

learning to play the game



Early in my Jazz career, I was presented with a very unusual opportunity. Over a pregame dinner with several fellow front office Jazz staff members, including Jay Francis, one of our VPs, we began discussing the Heimlich maneuver, the one where you grab someone from behind who is choking on something he or she has been eating, lifting or holding them and thrusting your locked arms backward into their stomach to dislodge the intruding morsel. Within five minutes, Jay began pointing to his throat, standing and squirming over our table. I thought he was joking, but he wasn't. I had never done the maneuver before, but if he was teasing me, at least it would be good practice. Years later, I had another opportunity, this time with my son during a steak barbecue in our backyard. I liked Jay, but I love my son. I'm glad Jay was my guinea pig, so to speak. I might have panicked otherwise. Fortunately, both maneuvers were successful.

Sometimes, we are asked or required to do something completely outside of our realm of experience. I was very grateful that in both instances I could respond favorably. I think I was more shaken than either of my patients. However, I might just prefer doing the Heimlich maneuver as a profession over shooting a foul shot to win a game in the NBA Finals. I'm a much better free-throw shooter than an emergency technician. But shooting that game winning shot? That's pressure. A life doesn't hang in the balance, certainly, so the stakes are higher in that case. But thoughts like "Maybe twenty million people are watching me take this shot, not to mention my teammates and perhaps twenty thousand people in the arena" could be enough to jolt anyone at the free-throw line with a chance to win a big game.

That's probably one reason Karl Malone worked so hard on his foul shooting after his rookie season. Karl loved having the fans' adoration. He loved being the good guy, the one who sealed a win with a jump shot, a breakaway dunk, or if it was necessary, a foul shot. Foul shots be-

came necessary. Because at 48%, the chances were good that Karl would miss that game-winning foul shot but probably not the five-foot jump shot or slam dunk. Why take a chance? Why not foul him early before he could embarrass you? In the off season, while the front office was busy trading Adrian Dantley for Kelly Tripucka and Kent Benson, Karl worked on his free throws. In his second season, he shot 59.8%, nearly 12% better than his rookie year. And, in his third year, he shot 70% from the line. That's over 21% better in two years, a remarkable feat for anyone, but especially impressive for someone who was not revered as a foul shooter when he came into the league. In another year, he would elevate and level off at 76% free-throw shooting. Now, you could honestly say that Karl Malone was not only very, very good, but—even better—he was dangerous. In 1985, he was a steal at the thirteenth pick of the draft. By 1988, during his third year, he was averaging just under 30 (29.1) points per game and almost 11 (10.7) rebounds while shooting 52% anywhere inside the three-point line. Who does that sound like? Michael Jordan (without the rebounds)? LeBron James? Kobe Bryant (also sans rebounding)? He was on a fast track to becoming legendary.

Karl's teammates were on a fast track too. During the 1988–89 season, Stockton was averaging 17 points per game and, almost unbelievably, 13 assists per game. Most of them went to #32. I attended a luncheon hosted by the NBA in our arena during one of these remarkable seasons. The NBA was honoring Karl Malone, and Bob Lanier, the famous Milwaukee Bucks center, was presenting the award to Karl when he quipped, "Karl, if I were you, I would give half of this award to that little white guy sitting over there at your table."

Thurl Bailey was clipping along at a 19-points-per-game rate and grabbing five rebounds. Mark Eaton averaged a shade below Karl in rebounds at 10.3, and the great Darrell Griffith managed 14 points per game, playing in all 82 games, albeit various injuries had started nagging him since the 1985–86 season, which he missed in its entirety.

The starting point for this magnificent run to the finals actually began sometime between the end of the 1986–87 season and the start of the 1987–88 season. Something really magical happened. It's where passion, obsession, loyalty, and chemistry mix together in a way every team hopes for but few ever witness or experience. It deserves a closer look.



My stats were improving a little as well. Not sure I deserve a closer look, but I began to feel like I could play in the NBA sales game. I did have an advantage (not big hands, though). Other than Larry Baum, I was really the only full-time salesperson. Grant Harrison, Randy Rigby, and David Fredman all had other demanding responsibilities, so their part-time status left things open for me to chase new clients. My notepad began to fill up, and I began to feel comfortable talking about the Jazz to others. Never liking the traditional sales books about how to “close” a deal, how to get in the front door, meet with the right people, negotiate and leverage a deal, I began developing my own style. Of course, some of my education was supplied by difficult prospects. Like Stockton, who learned from others who tutored him on the guard line, I studied my mistakes and weaknesses as I kept adding to my sales notebook. I was more comfortable in my skin, and approaching prospects was no longer intimidating. Just like the team, my teammates in sponsorship sales and I were learning to play, too.

