



After the Buzzer

Transcript: Kurt Hunzeker on the XFL BattleHawks

Date posted: 11/4/2020

Bob Wallace:

Welcome to After the Buzzer. I'm Bob Wallace, Chair of the Sports Law practice at Thompson Coburn in St. Louis. We specialize in representing entities with sports interests. Whether it's acquisitions, facilities, finance, representation on real estate deals, contract negotiations, we have lawyers that have a lot of experience in those areas. I started doing these podcasts because I believe there are plenty of great topics in sports law and business and even more importantly, there are a lot of great people involved in professional and amateur sports working in all these areas. I hope you have enjoyed some of our conversations.

Today, we have a really interesting guest. A St. Louis native who went to Missouri and came back home to lead what was described as St. Louis' first homegrown football franchise. That sports executive is Kurt Hunzeker. Kurt is a senior sales and marketing strategist creative leader, with 20 years of executive management and operational experience and has worked on or with agencies, brand management, media, league and team entities. In other words, Kurt has worked on all sides of the sports business.

In his most recent role, Kurt was a team president of the XFL St. Louis BattleHawks where he led all fan engagement and team business operations including talent acquisition, ticket sales, corporate partnerships, marketing, game day, communications, media and community outreach.

Prior to that, starting in 2015, Kurt served as the Vice President of marketing, strategy and research for minor league baseball where he built, enacted and measured the go-to market corporate partnerships and fan engagement strategies for the MILBS national commercial sales and marketing enterprises representing all 160 minor league communities. Prior to the MILB, he spent five years at Rawlings Sporting Goods as a senior director of brand marketing where he led Rawlings' global brand marketing, media buying and partnership activation efforts. Kurt has worked on the sports marketing agency side and often sports advertising process, an informative interactive guidebook for sports executives looking to enhance and maximize their internal and external marketing communications. Kurt received

his Bachelor of journalism from the University of Missouri Journalism School. Welcome, Kurt!

Kurt Hunzeker: Thank you, Bob. Thank you very much for having me.

Bob Wallace: It's great to have you, and so we are excited this weekend when Missouri upset LSU?

Kurt Hunzeker: I was excited and terrified looking through my fingers as I couldn't bear to watch a person goal from the one in the same endzone that has caused so much heartburn over my entire life, but the fact that --

Bob Wallace: Is that the endzone where they had the five downs?

Kurt Hunzeker: Uh, that's the endzone of everything. Fleet Flickr, uh, the fleet kicker, everything just seems to happen at endzones, so, no that was fun to watch.

Bob Wallace: Well, congratulations. It was a big victory for new coach. Hopefully, the start of something good. We could use some good football uh, at the college ranks here in the Missouri area. Uh, let's talk about the XFL and your latest adventure and the success story in St. Louis, and I was just saying to you, I think St. Louis and the BattleHawks had as successful a launch as any team in the XFL. How did you go about doing that? I think you got a late start, by the way.

Kurt Hunzeker: I did. I was hired on July 1, 2019 and from my first day until our first game at Dallas in early February, I had seven months and a week. So it was a lot of parallel paths that really got us ready for our inaugural season and on one hand, I'm building the long-term vision for the franchise building the brand and those foundational elements that any organization needs to get up and running but I also had to make sure that we had cold beer and you know, footballs and uniforms, uh, come February, so a lot of that long term strategy was going to play into the 2021 season. I would estimate that we probably enacted about 20% of what we ultimately were going to do as part of our business strategy just because we simply didn't have a full off season. We didn't have the time to get everything ready, given we had to spend a lot of time building the front office, building the actual team and then just making sure that, you know, the league gets off the ground in year one.

Bob Wallace: So what was it like the very -- when you walked in -- and I guess your office was out at the old Rams park which I don't know what it's called these days, Lou Fuz, I think. What was the very first thing you thought you needed to do?

