

FROM SUPER BOWL PLAYER TO SUPER BOWL CEO

GREEN BAY PACKERS PRESIDENT AND CEO MARK MURPHY ON LEADERSHIP



Mark Murphy

On February 6, 2011, the Green Bay Packers defeated the Pittsburgh Steelers 31-25 in a thrilling Super Bowl XLV victory. The triumph capped an unlikely run in which the Packers overcame the loss of 16 players to injured reserve during the season and rose from the lowest seed in the NFC playoffs to emerge as world champions. Just as unlikely and compelling has been the career trajectory of Packers President and CEO Mark Murphy. A graduate of Colgate University, Murphy achieved a rare feat by entering the NFL as an undrafted free agent safety and enjoying an eight-year playing career. He was a co-captain of the Washington Redskins from 1980-84; a Super Bowl champion in 1982; an All-Pro and Pro Bowler in 1983; and the vice president of the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) in 1983 and 1984.

After his playing career concluded, Murphy earned a law degree and returned to the NFL as assistant executive director of the NFLPA. Following a stint as a trial attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice, he made a name for himself as a successful athletic director at his alma mater Colgate, and then at Northwestern University, before becoming president and CEO of the Green Bay Packers in 2008. With the Packers' recent Super Bowl victory, Murphy made history as the first person to win Super Bowls both as a player and as the head of an NFL franchise. Spencer Stuart recently spoke with him about the leadership lessons he has learned throughout his unique career.

THE GREEN BAY PACKERS AT A GLANCE

- > Based in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and founded in 1919 by Earl "Curly" Lambeau and George Whitney Calhoun, the Packers are the second-oldest franchise in the NFL.
- > The team has won 13 league championships, more than any other team in the NFL, including nine NFL championships before the Super Bowl era and victories in Super Bowls I (1967), II (1968), XXXI (1997) and XLV (2011).
- > The Green Bay Packers are the only nonprofit, community-owned major league professional sports team in the U.S. As of 2005, more than 112,000 people could lay claim to a franchise ownership interest. The Packers are also the only major-league sports franchise to release its balance sheet every year.

You went from being a collegiate athletic director to become the president and CEO of an NFL franchise. That doesn't happen often. What was it like making the shift?

Mark Murphy: The experiences I had as an athletic director were actually very helpful in my new role in terms of working with both coaches and athletes. The league dynamic is a bit different, but it resembles some of the issues I dealt with as an athletic director at the conference level, particularly in the Big Ten, in terms of working with the athletic directors and presidents of other schools.

You joined the Packers, a legendary organization with a highly respected general manager (Ted Thompson) and head coach (Mike McCarthy). What were the keys to succeeding as a new CEO with such a strongly established team already in place?

Mark Murphy: First, you don't try to micro-manage. I have never done that at any role I've had. I believe in hiring good people or keeping good people in place and letting them do their jobs. One of the best things that happened early in my tenure with the Packers was the situation we had with Brett Favre where he retired and then changed his mind. It forced me, Ted and Mike to really come together on a major issue and I think it has paid dividends for us since then.

We all felt that Aaron Rodgers was going to be able to step in and play well for us. We'd made a commitment to him, and we weren't going to change. We really started to feel pressure publicly.

But when you make a decision, I think it's important that everybody is on the same page and you stick to it. When you start having people splinter off or there's some doubt about whether you're actually going to stick to the position, then you've undermined everything. I can't speak for Mike and Ted, but they didn't know me, and I think the fact that I stuck by them and that we worked well together gave them confidence.

The decision really split our fans, because some of them are loyal Packers fans who are going to support the Packers no matter what. But because Brett had such great success and was such a unique player, there were also people who became Packers fans because of him. Fortunately, Aaron Rodgers has played at such a high level over the last three years that it's really brought the fan base together, and I think that people understand why we went with him.

One of the things really that's unique about your job is the level of community involvement. You've experienced that in your other roles, but how do you see it being different in this role with the Packers compared to other NFL cities?

Mark Murphy: Well, it's very different from any other NFL team. Our ownership structure is unique and we're much more public; even our financial records are public. As an NFL team in a very small town, we get a lot more scrutiny than most teams, but our fans are also extremely loyal. They have a much stronger tie to the team than other fans across the league because they literally have an ownership interest in us.

After we won the Super Bowl, the support from our fans was just unbelievable. We had 35,000 fans on the parade route coming home from the airport. The Tuesday after the Super Bowl, 56,000 people came out to the stadium in five-degree weather.

The other aspect of it that's different is that we've got a 45-member board that is actively involved in the management of the organization. In some ways it reminds me of a board of trustees at a university. When you've got 45 people on a board, as opposed to a corporate board of eight or ten, it's a large number to deal with and keep informed. A big part of my job is making sure that they understand why we're making the decisions that we are.

