had a lot of fun at Rams together. I was there for eight or nine seasons. Our run there was terrific

and we'll get into comparing contrasting notes. So, this run was truly remarkable because as a lot of people know, on January 3rd we were in last place in the National Hockey League, by points, and never before had a team been in last place at the flip of a calendar. Only three teams that ever made the playoffs. No team had ever won a playoff game. So clearly no team had ever gone on to win the Cup. So, first team ever to be in last place after the calendar year to go on and win the Stanley Cup let alone with a playoff game. It's interesting. We knew we had the team in place. We knew we had the players. We got off to a very slow start. We were active in free agency last year. We brought on about five or six new pieces and no one could really tell why we weren't clicking. We made a coaching change in the middle of November, which was a tough decision for Tom Stillman and Doug Armstrong, but we promoted our assistant coach Craig Berube, who had played in the league for a number of years, had been the head coach for the Flyers and was on our bench for two years, and prior to that he was the head coach of a minor league team, so. Craig was familiar with a lot of our younger players and very well liked. He's a good guy and a player's coach but very demanding. Craig is very black and white, so, it took Craig some time to instill his philosophy in his process, and you know, as they say the magic just occurred in January. They started playing together as a team and as they like to say, they just played shift by shift, and as Doug Armstrong said, they would park a win, they would park a loss and they would just move on. Because looking at the calendar only three months out, we knew we didn't have a lot of time to make up lost ground, but, the Cup run was amazing. I don't want to jump ahead, Bob, but just a question that I've asked a lot of people. When I think back to our Rams run, that was three games over three weeks. We won on a Sunday and then there was no week off in-between as you well know, we won the next Sunday. So three weeks, three games, we were Super Bowl champs. This was 26 games over eight weeks. So you can imagine the endurance. I didn't play on the ice obviously but just the endurance of ticket sales, entertaining clients, traveling to away games with clients. Really, managing your emotions, a very key win, a very tough loss, and really trying to look at the big picture and know that this is a marathon and not a sprint, so. That is really how I would compare and contrast. It was really just

the longevity and they say the Stanley Cup is the toughest trophy to win in all sports. And it's because it's four rounds, and we played 26 games over eight weeks.

Bob Wallace: I was about to pull out my violin, very little one, for you while you were complaining about you know drinking and eating for six weeks or something. So, it is the toughest run though, at championship. I think the NBA's a little similar to what goes on, because they play a lot of games and you got to win a bunch of series and, you know, the NFL as you are right, when we went to the Super Bowl both the Rams, both of them, we won the division. So we only had to play two games to get to the Super Bowl, as opposed to you know winning what, four series you have to win or, for the NHL. But I'm not really feeling sorry for the corporate guys who are you know entertaining clients on the expense account for you know six weeks. That's a pretty easy job, Bob. We were driving a lot of revenue as well.

Bob Wallace: So you mentioned your coach, Craig Berube. I say, my extent of hockey knowledge is when I first moved here back in 1981, I went to a lot of hockey games because I was single and we had tickets. And the only thing I knew was the guy behind me who went to like every hockey game, would scream, "Too many men on the ice." So that's the only rule I know – too many men on the ice. Which they never call, by the way. But Berube seemed like sort of your lunch pail type of coach, you know. He seemed like a player, as you said, he was a player's coach, but he didn't you know, he wasn't dressed in the Armani suits or any of that; he just seemed like a guy that motivated the team. How was he, or does he, interact with the business side?

Eric Stisser: He does, so I got to know Craig a few years ago. We have a corporate golf tournament that every player plays in and the coach does and he was in my group two years in a row, and so it's been great to get to know Craig. And generally speaking, hockey players and coaches are very down to earth. I would say they're some of the most down to earth athletes that we have. So Craig was great and I sent him a congratulatory text when he got the head job and he texted me back the next day, that was back in November and it was off to the races.

And now, clearly, we don't see those guys every day because they travel a lot, they're on the road a lot, but you know, Bob, I think you're right. I mean he was kind of a blue collar player. He was a grinder. He actually had a lot of penalty minutes. He was kind of a brawler back in the day when the game was a little bit different. So he's a no-nonsense guy and he's still in great shape for his age and I think he knew what this team needed when he took over. Every locker room in any sport can be cliquy, and I think Chief is his nickname. Chief kind of knocked those walls down. He got those guys believing in each other and truly they played every shift for each other. And I think, is evidenced by his three-year contract extension that he got yesterday as our new head coach.

Bob Wallace: And we are going to talk about some of the differences in the run from the Rams and you know some of the lessons that you may learn as a business guy going you know, capitalizing on a victory. But you mentioned that the hockey players are some of the more accommodating players. It's different than, you worked in basketball, you worked in football. A hockey player is a different breed?