In an early encounter, I bumped into the local sales representatives for Michelin Tires, and it turned out they had a healthy local advertising and marketing budget. Soon, we put together a sponsorship, which included signage, on court promotions, tickets, and other amenities. They were a great partner for several years, but just as quickly as they had become a sponsor, they left, having lost the bulk of their budget. I was devastated. I had worked hard to manage their account and had cultivated good relationships with very good people on their side. It was one of the first—and actually very few—losses I suffered. I remember going into a sales meeting headed by Larry Baum, having just been given the very bad news, dreading to announce they were leaving. I moped around the office a couple days before I ventured back into the field. It took me a minute, but I realized that there was nothing I could have done to prevent their exiting as a sponsor. We had become good friends as well as business partners. It was the last thing they wanted to do. We even tried a couple of years later to reconstruct our deal, but the budget was never approved.

However, I found success bringing other companies into our fold,

some quickly, some not so quickly. I crafted a deal with M&M Mars that included something I hadn't done before: a player clinic. Matt Fish, who headed up local marketing, expressed an interest in finding a way to leverage their in-store presence at grocery stores. We created the clinic idea, inviting key store managers to bring their children to a two-hour clinic featuring several Jazz players teaching skills and granting autographs. They also received commemorative clinic T-shirts, which they loved having players sign, and refreshments. I began to see other possibilities that featured players and coaches in private settings, something that other companies couldn't offer their customers unless they were a sponsor of the Jazz.

Not every deal came together quickly. I called State Farm Insurance and FHP Health, and both of their executives answered in almost identical fashion: "Why would I ever want to be a sponsor of the Utah Jazz?" Even though I offered what I thought were rather compelling reasons, they were quick to dismiss me. But as our conversation was ending, I said I'd love for them to be a guest at one of our games, and I would check back. I was not going to make it easy for them to ignore me.



In 1987, as the season ended, John, Karl, Thurl, and Darrell Griffith were averaging double figures, followed closely by Bobby Hansen (9.7 PPG) and Ricky Green (9.6 PPG). The team was averaging 108 PPG and giving up 104 PPG, which was the biggest spread since the 1983-84 season when Dantley, John Drew, and Darrell Griffith were lighting up opponents for 115 points per game. John, Karl, Thurl, and Eaton represented a new era for the Jazz. They had size and talent. They could block shots, grab rebounds, move the ball, and score. And they were young. Excluding Darrel Dawkins, who was in his twelfth year, players averaged just over three years of NBA experience. When the Jazz traded for Dawkins and Mel Turpin, the front line of the Jazz with Eaton, Malone, and Thurl Bailey, weighed well over 1,000 pounds. Frank Layden announced at a press conference that he thought this trade made us the "heaviest team in the league." Pure Frank.

Unfortunately, this 1987 playoff team lost in the first round. The Jazz were up 2-0 against Golden State, but at the end of the game, Malone and Greg Ballard, who was close in physical stature to Malone, had words and a shoving match near the scorer's table. Fans got involved, too, and Golden State's coach, George Karl, was evidently shoved or perhaps punched. There were rumors that even his wife was accosted by fans. I was sitting right in front of Mrs. (George) Karl, and I don't remember seeing anything unfriendly, but my eyes were fixed on the scorer's table, and there was plenty of pandemonium to watch on the court.

The Jazz lost the next three games to Golden State. It didn't help that Ricky Green was injured in the second game, but the outcome might have been different if Malone had just walked away from Ballard that night with a victory. Then George Karl wouldn't have been shoved or possibly slugged, and Golden State wouldn't have had as much to play for. One can never know, but it was a painful lesson for players and fans. I guess it's all part of learning how to play the game.



Why should a company become a Jazz sponsor? Why should they spend advertising dollars with a professional sports franchise, a relatively non-traditional method for reaching customers? The answers were becoming more apparent to me all the time. First, there wasn't a better way for a client to receive instant recognition. Even though the Salt Palace only held about 12,000 people, the Jazz were playing to a packed house 41 times during the regular season. TV ratings were quickly elevating to record heights. For most games, over 25% of the viewing audience was watching the Jazz in prime-time television, which made it the most watched show in that time slot. So, when clients questioned my sanity in calling, I had answers. Patiently, I built my leads list and checked back from time to time, often extending an invitation to come to a Jazz game.