How do you do that? How often do you meet with the whole group?

Mark Murphy: We meet with our entire board four times a year; three during the season and one in the off-season and there is also some additional communication with them. We also have a series of different committees. Every member of the board is on a committee, and we also have an executive committee of seven people, including myself, where the business and the strategic planning of the organization takes place beyond my senior management team. The executive committee meets once a month, and more often as needed, so they're actively involved in the management of the organization.

Beyond the board, we have a larger body: our 112,000 shareholders. Once a year we have the annual shareholders' meeting, and about 15,000 people normally come to it. There's no other corporate board meeting or corporate meeting quite like it — we have it right in Lambeau Field.

In terms of launching the strategy when you first came aboard, how did you strategically go about mapping out the short- and long-term objectives for the Packers?

Mark Murphy: I was careful not to try to be a change agent right away. I wanted to make sure I really understood the Packers organization, which is very unique. I knew it was, having been around the league for a number of years, but until you're working here, you can't have a real appreciation for it. And though I played in the league and worked for the players association, I'd been away from the league for awhile, so I also wanted to make sure I really understood the business side of the NFL before making any changes.

Early in my tenure, I really focused on strategic planning. The Packers had done quite a bit of it already, but being new gave me an opportunity to look at things freshly, and I think that was crucial and has been extremely helpful to us in terms of some of the initiatives that we've gone forward with. In terms of strategic planning, to me the most important thing is making sure that your employees buy into it and see the value and importance of it. My experience both as an athletic director and now with the Packers is that some of the best initiatives and ideas come from throughout the organization.

One thing that's distinct about the Packers is its great sense of tradition. How do you keep that type of tradition going and build upon it?

Mark Murphy: First, you've got to keep the history and tradition front and center. For us, a big part of Lambeau Field is our Hall of Fame that recognizes the great history and tradition of the Packers. The stadium itself is historic — it's the oldest in the NFL. People want to come and see it.

The second thing we do is try to give our fans a number of different ways to connect with the players. For instance, a couple of years ago, we built a brand new training camp practice field with bleachers that seat about 3,000 where the fans can feel like they're close to the players.

The third thing that helps, honestly, is winning. We've got four Super Bowl Championships and 13 world championships, more than any other team in the league. You have to be careful — you don't want to come across as bragging about it. But it's important to make sure that people understand the tremendous history and tradition that we have.

How do you keep your people motivated to come up with new ideas and new ways to stay on top as a smaller-market team that needs to generate revenue and come up with creative ways to monetize itself?

Mark Murphy: First, you have to talk about the professional development and leadership

development of your employees. It is helpful when you can promote people from within. But the other thing that really helps is getting people actively involved at the league level on different league committees. It's also important to have them interact with their counterparts at other teams in the league, whether it's the marketing department or the finance department.

That's one of the good things about the league. We compete with every other team on the field, but off the field, we're not competing for the same sponsors. Learning what other teams are doing in terms of marketing and sponsorships and revenue generation can be helpful to us, and they're happy to share because it's not going to hurt them in any way.

When you came into the league, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell put you on the NFL's key Management Counsel Executive Committee pretty quickly. What was that like, coming in as CEO, not as an owner, being part of negotiations after having been there on the players' side 20 years ago?

Mark Murphy: I was very honored that Roger put me on the committee. I think he felt that my experience and background as a player, player rep and former NFLPA vice president could be assets with the bargaining coming up. It took some time for the owners who sit on the committee to understand that I brought a different perspective that could be helpful as we moved forward on the labor front.

At the end of the day, I think both the players and owners want an agreement that works for everybody and I think that where I can be helpful is maybe being able to find a middle ground that will work for the owners as well as the players.

When you think about the different challenges you have faced in your career, is there one accomplishment that you're most proud of?

Mark Murphy: As a player in the NFL, I took great pride in making an NFL team and then in being on a Super Bowl championship team. The accomplishments that are the most memorable are those that were a true team effort. Like at Colgate, where we were able to get the team back to the Division I-AA tournament and win a Patriot League Championship.

Throughout my career, I've tried to find positions where I can make a difference in the organization, and where my background, skills and experience can be helpful in the role. For example, my experiences as a player, a player rep, a former NFLPA vice president, a lawyer and an athletic director have all helped me in this current position. I think that having a variety of different experiences that you can draw from is invaluable.

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- > USOC Chief Executive Officer
- > Arsenal Holdings PLC Chief Executive Officer
- > Seattle Seahawks President
- > MLB Network Chief Executive Officer
- > ATP Executive Chairman and President
- > LPGA Commissioner
- > Pac-10 Commissioner
- > NFL Chief Financial Officer
- > NBA Chief Financial Officer
- > University of Michigan Athletic Director
- > Portland Trail Blazers General Manager
- > Seattle Seahawks General Manager

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