Eric Stisser: I think they're a different breed. I will preface that by saying they're still pro athletes, okay? And they all still make you know, our top guys are making \$9, \$10 million a year, so, they're in a very different category than the common person. I think where they're a little bit different is, hockey is such a, it's kind of a grinding sport. When they start as a five- or six-year-old you're skating at 6:00 in the morning, you're traveling a lot. So there's something in their DNA as far as giving back to the sport and promoting the sport. And just an example that I will give you, over the years some of the guys that do stand down, they will come to myself and others in our group and say, hey guys, tell me when the next corporate golf outing is, we want to play with you. They just love to be one of the guys. They love to talk about the sport, promote the sport, you know. Certainly some Rams guys did do that, but oftentimes we'd have to sort of beg, borrow and steal those guys to come to our events and sometimes pay them for appearances, but hockey guys are just a little bit different. They really

enjoy being around the fans, the sponsors and the folks that really give back to the game.

Bob Wallace: So, there are a lot of people comparing the goalie Binnington to Kurt Warner and sort of the rise from nothing to being the star. Can you make that comparison? You've been around both those kind of players.

Eric Stisser: You know I think I can. I will tell you, and I follow it closely, I did not know much about Jordan Binnington. He was our #4 goalie coming into camp, which a comparison as you and I probably did not know that much about the #4 quarterback in camp. Typically it's a camp-on. You don't spend much time thinking about him or looking at him. Binnington was a guy that had kind of toiled in the minors for almost four years. I think it was something like 300 games, which is a lot. And when you get to be about 25, 26 years old, you're either going to make it in the league or you're not. He had a good camp.

Bob Wallace: And how old is he?

Eric Stisser: He's 25. I believe he's 25, 26. He had a good camp. There was a guy above him named Ville Husso, who our minor league team is now in San Antonio, Jordan was his backup. Ville got hurt. Jake Allen got off to a slow start. Our backup Johnson did not play well, so. Things kind of worked out to where we put Jordan in there in January kind of as a spark, and he got a shut-out his first game against Philadelphia, 3-nothing. And by the way, that was the launch of Gloria, which we can talk about later, which also came from Philly. But I think the comparison is fair, because Kurt bounced around a lot, Kurt had talent and Kurt just was kind of the forgotten guy, like Jordan was, and then they burst onto the scene and then that same year they won a title. So I think you can certainly draw some comparisons there.

Bob Wallace: It's funny that Kurt Warner started out, Kurt was on the team for the year before he ended up starting. I remember him going to a kids' basketball game at Parkway Middle School and he and I are there and I see this guy standing and

I say, hey he looks familiar. I had no idea who he was, and he was there to see his daughter play basketball, and a year later, he couldn't have walked in the Parkway gym for anything without being mobbed, you know.

Eric Stisser: Yeah.

Bob Wallace: And Brenda would have made sure that people stayed away from him at that point. Yeah, so, hockey. Tell me about, what do you look forward to as you now are Stanley Cup Champions. Do they call them Stanley Cup or World Champions?

Eric Stisser: Stanley Cup.

Bob Wallace: Stanley Cup Champions and hockey. How's that going to change Eric Stisser's world in selling the St. Louis Blues?

Eric Stisser: Yeah, that's a good question. It probably will not change a lot on my day-to-day role or our sponsorship groups' role. I mean our goal every day, and we preach it, is you know you want to retain your partners, grow your partners and get new partners. And certainly we want to capitalize on this and we want to, you know, for the most part, the last several years we've sort of been maxed up on the revenue side as far as we sold our dasher boards, our LED, our radio. Now certainly we'll try to charge more and come up with some new platforms. But day-to-day it won't change much. I mean I think we'll have a much shorter off-season you know. The last several years we made the playoffs the last seven out of eight years. By mid-May you were already starting on the next season. So here we are almost July 1, so we've got a much shorter window to get going on our renewals and new business. We'll do some events around the Cup, but we'll do some partner dinners and things like that, you know. We'll probably begin it in a minute but we've got the All-Star game in January. So, we have a lot of marketing and platforms that we will sell around the All-Star game and probably around the Cup. But I guess my answer to you would be, not a lot

day-to-day but we have some more things to sell now. Because we are now Stanley Cup Champs.

Bob Wallace: So, you did make a lot of changes to the Enterprise Center this year, and because of that I think you know the SEC's coming back, the Blues friends. What did you do there?