State Farm Insurance was particularly difficult, but finally, after almost a year of short phone discussions, Michael Galletti, the CEO for the Utah Division, agreed to come to a game and then to a meeting.

In our first meeting, when I brought up TV ratings, he quickly asked me to tell him who had the best ratings on TV. I responded truthfully, saying that it depended on the time of day. Each station could claim number-one rankings in some day parts, as they were called. He responded with, "Thank you. You are the first person to tell me the truth. Everyone else says they are number one all day long. Tell me more." That meeting led to a preliminary sponsorship agreement, and when it worked, that led to another and another. State Farm became a valued sponsor for over 15 years, soon becoming a key partner.

I had a similar experience with FHP Health Plans. Steve Goldsmith, their marketing man who would become a life-long friend, declined to meet with me, too. But one year later, we finally had that first meeting. It also led to a multi-year sponsorship. One thing Steve wanted was in-game visibility on TV and in the arena. Grant Harrison, our Game Operations VP, suggested something he had seen in another arena: the tip-off sponsor. We incorporated the idea into TV games as well as an in-arena pregame "staged" tip off just before the game started to honor valued clients of FHP, presenting them with the game ball autographed by a player like Stockton, Malone, or even the entire team. Our agreement endured for about 27 years, ending just as I was getting ready to retire, when the parent company sold the Utah division.

Within a couple of years, advertisers could no longer overlook the Jazz as a viable advertising and promotional opportunity. I like to think it had something to do with us spreading the word, but it also had a lot to do with our very recognizable on-court product.



I don't visualize myself as a salesman. I couldn't imagine selling cars, boats, houses, or insurance. I admire those who can. Products everyone needs sooner or later—probably sooner. On the other hand, no one needs to be a Jazz season-ticket holder or join the ranks of companies who sponsor the Jazz. But I had always been passionate about the game of basketball, and I had always been a perennial Jazz fan, so it followed that perhaps the Jazz could become one product I could

embrace and sell. I was becoming passionate about it. The fans were becoming passionate, too, growing in numbers in almost geometric fashion. I saw the implications of how our product could positively impact companies and increase their successes in the market. But my passion wasn't shared by everyone. Not everyone was a Jazz fan. Not every company could see the value of being a Jazz sponsor. They weren't alone. Other NBA teams in the not-too-distant past took the Jazz for granted. Even though Frank had relinquished his head coaching position, he was still our team president and easily one of the most colorful, fun loving people the NBA had ever seen. He had been coach of the year, executive of the year, and an all-around good guy. But Frank could be tough too. He once fined Bobby Hansen \$5,000 for fighting with another teammate (Bart Kofoed), breaking his hand in the process. Frank was livid. Five thousand dollars was a lot to fine someone in the late eighties. When Bobby complained, Frank said something like, "You're costing me money by not being able to play, so I'm not going to be the only one to pay for your stupidity."



However, by the end of the 1987–88 season, it was readily apparent that NBA foes could no longer ignore our on-court product either. The team won 47 games (up from 44 the previous year), and even though they had qualified for the playoffs for five consecutive years, twice going to the second round, this year was different. The league noticed. Karl Malone was an NBA All-Star, a member of the All-NBA Second Team, and so was Stockton. Stockton also received the Allstate Good Hands Award. Eaton and Malone were named All-Defensive NBA Second Team. John, Karl, and Bobby Hansen were named NBA Players of the Week, and John and Karl were also named NBA Players of the Month in February and March of that year. Most of these honors came as we were finishing the season. The team was peaking just in time for the playoffs, something every coach wanted to see but couldn't always control.

Even better, John beat out perennial NBA All-Star Isaiah Thomas for the most assists during the year, and Eaton led the league in blocks

for the season, as well as three of the four previous seasons. During the first round of the playoffs, against Portland, Thurl Bailey came up big, scoring 31 points off the bench in the first game and then 39 points off the bench in game four. When the Jazz defeated the Blazers 3-1 in the first round of the playoffs, there was excitement in the air. Next up, the mighty Lakers.

I had never been a Lakers fan, even when the Jazz was still in New Orleans. I loved the Celtics, and I loved watching their fierce rivalry with the Lakers, finding them frequently facing each other in the NBA Finals. But the Jazz and Lakers would soon become rivals. Rivalry was a word I liked hearing. It signified a new day—maybe a new era.

They were big city—Hollywood—and high life. We were small city—meat and potatoes—and more country than city. You knew that if you drove from SLC to LA. It only took about 25 minutes to be out of town and well on the way to smaller cities, towns, and farms. I couldn't imagine anyone living in SLC becoming a Lakers fan. I found out differently when we faced them in the second round of the playoffs that year.