Kurt Hunzeker: Well, the first office was actually in the basement of my friend's house in Moscow Mills, Missouri. We didn't move into Lou Fuz Athletic Training Center until late October, early November. So we were kind of nomadic for a little bit there as we were building up the staff. I

mean, obviously in July and August, it was just me until the midpoint of August. That's when the first hire started. So, it was me and my laptop and sitting in my friend's basement. I was just trying to understand what is that initial building block. What's the foundation of this team. And I knew this going in. I had this gut feeling that we really learned to separate ourselves from the previous football teams in St. Louis. We did not want to harp on the negativity of the previous teams' exit from the community. So how do you really strive to be positive and build a pro football team from scratch in a town that had two heartbreak with the Cardinals and the Rams? To me the quickest way to do that was to build our brand on the fact that we were the first homegrown pro football team in St. Louis. And that really allowed all of us that went to the community, whether it was me, whether it was the front office, coach Hayes, the players and allowed us to be immediately positive and always about the present and future. We were completely cognizant of what happened in the past but building a brand off the negativity is just not sustainable, you know, and so we set out to build the story of St. Louis' first homegrown pro football team and we absolutely needed the community's help to doing that. And that grass roots philosophy was really the springboard for us to get out into the community and build this team.

Bob Wallace: So when you started doing that, your first hire to help you do that was what? What area?

Kurt Hunzeker: So, this is where, you know, the single owner entity that the XFL employs really bears fruit. So the talent acquisition team was based in Stamford, Connecticut but they allowed all the teams to really build their own program as they saw fit. So what I wanted to do is I absolutely wanted a community centric ticket sales and experience team and we had partnered with Elevate Sports Ventures to be the kind of the ticketing arm but all the great executives are part of the BattleHawks. I always looked at them as BattleHawks. They were part of our team. And they were going out into the community just as much as the marketing team was. So that was, you know, 1A, and then 1B was marketing in community and bringing us together so Ed Kazinski was my head of ticket sales and strategy and Mark Taylor, who used to work in the St. Louis Cardinals, was my head of marketing in community and really everything started with those two points. You had to bring people into the venue uh, and so Ed was not just the executioner of the ticket sales experience but he and Mark worked hand-in-hand in going out in community training these community events to really not just boost awareness but create those group sales and big opportunities for, you know, neighborhoods, churches, youth organizations, to come to the games.

Bob Wallace: So what was your elevator pitch, or their elevator pitch to the people that you were trying to sell tickets to? You just mentioned that you didn't want to sell uh or harp on the negativity of the two franchises, but you were trying to reach those people that miss football here. So

what was your elevator pitch to the people that you were reaching out to?

Kurt Hunzeker: No, you're exactly right. And the elevator pitch was the same to anybody. It was the same to civic progress, is the same to perspective ticket buyers, it was the same to Anheuser Busch and Centene, and Ameren and our commercial partners, or founding partners that we had. And it was, we had this vision of building St. Louis' first homegrown pro football team and we need your help. Simply put. We needed community's help. There was no way that the 20+ of us that worked in the front office, if you take the aggregate of the coaching staff and the players, we could not possibly build this brand and this team by ourselves in that short of a period of time and so we were very candid when we went out to high school football games to the, you know, the hot air balloon festival in Chesterfield, to all these different events and every day we had at least one from August 21, 2019 to March 12 when we suspended the season in 2020. Say, for Christmas Day and New Year's Day we were out in the community every single day and we simply listened and asked the St. Louis community to build this team with us. And that vision and that approach might have taken some people back just because we were very adamant to say we don't have all the answers and we really do want and need your help. And the embrace and just the collaboration and positivity that whoever we talked to uh, returned to us. That was the fun part. I mean the build of this team was probably the most fun part and the fruit and the – what, when we saw the results of that with two sell-out crowd with the only two home games that we played.

Bob Wallace: Right. So you, you touched on one of the questions I was going to ask. People were enthusiastic about that, about what you were trying to sell them on two levels. One is the fan base, you know, Joe Sixpack who loves football and wants to go to the game and then the corporate community. What did they tell you that they wanted out of the BattleHawks?

Kurt Hunzeker: The corporate community?

Bob Wallace: Either one. Corporate and then fan?

Kurt Hunzeker: Well --

Bob Wallace: What were they looking for? What was the return they were looking for?