Eric Stisser: Yeah, so first of all I just want to point out that Enterprise obviously a great St. Louis base, privately-held firm, stepped up a year ago on a new long-term naming rights agreement. The Taylor family is extremely generous in this community, philanthropically and now sports-wise, so. Enterprise made a long-term commitment. The last two years we have put in over a hundred million dollars to Enterprise Center with renovations and capital improvements. I would say phase 1 was really more infrastructure, you know, for lack of another term it was a 25-year-old house, so, heating, cooling, pipes, a new ice center. We replaced all the seats in the upper bowl on the club level last year. We built three new private clubs. We've just modernized the building, Bob, and it was time. We have some public gathering spaces with the Budweiser Brew Pub. And again, some other private spaces that we have – the Bommarito Lounge, the Stifel Bull and Bear Club, the Jamison Club. Our offices were underneath. We moved our offices over to Stifel Theater, and underneath our offices is now a private club for the people that sit along the glass, all-inclusive food and beverage. Again, things you beg, borrow and steal from other teams when you're doing renovations and this summer is our third wave. The lower bowl will get new seats. I never thought I would imagine how expensive elevators and escalator renovations are, but we're doing those as well, so, just modernizing the building and really getting it up to speed.

Bob Wallace: Right. I know how – elevators are really expensive.

Eric Stisser: It's incredible.

Bob Wallace: Right. It really is incredible. So there's a lot of competition in the St. Louis market. I tell people that St. Louis is a small city with a lot of big-time attractions. You guys are involved in the Stifel arena...

Eric Stisser: Stifel Theater.

Bob Wallace: Stifel Theater. We have a great zoo here. We have a great you know symphony, you know. We have some great cultural events here. The Muny, Shakespeare in the Park. And we have the Cardinals. How is, and I know you guys get along so you don't have to tell me how wonderful the partnership between the Cardinals and the Blues are, but, how does that affect the day-to-day business environment for the Blues as going against the Cardinals?

Eric Stisser: It really doesn't. And I, I'll just touch upon it. We complement each other. And it really goes back to, we had a good rapport prior to the Rams leaving, but when the Rams left we kind of joined forces and we kind of joined each other at the hip and Stillman and DeWitt get along very well. Tonight the Stanley Cup is going to be at Busch Stadium from 5:00 to 7:00 for the Cardinals' fans to get pictures with it. They hosted our rookies two days ago for batting practice. We wear Cardinals jerseys during warm-ups in the spring, and then we sign those and auction those off. They do it for us in the fall. We hand out their pocket schedules; they hand out our pocket schedules. And when I go to conferences around the country, people ask me how in the world does this happen – two teams that compete for entertainment dollars and sponsor dollars – how did this happen. We just get along really well. Our ownership groups get along. Our front offices get along. And you know, we complement each other. Sure, there's a little bit of overlap in the spring and the fall, but for the most part we're different seasons. And I would say we share probably 80% of the same corporate partners, with sponsors and suite holders. Sure, does a company sometimes make a decision to go with the Cardinals or the Blues? Yes. But for the most part we get along really, really well and there's probably four people I think in our ticket group right now that used to work for the Cardinals. They're some of our folks that are now over there, so, it's a two-

way street and we get along well. But yes, to answer your question, there are times when we come toe-to-toe with a particular sponsor and they may choose us or them and it is what it is.

Bob Wallace: How was it when the Rams were there? Was there a difference? I mean obviously there was more competition because you had another big dog in town.

Eric Stisser: Right.

Bob Wallace: You described your relationship between the Cardinals and the Blues. How about the relationship between the Blues and the Rams when they were here. You're coming from there, there was some familiarity with the people.

Eric Stisser: Right.

Bob Wallace: But on a business-to-business side.

Eric Stisser: Yeah. If I'm being really, really candid here, the eight years I was with you at the Rams, you know, we had a really, really great run. And at that point in time I think the Cardinals and the Rams were 1A, 1B. It just depended upon the season. I think back then the Blues were a clear #2 team, 3 in the market if you will. Although back in the early 2000's they won a President's Trophy; they were really good with Pronger and McGinnis. When I made the move over to the Blues, Marx had already left, I think Scott Lanahan had just become the head coach, as you well know; I talked to you a lot about it. It was a tough decision for me to leave the Rams, but I felt like the Blues, and really the NHL, were at a point where we could only go up. The Blues brand was really, really low and I felt like I was buying the stock for a dollar. It was a 40-year-old brand that had just come off a lock-out, new ownership group in Dave Checketts. And as we rebuilt that franchise, you know, fortunately or unfortunately, the Rams fell on hard times. I mean the Rams had a 9- or 10-year run. It was one of the worst in all pro sports as far as their record. And I think the Rams you know, once I got into '09, '10, '11, '12, we didn't bump up against the Rams as much

as we used to. And I felt like the Blues had probably overtaken the Rams as the #2 team in the market from a corporate standpoint. As far as fan engagement, good product on the ice. I mean the Rams just fell upon hard times and I think once people figured out what Stan's motives were, I think the Rams fell that much further down. But I don't think the Blues and the Rams were ever joined at the hip like the Blues and the Cardinals are. But I think we certainly got along fine. I mean I'm sure you recall we would trade out suites, Blues and Rams back in the day. We would trade off tickets. So there was always a professional courtesy, no doubt about it. But we weren't doing joint promotions like we are with the Cardinals now.