Years later, as the rivalry increased, along with more yellow jerseys in our own arena, I had a brief face-off with a Lakers fan. It was after our run to the finals, and both of our teams were just a little on the other side of their glory years. He taunted me by thumbing his jersey at me on the Jazz concourse, hoisting it and saying something with just a little bravado.

I approached him and said, "I know who you are."

"What?" he said.

"I know who you are," I said again. "You're the same guy that wore the Bulls jersey when they were the best team. And you wore Detroit's when they were the 'bad boys.' And you probably wore the Spurs' and the Knicks' too."

He didn't have a response and just skirted by me. I actually think he was a Lakers fan. But I couldn't resist labeling him as the kind of guy who always wore the "in" jersey to games, even if he was in his home team's arena.

However, in the spring of 1988, our team wasn't supposed to beat the Lakers. Magic, Worthy, Kareem, Cooper, and company would be

too much to handle. We knew that. The Lakers made sure we knew that, too, beating us soundly by about 20 points in the first playoff game in LA. I remember Frank addressing the media after the game, telling them, apologetically, that we just weren't in their league—that we couldn't compete. We were happy to be there, and we knew it would be a quick series. But that's not what he told the team. Not at all. I'm sure he told them not to hang their heads for a minute after the loss. According to stories that later emerged from the locker room, he told them that they would win the next game and told them exactly how they were going to do it. Frank was brilliant. He was the perfect balance of fun, humor, craziness, inspiration, toughness, and game knowledge. He knew his players, and he knew how to motivate them. He reminded me a little of Red Auerbach of the Celtics, who led that team to nine straight NBA Championships.

The Jazz won the second game in LA, making the Lakers look a little flat-footed on the way to victory. They won the next one back in SLC but then fell to the Lakers in the second home game at the Salt Palace. The series was dead even at two games apiece. No one, absolutely no one, expected that to happen, except maybe Stockton, Malone, and, of course, Frank Layden. Further, no one ever thought it would become a 7-game series. But it did. Layden had quietly set the table with his post-game interview following the team's blow-out loss in LA. Under his expert guidance, the team with their young, emerging talent rose to the occasion.

The Lakers won the fifth game in LA, but the Jazz countered with a 28-point win in SLC. The series was even at three games apiece. You always hear that a seventh game is anyone's game. It's a very nice thought, especially if you've been the underdog. But the fact is that most home teams win the seventh game. LA was going home. They might have been shuffling their feet a little on the way, but they were most definitely going home.

For the seventh game, full-time Jazz employees were given a very nice bonus: a trip to see that final game in LA. It was a very nice gesture from ownership (Larry Miller was the sole owner of the team), and my wife and I made plans to attend the game. It was only my second year with team, and life in the NBA seemed pretty good.

Our seats for the seventh game of the Western Conference Semi-finals at the LA Forum, which held about 18,000 yellow and purple jerseys, give or take a few, were close to the top of the arena, just below what could have been a helipad, or so it seemed. *At least they're inside*, I thought as I nestled in quietly next to suspicious stares from a pulsating swarm of fans in Lakers jerseys.

To make a long story short, we lost by about 10 points. But I and every Jazz fan in America was so very proud of our team. They had pushed the mighty Lakers to a hard-fought final game of the second round. Stockton had two 20/20 games. In game five, he scored 23 points and dished 24 assists to his teammates. In game seven, he dropped in 29 points and had 20 assists! The Lakers would go on to win the NBA Championship that year, beating Detroit in seven games after losing the first one at home, and I like to think the Jazz helped them get it done. If you can't win it all, then you would like the team that beat you to be the champs. Even though I wasn't a Lakers fan, they had built a dynasty, and they had a swagger about them, which isn't all bad. And they had Magic. Magic used to say something like "We're in the playoffs. First team to get 15 (today it's 16) wins will be the champion." Hard to beat someone with that much mojo, but we came close. Very close.

Learning to play takes time. Progress is not constant. I learned that when Michelin said goodbye, when Eagle Hardware fired us, and when FHP tried to leave when a new company bought them. But having the right people around you helps you get through the difficult times. Sometime around 1987 and 1988, two very good men joined our sales team. Larry Baum brought them on. First came Les Barber, a rookie, like me. However, he was straight out of college, and he had won Larry over when, as a student, he had headed up a season-ticket sales project for a class at Brigham Young University. After he and his classmates presented their findings, he told Larry he would come to work for free

to prove what he could do. Larry had a penchant for people who were willing to roll up their sleeves and work hard, and he sometimes told clients during a pitch that at the end of the season, if they didn't like it, it would be free. "Free" stuck in his mind.