Kurt Hunzeker: There's a lot of similarities. The fans were very keyed in on fun. And my background, having just come from minor league baseball, I mean that's the minor league baseball brand. It's fun and tagline was "it's fun to be a fan." And so there was a very clear synergistic alignment between what I had to do and previous almost five years in minor league baseball to what I wanted to do at the BattleHawks, and an

aggregate with the XFL was wanting to do in being a fan-focused community centric league. So that was easy because we were in complete lock stack because we had aimed, I had aimed to build a team that fun was one of our root personality traits. Now, on the commercial partnership side, fun definitely was a part of it and given the fact that it was such an open book, it was a blank canvas, that we were able to do things with brands that, I, you know, I think we could get away with a little bit more because the creativity – there wasn't a "we've always done it this way," or "we've never done it that way." When you're building something completely new which is like catnip to me, it was the same way, like AB selecting Bud Select to be the beer aligned with the BattleHawks, like there was so much creativity because we literally went into our partnership meetings with, "hey what do you guys want to do?" And once in a while, I go here's the menu board. With one sponsor we actually physically created a glass box of emotion that became one of the lighthouses in the concourse area during our games. Our fans wanted to take pictures with it and it got them talking about their product in ways that you can't do with a typical "advertisement or marketing activation." And that was again, the fun. I mean building everything when there's no one telling you that what you're doing is wrong. It may not be right, but certainly not wrong either. I think our fans as well as our corporate and civic partners, had a lot of fun in building that together.

Bob Wallace: Did you have any restrictions from the league headquarters on their vision on what was fun and what you could do uh, from, you know, was there any big brother looking down on you?

Kurt Hunzeker: I wouldn't call it big brother looking down. I think we greatly benefited from the fact that the XFL had its mantra – what it was trying to do, what it was, "the reimagining of football." And then with the official tag line "for the love football" that gave us a pretty enormous sandbox to play in. And what Jeffrey Pollack, the XFL COO and President who I laddered up into on the business side, he really wanted that story told in eight distinctly unique ways in each of the eight communities. You know, on the macro level, the XFL meant this so if you're watching on TV in any of the non-eight XFL markets, you saw that access to players and coaches behind the scenes that we wanted to provide as a league but then at the local market, they, I knew what works in St. Louis may not work entirely in Seattle or Los Angeles or New York and vice versa. But there was always cross-collaboration between the 18 presidents and really everybody laddered up into a committee in Stanford with the league office, so they promoted and demanded and we welcomed with open arms the collaboration between not just the league but the other markets.

In St. Louis, we were the guinea pig for a lot of the grass roots elements that I started off with local high school football, with some of the happy hour type events, that when we, some of the other markets replicated, put their own unique spin on it that makes sense in their communities, that they started to see the same results. And vice

versa, we picked up a lot from what other markets were doing and were able to integrate that into our business plan. So it certainly was not big brother. We took advantage and we levered the big benefits of having a single ownership structure where really all eight franchises or teams were all rowing the same direction at all times.

Bob Wallace: You mentioned that what may play in St. Louis may not play in LA or New York and the BattleHawks in St. Louis were one of the few teams that didn't have an NFL franchise in it, a city that didn't have an NFL franchise, but was one that had lost two. And you mentioned you didn't of course want to focus on the negativity, but talk about St. Louis as a football market and what your feelings about that were.

Kurt Hunzeker: Well we were the only XFL market that did not have an NFL team and so this time last year, my counterparts in the other seven markets were shadowing their NFL equivalents because some of them played in the same venues. Others were shadowing their counterparts so when their game day came up, they had a frame of reference and , obviously we did not have that in St. Louis. So we were always a bit of an outlier in that regard but that also allowed us a longer runway to do more I think. When we went out in community starting with that first football Friday last August, it was, we had the entire high school football season ahead of us that we could activate and we did it in the four quadrants of St. Louis because the closest, even collegiate team, was Mizzou an hour and a half away. So that allowed us to really come in and, and I'm not going to say by default, be the steward of football in the community, but it gave us an opportunity to assume that mantle but we had to earn it. And that's really where we wanted to go out in grass root events and go out and be in the community and engage with would-be fans and consumers.

While it's really easy to say you're St. Louis born and raised, we wanted to walk the walk as well and that's why we had such a committed schedule of everybody being out in the community on a daily basis. Now outside of our team meetings on Monday mornings, I told everybody if we were all in the office at the exact same time at any other point this week, we are doing something terribly, terribly wrong. And because we were losing an opportunity to talk to clubs, or high school like booster clubs, or elementary schools or chambers of commerce, or local companies because we wanted to tell our story. We wanted to do that elevator pitch of our vision for this team and really, we needed their help. And getting out in the community was really the core of what the BattleHawks did from day one that some of the other market adopted once their NFL seasons ended. They had now quote unquote the undivided attention, football attention in their communities to do so and they started taking advantage of that just the same way that we did, we just had more months.