Bob Wallace: So one of the criticisms that Kroenke made when he moved the Rams out of St. Louis is that he believed that this city was not capable of supporting three teams. Whether you agree or disagree with that, and over the past three years and really as you mentioned prior to the Rams even leaving, their popularity was dwindling, especially once they went to the year-to-year lease and people kind of got the impression that he wanted to move the team. Well we're going to get a new team in here. The MLS probably. I would imagine they're going to get it. And, to add on top of it, as you mentioned earlier, they're going to be owned by one of St. Louis' leading families. Do you think that will have any impact on sponsorship dollars, marketing issues, you know. You're going to have the difference between the Rams when they were here is that they weren't engaged. They weren't. And now you have someone who's going to have a lot of juice, MLS being owned by the Taylors.

Eric Stisser: I would agree. I think the MLS will be a home run here for sure. I think you know, I think selfishly we all will probably be a bit envious because they will be the new team on the block and I would imagine when that is announced and they form an executive team and they go on sale with tickets, I bet you within two to three days they sell out the entire stadium. And that's just part of being the new kid on the block and I think with the Taylor family and Jim Cavanaugh, with what Caroline Kindell's doing, it's going to be a home run, and I think it'd be silly for me to say they won't impact us; however, there is some cross-

ownership between them and ourselves. I think we'll do some things with them. Again, they're primarily a spring, summer, fall league. So that will complement our seasons. I don't think we'll lose a lot of corporate dollars. I think most St. Louisans and back to your comment about Stan, we supported three teams for a long time here. When the Rams were really, really good, that Dome was incredible and we were selling it out. So I think this market can support three teams and I think it will support soccer very well.

Bob Wallace: So let me ask you, and I'm going to go back to soccer and other sports and fan bases and all that stuff in a minute. But let's talk about both of us are football fans to some extent. Now the XFL just hired a president.

Eric Stisser: Yeah. I know Jeff.

Bob Wallace: Do you know... oh, okay.

Eric Stisser: I do.

Bob Wallace: And, so they're coming in to, they'll be a fourth team. Now, you can make the argument that they're not anywhere near the league of the Blues, Cardinals or even MLS. XFL is a fledgling league, I would say, because they haven't really played a game yet, so. How do you think football will come in to this market, in your mind as someone who sells tickets and markets things, and can they make it. Can we support four teams?

Eric Stisser: I think the XFL is a really tough putt, to use a golf analogy here. I think that they're going to be kicking off in February of 2020, right in the heart of the Blues season. Cardinals' first pitch is 30 days away. And the question I really have, and you and I have talked a little bit about this offline is, is the appetite really there for take St. Louis aside but we'll address St. Louis. Is the appetite there for the football fan after a long college season, a long NFL season, literally two weeks after the Super Bowl, the XFL is kicking off. Sure, you're going to have some die-hard football people that just want their fix. The reason why I

think it's tough here is I think playing in the Dome is going to be challenging. It's a 60,000 seat stadium. I think they'll be lucky to get 20,000 in there. I almost view it, and this is no slight on the XFL, I would almost view it as if we had an NBA D league team here. A developmental league team which from what I gather, the XFL wants to become a developmental league team for the NFL. I just don't know if the common person is going to go down to the Dome in February and March and watch the XFL. Now I think they're going to do some unique things, probably with uniforms and neon balls. They'll do some things that I think might engage the 13- to 19-year-old kid, and that might be really nice for them to do. They've got good television deals as you well know. I think we'll know after about two or three years if this league will make it or not.

Bob Wallace: Well you're giving up, that's, the last spring league that they had, I had a couple of comments about what you said. I'm not sure that they view themselves as a developmental league. I think they maybe morphed a little bit more to saying, maybe we should be a developmental league, because as I always say, nobody's going to come down to the Dome to watch Eric Stisser and Bob Wallace play football. We don't have any you know, we have no following. You got to have some stars. You got to have people that want to come, otherwise you got to develop sort of like the college affiliation where people are going to come because of the name on the front of the jersey instead of the name on the back of the jersey. I'm not sure but that's the professional sports model that people, they come because of, to see stars. So I'm not sure that they will be able to be a minor league. And then I asked a question, even when they were negotiating the concept, to come to St. Louis to play in the Dome. I said the St. Louis people, I said, does St. Louis, that has had two NFL teams here, want to be, get in bed with a fledgling league, or do we take the position that we're an NFL city, that we supported our teams, that St. Louis has really had ownership problems much more than they had fan-based problems. Now, we did have some stadium problems when the Cardinals were here. And there was some stadium issues with this, although I would make an argument that St. Louis, we kind of bad-mouthed ourselves into believing we had the worst stadium in the

NFL instead of having the worst stadium in the NFL. I don't think it was quite that. So I just kind of wonder about the XFL. I think you're correct is that they may have a, the 13- to 19-year-old attraction. That doesn't attract the 63-year-old Bob Wallace who, when I go to some of these events, I'd like them to turn the music down. I don't really want to have a lot of noise in the stadium. And I think that's going to be part of it.