But Les did what he promised. He worked hard. He was one of the most persistent people I've ever known, and he quickly fit into our culture. So did Kevin Gianatiempo, a handsome, dark-haired Italian from New York. Larry bumped into him through one of the national sales "rep" firms that worked with a local TV station. While he looked for a place to live in Salt Lake, Larry paid for him to stay at a local Marriott hotel just across the street from the Salt Palace Arena. Kevin looked and acted the part of a polished salesman, dressing immaculately while networking with local and national sales rep firms and prospects. He even sent Larry his shoeshine bill, which I know Larry didn't relish receiving or paying for. We then had six sellers with boots (or polished shoes) on the ground: Larry, Randy, Grant, Les, Kevin, and me.

Things were taking shape for us on the sales side of things, just as they were for the team.



Malone, Stockton, Eaton, Bailey, and company finished the 1988–89 season by winning four more games while crossing the 50-win benchmark that virtually guarantees a pretty good playoff spot. But they lost in the first round of the playoffs, and even worse, were swept by the Golden State Warriors. How could that possibly happen to the team that took the Lakers, the eventual NBA champs, to seven games in the second round of the 1988 playoffs?



Our sales team went to lunch on the first day of the 1988–89 NBA Playoffs with Don Nelson, head coach of the Warriors. Well, not exactly *with* him, but at the same restaurant. Our leader, Larry Baum, had made reservations at a nice, local eatery, and several tables away, sat Nelson and his coaching staff. We peeked at them from time to time, and I

thought they seemed pretty relaxed. They were the seventh seed, and we were second, finishing behind the Lakers. We had home-court advantage, potentially playing three games in our arena in a five-game series. Other Western Conference matchups were: #1 Lakers vs. #8 Portland, #3 Phoenix vs. #6 Denver, and #4 Seattle vs. #5 Houston. We were projected to face Phoenix in the second round. And we should have. In the first round of the playoff series, every team with home-court advantage won—easily—except us. The Lakers swept Portland 3–0, Phoenix swept Denver 3–0, and Seattle beat Houston 3–1 despite the fourth vs. fifth seed matchup supposedly being the toughest.

Chalk it up to a bad week, a little uncertainty with a new coach (but a darn good one), matchups, the idea that we might have been looking towards Phoenix after messing with the Lakers the previous year, and some player injuries.

Bobby Hansen, a solid number-two guard defensively and offensively, missed the playoffs because of a broken hand due to that collision with teammate Bart Kofoed's jaw. He only played 46 games that year. Plus, the Jazz had offered up Ricky Green in the expansion draft before the season started, and Charlotte took him. We also traded Kelly Tripucka to Charlotte for Mike Brown, who evolved into an integral role player for the Jazz by the next season. The Jazz signed José Ortiz after he finished a season in Spain and played in the 1988 Olympics, but he didn't look like a fifteenth pick when he suited up for the Jazz. Due to injuries, he only played in 51 games and didn't have much to offer in the playoffs. That put too much pressure on the starting five with no clear backup for Stockton and no one to help a slightly older Darrell Griffith. Almost a perfect storm. We just didn't see it brewing. But I think Don Nelson did, even though Larry Baum had jokingly put out a verbal "hex" as he and his staff exited past us at the restaurant. He'd waved his hands at Nelson like a magician and said something partially under his breath to the effect of "You're gonna lose." But by then, Nelson knew everything there was to know about the Jazz from top to bottom, i.e. all of the above. I'll bet he knew they had a pretty good chance of upsetting us.

We lost the series 0–3 and watched on TV as the crowd in San Francisco tauntingly waved brooms in the air throughout the final

game, signifying a "sweep" of the series. I'm sure game operations had purchased a bunch of very cheap, plastic brooms as soon as we went down two games to none. I think Grant Harrison would have done the same thing!



Les and Kevin were fortuitous hires by Larry. Both brought energy, drive, and ambition to our somewhat small sales team. J'Neil Romero and Shannon Roberts worked at sales administration, and Grant Harrison brought a refreshing sense of humor, color, and the ability to establish good relationships with clients, even though he was technically working for us part time. Grant was busy during the summer preparing all the in-game promotions and events for the coming season. Imagine meeting with an important client and then hustling over to the arena to audition singers for the nightly national anthem at home games. Grant could be hilarious. For a while, we had "cubicles" right next door to each other.