Bob Wallace: Imagine how more difficult your strategy would have been if we were involved in the pandemic like we are now. Your high school football

strategy and some of that would have been so much more difficult than it was --

Kurt Hunzeker: You're exactly right.

Bob Wallace: So you also talk, I mean your very first game here was a sellout. It was great. You had the whole lower bowl filled and there was a, my sense of it was, part of it was a genuine middle finger to the Rams and saying we are a football town. How did you guys sort of tap into that a little bit?

Kurt Hunzeker: Obviously. And without really audibelizing it so to speak, we knew that there was that pent up anger but we also knew that there was pent up demand. What we wanted to do was as quickly as possible shift that negative sentiment into have the nation understand what a lot of us already knew, that St. Louis is a phenomenal football town and I saw terms like oh the hidden gem of pro football. I said okay, let's unhide this gem. Let's get out. And I think very quickly, yes, you have the chance to start the game but as, you know, that first home game went on and then you're starting to see more people just get on board with the "kakaw" train and just really felt this is actually a fun team.

I think that transition from what's "stick it," we're going to support this team as a way to get back. A transition to we're supporting this team because it's fun and man, they do adopt a lot of St. Louis things into the game day experience into what they do during the week. I mean, coach Hayes and I were completely aligned from day one on being – giving back to the community all the time and we never – like on the days off that the players had, typically a Tuesday, we were out in the community doing something with the players giving back whether working with uh, the food bank or working with our partners at SSM Health, Cardinal Glennon Hospital, we were always – the players were just quick to raise their hand to do whatever we kind of asked as related to hey let's support the community that's supporting us. And it's that reciprocal embrace that I think we caught some people off guard with that because it's not something that the previous football team did or was so passionate about. And so that helped transition from boo we hate the other team because they left us, to this is what we want. This is what a homegrown team should do. Let's embrace this and let's have some fun with this.

Bob Wallace: So you talk about the hidden gem of St. Louis. And why a football market. And, you know, we've lost two football teams. And even though when the Cardinals left, they did not say this was a bad football market, the Rams leaving saying that this was a dying football market. In fact they basically argued that it was a dying region, you know, losing businesses and all that. How do you address that? What's your take?

Kurt Hunzeker:

Well I think we lost the Cardinals and the Rams in a real estate deal. It's easy to point the finger and honestly recently being how the Rams exited and what they said to your point about not just the football fans living in St. Louis but the region in general, it was really a real estate play. When given something to care about, especially in football which there hasn't been a time, you know, that the football Cardinals weren't regular contenders year after year, obviously the greatest show on turf showed the country and the world what a raucous home field advantage really is, but then you had all those years of losing and never making the playoffs and that, I mean obviously that chips away at a fan base, especially a professional top level fan base. And we knew because we weren't – the XFL was not at the highest level, similar to minor league baseball. It's still professional baseball but it's not the highest level. It would – their transactions almost guaranteed year over year, you can't build your brand on a quarterback or a quartet of players but you can build your brand on what the actual team stands for. What's the purpose outside of just providing entertainment for five games, 41 games, 80+ games over the course of a year. And that was the difference. You know, we weren't building just five games for fans to come to, we were building something that they – that was eventually as part of our long strategy or business plan, was going to be a 365 day brand. As soon as the season was going to end in April, we were going to launch an adult flag football league and lease/use the training center, teams would have been branded the BattleHawks.

We were – I was already working with a number of youth football organizations, both flag and tackle, and trying to brand as many of them as BattleHawks, and then one thing I developed that we had not anticipated, uh but based on the data that we had of our actual game attendees is we were drawing a very strong regional crowd. Fans from not just Missouri and Illinois, but Iowa, Indiana, going as far west as Nebraska. Actually, we had a couple people from Montana come in for both games. That was telling us that the story of why the XFL was created – to bring more football to fans who love football who cry in their pillow when the super bowl ends because there's no more live football, there's a massive market for this. And St. Louis just kind of got screwed twice. You know, two teams left, not really because the fans were terrible, but just they moved on to a different real estate deal. And so how can we tap in, how can we overcome that angst and believe me, I heard it numerous times of I just can't fall in love again, I don't want get – I don't want my heart broken again. I'm like, I totally understand. So just come out on one date and help us build this brand. Even if you can't – even if you don't want to come to the games, follow along on social media. We're coming to your high school games, we're coming to your youth events, tell us what you would like and then maybe it might entice you to come out to a game at some point this season or next year or the year after.