Eric Stisser: I think you made a key point. St. Louis is a very proud city, as we all know. And they've had two NFL teams – the Cardinals and the Rams. And they view themselves as an NFL setting. And I think that's going to be knock on the XFL. Number one, there's no local ownership. It's owned by the XFL that's McMahon. So I don't think they're going to have that community tie in where people are really going to dive into it. Of course, people are going to check it out and see how it goes but I think it's going to be really – I think this is going to be a challenging market for the XFL.

Bob Wallace: Right we used to – St. Louis has a great reputation for being a baseball city. I think the Blues proved that it's a sports city. You guys got the coverage that for years you've been desiring! I mean, you know, you're on the front page and the newspaper, you're on the front page of sports pages that are four pages in them. The Blues have never had that kind of coverage. The Rams didn't have that kind of coverage except when we were good. So there's a difference but St. Louis is a sports town, not necessarily a baseball town. And I think you guys proved that to the people. However, and you and I have discussed this a bunch of times and it's one of my pet peeves, a little bit, about what happened with the Blues run and I've said to you, there's no diversity in hockey. And I look at your team and you know I don't mean to – but that's not your fault. I don't blame that on the Blues at all. There's no African-Americans on your team. I've not sure if they're any African-Canadians on your team at that point. Which is different. So North St. Louis and you look at the parade and you look at your crowds and you look at the watch parties and there was no diversity in the crowd. And I don't know how hockey addresses that; how the Blues address

that. I know they're trying. Telling me what you guys are doing to sort of grow your fan base.

Eric Stisser: Yeah, I think that is a key element for us and I think it was probably – I know you don't go to a lot of games. I know we've made some inroads and I know that I'll talk about Randy Gersh who heads up our community relations and Brandon Knox. So we have a couple of programs I want to highlight. One is called Hockey is for Everyone and one is called Little Blues. I brought a little stat sheet here. The Street Blues Ball Hockey Program has been implemented in 186 local schools and youth centers since its inception, reaching more than 85,000 kids annually. So --

Bob Wallace Is that in St. Louis or –

Eric Stisser: This is St. Louis only. So for instance, ice is limited. Ice hockey's expensive. So what we've been doing is, we've been taking through our community relations initiatives, we take street ball back to the schools. We supply them with the equipment. We give the teacher the curriculum to run street hockey. We built a rink at Matthews Dickey a few years ago, an outdoor street hockey. We've done events with JJK, the St. Louis Boys & Girls Club. So we're probably doing more in that area than you're aware of or maybe the community is aware of but it is a very key point for us. Little Blues is a program that is for ages 5 to 9 and for \$150 we will fully equip a child and give them 6 free sessions to learn the game.

Bob Wallace On ice?

Eric Stisser: On ice. On ice. Kim Davis, African-American, she's the EVP of Social Impact & Growth with the NHL. She came to town this past season and we hosted a luncheon at Enterprise Center with various African-American leaders in the community to talk about this issue exactly. Not only the Blues but around the league, how can we do a better job of speaking to people of color, speaking to African-Americans and getting them engaged in our sports. Now I will tell you,

I was very encouraged at watch parties, games, bars, just the growth of people of color that jumped onto the sports. I do agree with you to a sense that there is a bare entry to hockey. Ice is limited and equipment is expensive. I mean when you and I were little, we could go play baseball or basketball outside very easily. So we're aware of those issues and we're trying to address them head on, locally and nationally with the NHL.

Bob Wallace Right. I tell you the argument that I've been having with people and it's not directed at the Blues or the NHL. I actually direct it more to the coverage of the event, that it was a uniting force for the community. Where I don't believe that it had any impact on north St. Louis at all. So – and that was the media's fault in not pointing that out. Because you might say and I did, I'm one of those people that look at pictures and saying "where's the diversity in this picture?" And all the pictures that I saw at the parade, there was no diversity in any of the pictures. And that was the media saying --

Eric Stisser: When you saying "no", you mean you didn't see any person of color?

Bob Wallace One. I mean, when you can count –

Eric Stisser: I know firsthand 50 of my friends that were people of color came.

Bob Wallace -- when you can go to an event in St. Louis and you can see – when you can count people of color then that's a problem. Because --

Eric Stisser: Yeah.

Bob Wallace You know, when you literally say "oh there's one; there's one," that's a problem. My criticism is that the media wanted to paint this picture that it was a unified force instead of saying "boy, look at this, the people who are supporting this sport. It's not diverse." That's my criticism.

Eric Stisser: Yeah.

Bob Wallace It's wasn't of the Blues.

Eric Stisser: Right.

Bob Wallace It's not of Blues' ownership. It's not even of the NHL because I do understand, I've talked to the people on the NHL and they understand that this is something that they have to address if they want to grow the sport to be something more than the fourth of the four big sports. You know basketball has the problem – well let me just say, basketball had the problem on the reverse where it was viewed as a totally African-American sport although now with the international players you get a much more diversity on both of those.