One day, after I had finished talking with a prospect, Grant leaned over the partition and said, "That was the biggest bunch of BS I've ever heard."

"Just following your lead," I told him.

Like the team, we made mistakes too. It's easy to think a deal is going to happen and to look past it to the next deal. Larry taught me an important lesson: "A deal is not done until it is done." He may have borrowed the concept from that infamous line from Yogi Berra, the Yankees beloved catcher, and probably the most quotable player ever, who said, "It ain't over 'till it's over." But he was right. It was important to juggle deals and put as many balls in the air as possible, keep track of every deal, and know when to let it sit, when to push ahead, when to negotiate, and when to let a client or prospect do the talking. It was a learning process.

Relating to and developing esprit de corps with each member of the sales team was also a process. Each of us had different personalities and our own egos to go along with them. Sales meetings, under Larry's direction, often took on a life of their own, and shouting matches were

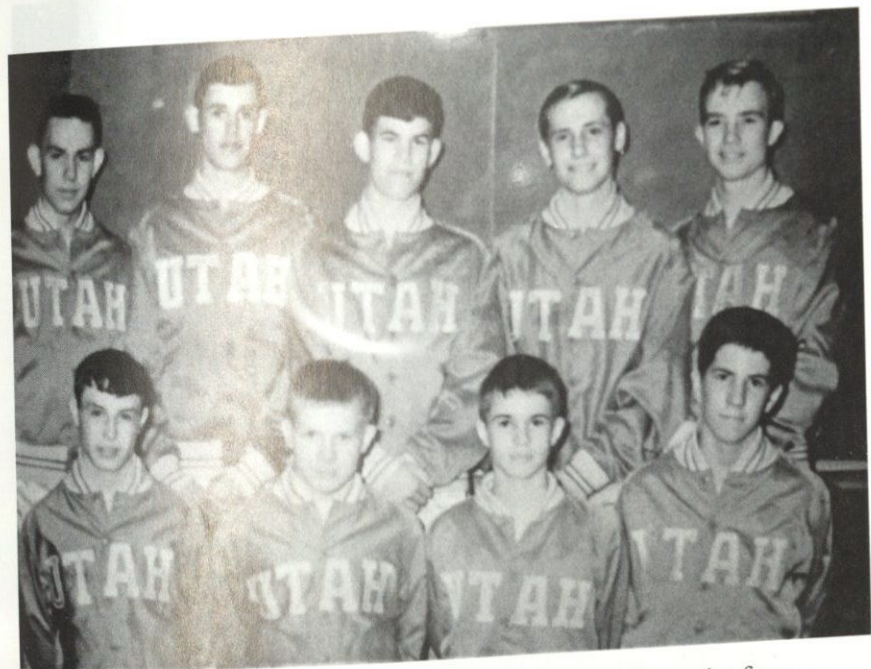
not completely uncommon. I think Larry liked to see us passionately defending our position on an issue or arguing over a client situation. Larry didn't believe in client exclusivities, and I mostly agreed with him on this. The market wasn't big, even though it was growing, and the sponsorship concept was new enough that it was hard for clients to put a high value on it. Hence, we were courting several banks, several fast food restaurants, and several of just about any category. Easy to step on toes.

One of the best things Larry did was introduce a sales commission pool. That meant that we all shared the commission on each deal (some a little more than others), which was something I thought was fair, especially for a small sales team. At the end of the day, it paid—literally paid—for each of us to work together to complete deals that made sense—for everyone. Mostly, there were no end runs to upstage a competitor. If we lost a deal, we all lost.

When I took over sales after Larry left, I wanted to build on the momentum Larry had established. For sales meetings, I prepared an agenda that listed our goals and sales guidelines, the principles and guidelines we would stand for. A couple of them were: "New business is everybody's business," "Put the (sales) team first," and "Play to your strengths." I was also not interested in over-the-top contention. Yes, there were disagreements, but they could always be worked out, and I often halted meetings during testy moments to say, "Ask yourselves, what is the right thing to do in this situation?"

I was learning the importance of team play in other ways, too. One day, our CFO, Bob Hyde, walked in my office at Triad Center and said, "Hey Mike, can you call X, Y, and Z clients and collect some money? I need to pay some bills." I jokingly said I thought we were on very solid financial ground. He reminded me that he had to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in player salaries every two weeks, and that didn't include the company's ongoing overhead. I quickly told him I would make the calls and hasten payment.