Bob Wallace:

So as you talked about the brand a lot. So if you had to, you know, the Cardinals had a great tag line that the baseball Cardinals,

“baseball the way it ought to be,” and that really caught on in the mid, you know, I guess in the mid 90’s. Do you have a tag line that you would say about the X – about the BattleHawks? What would you, your tag line be, that sort of capsulates, encapsulates what you believe the BattleHawks stood for?

Kurt Hunzeker: Well, this is an excellent question. I think this is where, again, while we didn’t have a whole lot of time, we were given a very good running head start by the XFL lead office. When they came out and said we are reimagining football, uh Oliver Luck, Jeffrey Pollack and Mitch McMann, they said that over and over and over again. So even those simple words, there’s a lot to play with there and so we reimagined. I took that to heart when I was interviewing for the job. I’ve had reimagined football in St. Louis and that led to the, well this is the first homegrown team. So we knew that and having worked at minor league baseball during my four seasons, I had visited 134 of the 160 teams so I seen a ton of Americana. And in no place, and I’m 100% biased having been born and raised in St. Louis, but in no place is the value of being born and raised in a certain city or community the same as it is in St. Louis. It’s just, the value is off the charts.

Bob Wallace: And you went to what high school?

Kurt Hunzeker: Uh, this is where I fail. I’ll get to that in a second.

Bob Wallace: *[Laughs.]*

Kurt Hunzeker: So we, we knew that the Cardinals and Rams weren’t from here and having that starting point of we’ve, we are actually birthed in St. Louis. This team is St. Louis through and through but this is how we’re going to reimagine the game. How would you want to reimagine that potential BattleHawks fan, potential BattleHawks corporate partner, potential BattleHawks beer vendor, whatever, having this conversation really, that was, that was our brand. And that allowed us to not just make it a one way, here’s a catchy tag line, but really make it a device to create two-way conversations with fans and that’s what I, in today’s day and age, it absolutely, sports brands absolutely have to be listeners. They can’t just push something out and expect it to click. They have to be able to respond whether it’s social media or any kind of typical customer service. Um, because without it, you’re going to get laughed by brands and companies and teams that, you know, definitely do listen to their fans.

Bob Wallace: So how hard is it – well first of all, what high school did you go to?

Kurt Hunzeker: So I went to high school in Tampa, Florida --

Bob Wallace: *[Laughs.]*

Kurt Hunzeker: -- Bloomingdale High School. My parents, my dad took a job, uh, I moved in sixth grade, so I went to school in Des Peres, kindergarten

through a couple weeks into sixth grade and then my family moved to Tampa. And it's funny because even though I was 11, 12 at the time, it was very quick to me that what being midwestern meant like from a personality standpoint, when I got to Florida, and no one from Florida at least in the late 80's, was from Florida. There's just transients everywhere. And the joke was the farther south in Florida you go, the more northern you get so the Tampa/Orlando corridor was kind of like being Midwest but certainly not the same. And I realized that I just, that laid back mentality is central to me, very unique to me and I really missed that. I missed the, being in St. Louis, obviously and that's why at the first opportunity which was college, away I go to the University of Missouri. So I tend to, when I lost the high school question, I rally pretty quickly by saying I went to Mizzou. So that generally helped out in those conversations.

Bob Wallace:

Well you said that your Midwest background made you laid back. I would have trouble believing that a sales person brand builder is laid back. But how hard is it to build a brand? That's what you built your career on doing, so, but how hard is it to do?

Kurt Hunzeker:

It's incredibly hard, especially if you are impatient. I mean there are, or if you believe you have all the answers yourself. And I look at being a brand builder and you're right, and I said it earlier, it's catnip to me. I mean that was the draw of this. The cherry on top was I was going to be able to do this in my home town. But any kind of build and even at Rawlings where I worked for almost five years, we were building at the time a football helmet business and we were looking at new ways to reimagine and to amplify participation in the sport, not just in the United States but globally.