Eric Stisser: So one other program I want to highlight and it was something that we started last year. Wells Fargo Advisors is our partner. We have a program called First Game Program. And 10 times a year, 100 tickets for each game, so it's a thousand tickets. So on a random Tuesday night, 100 people will come to the arena and we work with various local organizations, primarily in the City. It's been Matthews-Dickey, it's been other boys and girls clubs, it's been school, and these children, primarily people of color, it is their first ever Blues game and they come with a guardian or a parent so each child gets two tickets to bring a guardian or parent. We go down underneath and Chris Curber and Joey Vitali, or radio announcers, we do a one hour Hockey 101 and we teach them offsides, too many men on the ice, icing, slashing, things like that. We give them an hour sort of tutorial about the game. We give them a t-shirt. We give a coupon for a hotdog and a soda and they come to the game for the very first time. And this is a program we're really proud of and we know it will continue to grow.

Bob Wallace Good. That sounds like a wonderful program. Moving on to a couple of other challenging issues for someone who's in the business of selling the sport to people is the participation in the Olympics. I mean I would imagine that the marketer who's trying to grow the population would think participation in the Olympics is good although taking time off in the middle of your season is a

problem, I guess. Do you think that's a benefit to be participating internationally? Does it grow your sport?

Eric Stisser: It certainly helps to participate in the Olympics. I'll go back to when, I think it was 2014 in Russia when T.J. Oshie had his unbelievable shootout; I think he had four in one game. It is very disruptive. It's a two week break in the middle of our season. There's a risk of injury. As you well know, these guys have big contracts so as I sit here today I don't have a clear cut answer. But the past Olympics we skipped that didn't work out. I know Gary Bettman is working closer with the IOC to talk about the next Olympics. It's probably a missed opportunity marketing-wise for the very best in the world. All the NHL players are not playing it. But, you know, a lot of people like to compare the NBA. The NBA is easy because they play in the Summer Olympics which is in July and they're not – they don't have any conflicts. Ours is a little bit more of an obstacle that we need to address and sometimes it just depends on where the Olympics are being held and ease of getting there. But the disruption to the season is a big one and the injuries, and in 2014 you have a lot – these guys, their country – it's very important to them.

Bob Wallace Right.

Eric Stisser: It's as important to them as the crest for the St. Louis Blues and Chicago Black Hawks and they come back from the Olympics and they're wiped out. Like they're really wiped out whereas some guys get a lot of rest for two weeks.

Bob Wallace Do you get push back from your foreign players that they want to do this? I know the Players Association seems to be on the side we should be in there. We should be playing the Olympics. At least that's was at one point their position.

Eric Stisser: Yeah. I can't – I know Alexander Ovechkin had a comment for Russia. I can't – I think most of the players align themselves with what's best for the Players Association, the ownership and the league. And I think this last go around, sure

there were some guys that were disappointed they couldn't play in it but I think they understood it was for the good of the whole.

Bob Wallace What is the difference between that the World Cup that we were talking about, World Cup of Hockey?

Eric Stisser: Yeah, so the World Cup of Hockey is a separate event that was done a few years ago in Toronto and that's set in September.

Bob Wallace So a different time period?

Eric Stisser: And that's done – yes, before the season starts.

Bob Wallace Hockey, and you mentioned when you're talking about the Olympics and you're talking the injury factor, you know hockey is a tough sport. These guys are hitting each other, they're skating 100 miles an hour, they're slamming into each other. It's not like football where they're slamming into each other but that really is the game. It's not unexpected. Hockey you could knock somebody out and they don't see you coming. And the concussions are an issue. Do you get any – you're a dad of a young athletic man, do you get any pushback from "I don't want my kid to play hockey; it's too dangerous"?

Eric Stisser: No Graham played hockey for two years and he plays football. You and I have talked about --

Bob Wallace I know his mother doesn't want him to play football.

Eric Stisser: Yeah, that's correct. But Bob and I played it our whole lives and I think we're okay. I think the pendulum has swung really far, not only with hockey but with football. I think the pendulum has swung too far the other way because, as you and I know, the equipment's better, the diagnosis is better, the awareness is much better than it was when you and I played. As far as hockey concussions go, it's interesting. I'll go back to when we talked about this Cup run, playing

26 games over 8 weeks. It's almost three games a week and these are high speed, intense games and I would argue that these hockey players are some of the greatest athletes in the world because you've got speed, finesse, physicality and, oh by the way, it's on ice. It's a very challenging sport. It's about as physical as football. It really is. Now granted they play in shifts. Although football does as well with offense and defense but Bob I think every league is concerned with concussions. Soccer, probably not baseball as much except when you get hit in the head with a pitch. I think everyone wants to be wise and cutting edge with technology and awareness on concussions so I think we're certainly cognizant of that.