But we were bringing consistent revenue to the team, too. Teresa Pryor, our game operations director, once said to me while we were planning a client promotion, "Mike, your guys are driving over sixteen million dollars in sponsorship sales through this company, and I don't know how you are doing it. But I'm here to help you in any



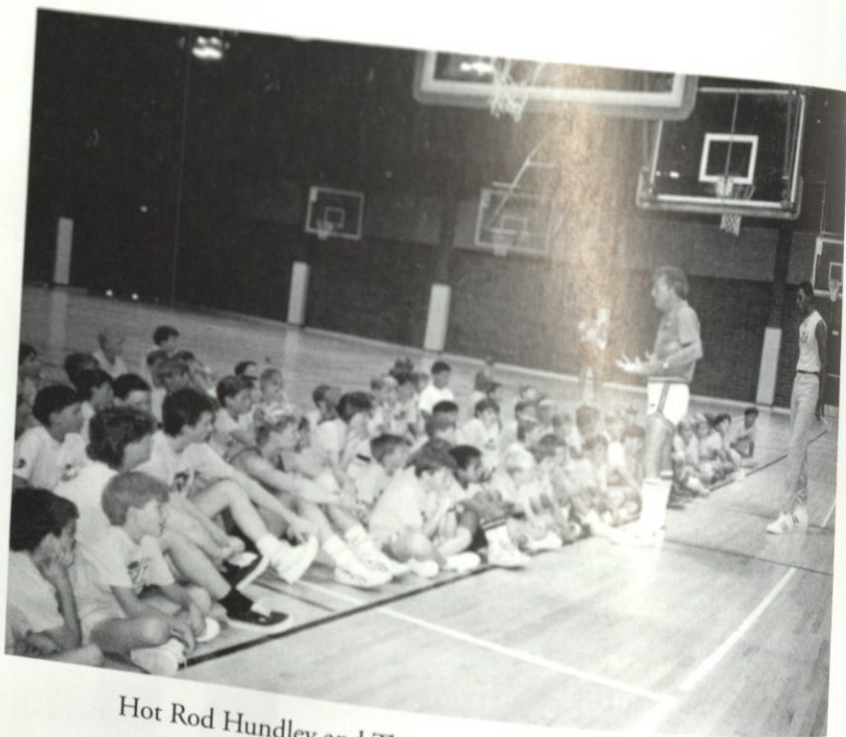
The Hillside Jr. High Basketball All-Star Team, the peak of my athletic career. "Man Mountain" Brown is on the left in the top row. My close friend Erv Terry is on the bottom left. He passed away in 2017. I'm wearing my game face, first row, second from the right.



Our first Jazz Golf Tournament. Top left: Randy Rigby, Jerry Sloan, and Phil Johnson. Bottom left: me, Shannon Roberts, Les Barber, Larry Baum, Grant Harrison, and J'Neil Romero. Jerry and Phil were team players that day and every day, for that matter.



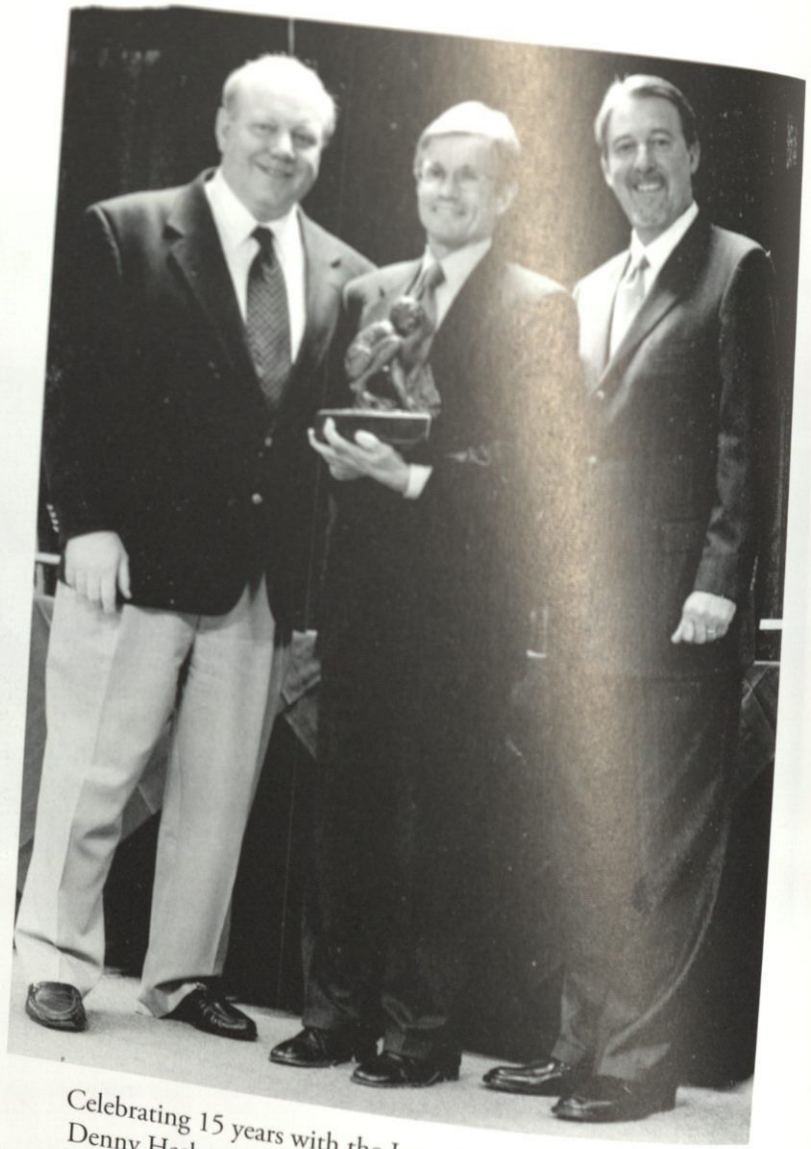
Larry honors Julius Irving during his farewell tour.