I go to minor league baseball and they were building their first centralized sales and marketing office so having my fingerprints on that build and then seeing it deploy in 160 markets nationwide, that was, that's the fun for me. And then, you know, an executive recruiter came calling about the XFL and specifically the BattleHawks and, you know, all of the ideas come flooding through my head and while we didn't have a whole lot of time, it's not like we have the runway that the new soccer team does, we still had to be patient and go step by step and I mentioned before, when I built the business strategy, it was really for 2021. The foundational element we were building for 2020 but I don't think the St. Louis community would have been the full power, they never saw the full power of the BattleHawks. That is unquestionable. We were not remotely close to our potential just because there's so many things that we need a full off season and some metric that told us what was working and what wasn't from our inaugural year to get off the ground and so being someone who's really rooted in research, planning and strategy development, you know, that allowed us to create this initial go to market strategy. It needs activation strategies that bring people together, bring this BattleHawks brand to life. And so I had to be, I had to tap into that patience knowing that even when that first sell out crowd, we saw that

29,000 plus jam the lower bowl, I knew at that point we were opening the top for the LA game. And then in my --

Bob Wallace:

Do I want to talk to you, I want to talk to you about opening up the top a little bit because uh, I actually thought you shouldn't open the top. I thought that it was, you had a value – supply and demand – and you had more demand than you had supply with just opening the lower, and I didn't think you were going to sell out the top of the stadium and you'd have expenses for opening up the top and uh, anybody could get a ticket at that point so I was, you know, one of the things that we all talked about when I was with the Rams is, you know, leaving LA when they left LA, we should, you know, we should build a small stadium in LA and charge a lot of money for it because LA, you know, it's exclusivity. And so I was pushing back a little bit on opening the bowl and expanding supply before the demand was there or before all the demand was there. What do you say about that? Tell me I was wrong.

Kurt Hunzeker:

I agree with you to – no, I agree with you, to a point. I agree with you that you start this team, there was absolutely no way we were going to open the top. And if even the success, even if we sold out game one, game two was six days later so there's not enough time and you know it, to get everything ready upstairs. Game three, you absolutely, I had almost three full weeks, we had two road games, give and six, planned. So getting ready for game seven, home game three, we would have had three weeks to prepare. Because of the ticket – robust ticket sales for games one and two, we were able to work with the dome and be like, I think we're going to go, let's put the contingency plan that we kind of tabled, let's start working on this for game three. I don't know about the final two home games because you're kind of at the whim of the standings, where we are in the standings, plus home game four was going to be an 11:00 a.m. kick off because it was the same day as the Cardinals first Sunday home game of the season.

And even though it was Tampa Bay - who evidently St. Louis hates with as much venom as they didn't like the Rams leaving for Los Angeles - an 11:00 a.m. kick is not desirable. And the we did not know up until the day we actually shuttered the season or the day we suspend the season, we didn't know what time we were playing on Easter, which was our final home game. It was either 2:00 or 5:00 and I pushed as hard as I possible could on five just so St. Louis could finish all their Easter festivities and then come to the Dome for what could have been a division championship game versus D.C. But we were going to at least get one game in to see what, how expensive it was because you're right, there's a total, there's expenses about opening up the top, your security staff, there's logistical operational concessions, you name it, about going upstairs and we really couldn't go all the way around anyway because of the way Fox and ABC deployed their camera system so the pulleys blocked oh probably a fifth of the upper deck, essentially would have passed the press box

from side to side. So no matter what it wasn't going to be complete – we weren't going to completely encircle the top. But if all went well and the demand was there, and you were right on the pricing, but again we aren't the elite league, we were wanting to get fans who never went to a Rams game because they couldn't afford it but they really love football. There was more volume there than fans were who were willing to spend what we were charging for in between the 20 yard lines so to speak. So that gave us – opening up the top gave us the opportunity to invite more fans who were, even though we only had, we had \$20 tickets for lower bowl endzones, I mean those were snapped up in a nanosecond, it gave them the same opportunity to – at the same price – to go upstairs to be a part of that crowd, to be a part of the energy, to be a part of that tailgating experience and really, really hammer home to a national audience what kind of football town St. Louis is. And then the belief was, year two we're opening up the top all season long.