Bob Wallace So you know what I noticed about hockey and the playoffs is it was less fighting.

Eric Stisser: Correct.

Bob Wallace During the --

Eric Stisser: That's accurate.

Bob Wallace Is that because they figure -- why is there more fighting during the session than in the playoffs?

Eric Stisser: I don't have the stats in front of me but fighting is way down. I don't have the perfect answer. I'm not going to verbalize this the right way but until you're around the sport enough, there is a place for fighting in hockey. You've got a weapon in your hand. It's high speed. I'll use an example and Brad Marchand for the Bruins or some of the crew. Sometimes guys will run around and they'll take some runs at your star players. Marchand had a very low hit on Tarasenko in the playoffs that was not called. And sometimes he needs a guy to go in the corner and rough him up. It may not result in a fight but you may need the guy to rough him up just to send a message. It's different than basketball. You get ejected. It's hard to draw parallels sport by sport.

Bob Wallace Well, no but I can draw a parallel to baseball. Where --

Eric Stisser: Brush back pitch.

Bob Wallace The brush back pitch thrown and they've tried to take that out of the game.

Eric Stisser: Correct.

Bob Wallace And there would be people that would make the argument that the self-policing is better than the umpire giving a warning that means nothing.

Eric Stisser: Yes.

Bob Wallace Or means too much actually, doesn't mean that the next pitch that could slip or could be an intentionally pitch, takes the guy out of a game.

Eric Stisser: Yeah. But fighting in general is way down. It's way down in the regular season and the reason it's almost nonexistence in the playoffs is because these games are so critical and meaningful. you don't want to make your team shorthand. You don't want to put yourself in a tough position. It's almost extinct from the playoffs.

Bob Wallace Right.

Eric Stisser: Unless the game is out of hand.

Bob Wallace I don't know anything about hockey. But I would think if I was coaching a hockey team, what I would say is, we're not getting penalties. I would drill that into a guy because it seems to me that if you're shorthanded, you're going -- the other team's going to score 90% of the time. Maybe not.

Eric Stisser: Statistically, it's about 75% to 85%, it's very high. Yes.

Bob Wallace Right. So a penalty is deadly and one goal, it's not like you're coming back from a touchdown. In basketball or football, if I'm down 21 nothing or 15 to 6 in a first quarter in one of those sports, I got plenty of time to come back because scoring is much easier. In hockey it's not. And if you give somebody, it's like playing with 10 guys on the field instead of 11. That means somebody's not covered.

Eric Stisser: Correct.

Bob Wallace So that makes it much more difficult then. And then we talked a little bit about the cost of playing hockey -- the cost of attending games. I mean one of the things that I find, one of the things that was good about football is you only had 10 games. You only had 8 count; you had to pay for 10. So you'd get a season ticket for \$400. You can't get a season ticket for \$400 in hockey. It's \$40 for about 40 games?

Eric Stisser: Well we've got some partial plans. We got some 10 games, and 20 games --

Bob Wallace But hockey's an expensive sport.

Eric Stisser: It is. The lower bowl hockey is, is some of the most expensive tickets in all of sports and generally speaking the lower bowl can be fairly corporate white collar and the upper bowl can be kind of blue collar. But, you know for instance, our arena, we actually decreased our arena. Our arena was about nineteen-five. And with the renovations, we knocked down some suites, built some private clubs. We had to get more in line with ADA codes. We lost some seats so we actually went from probably nineteen five down to about eighteen-two, eighteen-three. Out of that eighteen-two, eighteen-three, 16,000 are season tickets and with the success we had this year and with our ticket sales group the last two weeks, we are coming right up against being completely sold out of season tickets next year. I mean, we'll always keep some back for individual games and groups.

Bob Wallace: Here's my advice, sell'em!

Eric Stisser: Yeah, right, right.

Bob Wallace: Sell'm while you're hot, right.

Eric Stisser: Yes. One other thing I want to mention, just going back to growing the sport and Little Blues and Hockey is for Everyone, something we're really, really excited about and proud of is this September, we are opening an \$80 million dollar facility called the Centene Community Ice Center. We broke ground about a year ago. It's four sheets of ice out in Maryland Heights. It's a three-way partnership between the city of Maryland Heights, St. Louis County and the St. Louis Blues Legacy Foundation. Four sheets of ice. The Blues will practice there, although we will only equate to roughly six percent of the ice time, which is key. Between the other three sheets of ice, and the Blues ice will be used as well, Lindenwood will play there and there will be various youth hockey tournaments throughout the year. And this facility is unlike any other facility around the country. Four sheets of ice, three covered, one – three indoor, one outdoor but covered. In the summertime, we'll have concerts there. So that opens up this September, the Centene Community Ice Center and I think you will, that will be a huge bonus for us as far as additional programs for Hockey is for Everyone and Little Blues.