Bob Wallace: So we talk about St. Louis. I want to go back a little bit and not asking you to disclose all of your great ideas for going forward because they could be valuable, that you could use those in your consulting business coming up. Uh, what didn't you get to do that you really wanted to do going forward for year two, three and four?

Kurt Hunzeker: That's a --

Bob Wallace: And then while you're thinking about, while you're thinking about that, I'd say, one of the things that I say about St. Louis is we are almost our worst enemy because we're just, you know, we're kind of negative sometimes and we sort of talk about, you know, we're – it's a baseball town, not a football town. The dome is the worst stadium in the league. All those things that sort of get a narrative all of themselves, kind of weave that into your answer.

Kurt Hunzeker: Well, ironically, I always use the dome as being super positive about the game day experience because as we were talking fans and especially as tickets start to go on sale in December and it's obviously a little bit more than chilly outside, I was guaranteeing 72 and sunny every game.

Bob Wallace: *[Laughs.]* Right.

Kurt Hunzeker: And I think that the mindset turned into, yeah okay, when the Rams were there and it's gorgeous and it's 70 degrees in, you know, late September, October and you're stuck inside, yeah, it stinks. But when you're starting – when you're playing in a league that's playing in February and March predominantly, and we know that in St. Louis February and March can be brutal from a weather standpoint, um, guaranteeing 72 and sunny was a major positive for us. The dome really was a huge benefit. Now, believe me, I was more than ecstatic on home game one on the 23rd of February that it was 50 degrees outside and people were sweating their asses off. That was, that

started the day long goose bumps for me as I'm pulling up getting off of 70 at Broadway and seeing billowing plumes of smoke from all the tailgate grills at 6:45, 7:00 in the morning and we were kicking off at 2:00 pm in the day, so yeah. The Dome was nothing but positive to us and that really kind of fed into why our brand works, we were very positive so we looked at the dome and people like, you know, blah blah blah blah, that's the reason why the Rams left. It's like their loss is our gain. I mean, always had the mentality and I would say that without question Matthew Dewey, Kitty Radcliff and their team were our greatest partners. They never said no to any idea that we had and believe me we threw the kitchen sink at them.

To answer the original question, we were set to launch a great partnership with Square with home game three. We were going to install what was going to be called either Square's Square or Square Garden, depending on how the trademark got through on our idea but a section of the concourse we were going to have local Square fellers creating Battlehawk themed products that you couldn't buy anywhere else. And it really honed in on the community spirit that we were celebrating, not just during our five home games. We used the five home games as a megaphone, as a platform but really to shine light on a lot of these great small business and obviously Square moving in to effective right next door to the dome, you know, the Post-Dispatch building, you know.

There was a lot of synergies and then long-term what could Square do from a B-to-B standpoint to improve not just power operations but the convention complex operations whether it was physical point of sale or kiosk and then all the technology that it can bring to the table. This is going to be a robust massive partnership. I worked with Square when I was in minor league baseball, carried over that same, "hey, the sky's the limit" mentality. That with Mr. McKelvey, that was something that in addition to not seeing 50,000+ people go bananas at a BattleHawks game not activating the Square partnership, actually not even getting to announce it. We were going to announce it after the Tampa Bay game. I'm disappointed in that.

Bob Wallace: We've got a new soccer team coming here in a few years. What advice would you give them on how to kick it off? I mean I think they're doing a great job starting off. I think they've really tapped into a lot of good things. Is there anything from your experience launching a new franchise in the city that you would say to them? Again, without giving away too many of your secrets.

Kurt Hunzeker: No, I've been an open book to Caroline and Dennis and others in the organization. When they came, I invited them to our first game and told them point blankly, I'm actually in this because this is kind of the climax of the build. The build was so much fun. It was seven months and none week of, on July 1 staring at my laptop thinking oh, alright, where do I start. There's no guidebook. There's no one telling you how to do this. There's no like right way to do it. There's no wrong

way, but 29,000 people going bananas is certainly helping to score a touchdown four plays into the game. And it just amplified the noise that much more. But for the team, I mean there are a lot of similarities and there's one major difference. We were able to tap into what we knew to be true that the national media didn't. And that was St. Louis is a great football town. But the MLS team is doing – I mean they're holding pocket aces because everybody knows what a great soccer town St. Louis is so they're maybe more pressure on them than there was on us. Certainly also because we were technically a minor league football team and they are at the elite level of soccer in the United States. But they still have an incredible starting point, locally and nationally. And while I think everybody was disappointed that their initial pick was pushed back from 2022 to 2023, what that extra year does, it provides another 365 daily opportunities to engage their would-be consumers and their super fans and really roll all of St. Louis' soccer loving families and youth organizations under one banner and you said yourself, they're off to an absolutely flying start.