Bob Wallace: That sounds like a wonderful facility that you're going to have. And yeah, the more people you're getting exposed, I mean, we talked about earlier, one of the tough things about hockey is the ice time, getting ice. There are very few sheets of ice and we're spreading them out among the different groups that want to use it, so, you know. It's probably – eight-year-olds have ice time at six in the morning.

Eric Stisser: Yes.

Bob Wallace: Which is hard to get an eight year old to go do anything at six in the morning.

Eric Stisser: And this past year was tough for the community because the old Hardee's Ice Plex is where Top Golf is now.

Bob Wallace: Right.

Eric Stisser: And that eliminated three sheets of ice. And believe me, three sheets of ice, that's a big dent in the community. So getting our four sheets back online is

great and then the Michael Steinberg project in Chesterfield, I believe, is two sheets of ice. So.

Bob Wallace: Let me just throw a suggestion out to anyone who's listening about sheets of ice, is we need some in the city. We want to grow it in the African American communities. We've got to get it so a kid can, parents can get them there in ten minutes instead of 45 minutes in the morning.

Eric Stisser: Yes.

Bob Wallace: So we need some sheets of ice in places that are a little bit more convenient. So, you're in charge, Eric, in the sports world. What do you think St. Louis sports is going to look like in ten years? You've been here, what, 20?

Eric Stisser: Yeah 20 years, 23. I moved back in 1996. That's actually a really good question.

Bob Wallace: Of course, I asked it.

Eric Stisser: We talked about it, you know, St. Louis being such a prideful city and you go back to the winter classic, I'll go back to the Rams' Super Bowl runs, the way we put on events in this community, the PGA is a great example. The run of the Blues just had – this town shows up and this town does it in a big way. And Bob, I know you've been very active in the Sports Commission over the years whether it's the women's Final Four, the men's Frozen Four hockey, gymnastics, the wrestling that comes to our building – any time this town puts on a big event, the town shows up and the town supports it in a huge, huge way. So ten years from now, I'd like to think the Blues are still very much still flourishing, the Cardinals are flourishing. It's probably a crystal ball, maybe a wish, but I hope the NFL's back here in ten years, I really do. I think it's great. I think having the NFL shield in our city is a big deal and I think that we're a little light without it. I don't know what that looks like. I don't know who takes that baton and runs with it but I really hope that um, it probably won't be Goodell because I don't think he'll be the commissioner in 10 years, whoever the commissioners at the time give St. Louis a really good look and a fair shake and I think that we have the interest and the pockets around here to make that happen.

Bob Wallace: Yeah, I would agree with that. I think that there is no fire that anybody wants. I mean the city of St. Louis, the politicians, even if the business community, it's

been so turned off by the NFL that nobody's saying – you know when the Rams – when the Cardinals left in the 80s, there was a – we need to get a team back here. You don't have that same fever now that you had then, but I agree with you. I think, you know, as nobody in my family is a hockey fan but everybody knew that, you know, the St. Louis Blues were playing because they saw it on the bottom of the ESPN scroll. You know, in June, St. Louis versus Boston was on the scrolls, you know. So that's great for the city, and the NFL, when we're here in the NFL. You know, I think we miss not having basketball. I'm not sure we could support all those sports but I think the one thing sports are, and they say this about colleges, is that the football program is the porch to the university. I think sports in the porch to the community and I think what you guys proved, despite uniting the whole city, you did bring a sense of attention to this city that was wonderful. The perception of St. Louis as, you know, the hockey champion, has been great, is great for this city, especially after some of the, you know, some of the negative publicity.

Eric Stisser: About time we did it.

Bob Wallace: Whether it's what happened in Ferguson, whether it's the crime statistics that we have here, whether it's the Rams leaving, what you guys did I think was a real plus for this region on a national and maybe even on an international level. I think, you know, you got the hockey players that are from different countries and, you know, they may not be St. Louis Blues fans --

Eric Stisser: Right.

Bob Wallace: -- Because their guys plays and won the Stanley Cup. So, I think that's great. Well, Eric, I want to thank you for taking the time. I think uh, again, congratulations.

Eric Stisser: Thank you.

Bob Wallace: This is Eric's – he's getting his second championship ring, so congratulations. And he's two up on many, many, many, many people in this community. Well, thank you, Eric.

Eric Stisser: Right place, right time. Lucky to be a part of both.

Bob Wallace: And good luck next season.

Eric Stisser: Thank you very much.

Bob Wallace: I hope you enjoyed listening to Eric, more than you've enjoyed any of our podcasts in the past. Please let us know. You can provide feedback by going to the Apple Podcast and got the radio zone news sections for that. If you're listening to these on Stitcher, go to [Stitcher.com](https://www.stitcher.com) and search for After the Buzzer to leave a review or comment. Of course, if there's a topic you would like us to discuss in the future, let us know. And thank you for listening.

THE END