Bob Wallace: So the XFL has announced that they're going to come back, I guess in 2022. Would you like to be part of that?

Kurt Hunzeker: There's a lot of unfinished business, that's for sure. There's also a pretty large file, I think, sitting in the database that was transferred over to the new owners that has the business plan. Now obviously the pandemic's thrown a monkey wrench into the sports industry and so there would be some modification to it but the same route is still there. And that it is really building a sustainable brand, a year-round brand in St. Louis. I am intrigued to see what the new ownership does. What they want to do. They tend to not invest in things that don't succeed ultimately. And that's an excellent sign for anybody who seeks to associate with the XFL. I have no idea what their plans are. I have not talked to anybody associated with the new ownership or the league office since the 10th. So really don't have any insights to glean but I certainly do not believe St. Louis did anything to disqualify itself from being one of the first calls when they do start to plot out the 2022 season.

Bob Wallace: I saw something on TV and they had sort of a short blurb about the Rock taking over and the highlight was of St. Louis. I think I've said this to you before we started, but I think you guys did as good a job as any other team in the league. I think they have a resource there in St. Louis and they are silly if they don't take advantage of what you did and what you plan to do going forward. So tell me again, so, what's in your future?

Kurt Hunzeker: I'm a candidate for sure. Again, as much as I like to think I'm very patient sitting on the sidelines for more than six months and my unrequested early requirement has been really difficult for me and the family. And I know there are millions of others who unfortunately lost their jobs due to the pandemic and they're looking for their next professional chapters as well and it's tough. I mean the market, the

job market's slowly reemerging. At the same time it's still being flooded by great, talented executives. I mean you start seeing major league baseball teams cutting staff. Of the 22 of us on the BattleHawks, only a handful of us have landed. So, I mean, I'm ready to go should the XFL leadership call or really any entity. And while I would obviously continue to love to stay in the industry I've dedicated more than 20 years of my professional life to, and obviously to my hometown love of more than 43 years, I really don't know where I go next. But I do hope wherever it is it's soon.

Bob Wallace: Well I'm sure that you'll do well. So you're in kind of the same boat as a lot of people who are in the sports industry and love it because it's fun, it's glamorous. Sometimes it's lucrative. It may not be as lucrative as it is for the players, but it is lucrative. What advice would you give to those people that are trying to break into the sports industry?

Kurt Hunzeker: I think the biggest one is always strive to improve. Always say yes to professional development. You can always learn something new and really to make it in this industry and you know this to be true, I mean you have to have not just a well-rounded skill set but really the hands-on operational knowledge. That will separate you from your peers as you continue to grow into more advanced roles and responsibilities. I grew up on the agency side of the business where you have to by necessity make pennies and nickels in your budget look like dollars, and that kind of fiscal responsibility merged with strategic, like you can you take numbers, how can you translate analytics into your action, has really been the background, or the core of my career. Having a diverse skill set and working on all sides of sports business I can see things that in perspective it's what I'd like to think is fairly unique in the industry. And one that's also very applicable to other industries. You know, leaving a professional sports team as its president is very transferrable to leaving a brand, leaving a company, leaving an agency outside of sports. And that's really been the storytelling in the last 6+ months for me.

Bob Wallace: As I said earlier, the success that you have with the BattleHawks I think was spectacular. I'm sure there will be a lot of great things in your future, and I look forward to following those. And again I really want to thank you for taking the time to speak with us. I think our listeners will really enjoy listening to you. And I hope they have enjoyed this conversation as well as our other podcasts. And if you do, let us know. You can provide your feedback by going to the Apple podcast and going to the ratings and review section for our podcast, After the Buzzer. If you're listening on Stitcher, go to [stitcher.com](https://www.stitcher.com), and if there's a topic you would like to hear us discuss, let us know that too. And Kurt, thank you and we thank you for listening.

Kurt Hunzeker: Thank you so much, Bob. Take care now.

Bob Wallace: Thanks, Kurt. If there's anything I can do for you, let me know.