Hot Rod Hundley and Thurl Bailey instruct a group of
Junior Jazz basketball players at a clinic.



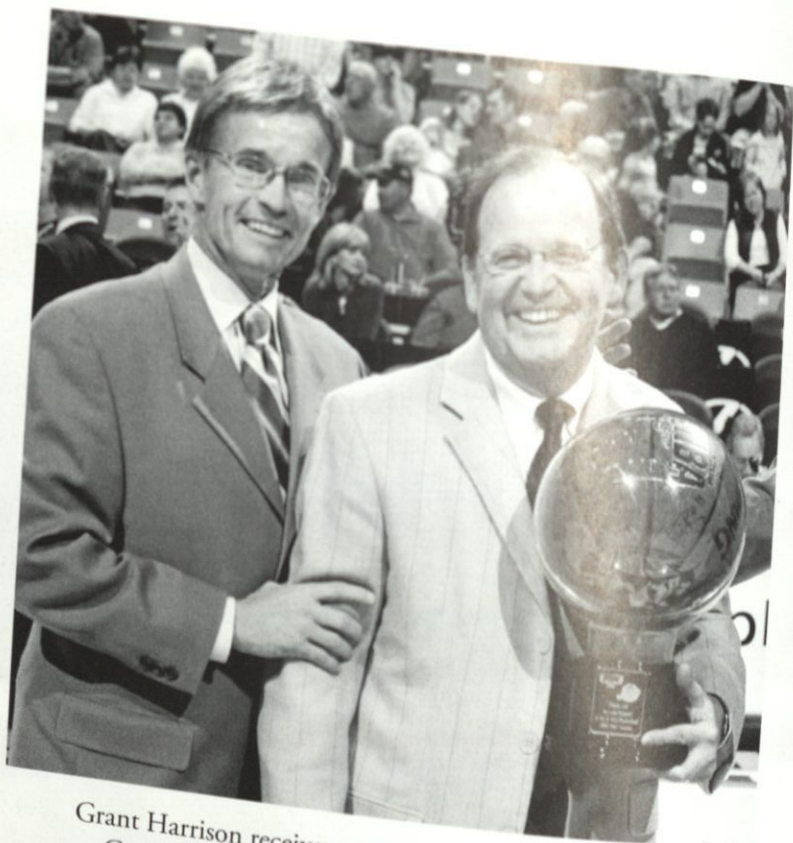
The sales staff with the team during the 1999 lockout year.
We still went to work every day!



Celebrating 15 years with the Jazz with Larry Miller and Denny Haslam. The sculpture weighs about 15 pounds.



With Peggy Larsen of WCF Insurance, Chad Lewis, Craig Bolerjack and Eric Torgersen of WCF at the Chad Lewis Golf Classic.



Grant Harrison receives an award for a no-show client.
Can't remember who he subbed in for that night.

way I can." Comforting. Nice to know she had our backs. We felt that kind of support from the marketing department, PR, accounting, and broadcasting too.



One prospective client I had begun to pursue was ZCMI, the largest retailer in the state at the time, and one of the largest in the country. I first met with the head of marketing, but I really didn't get anywhere. She couldn't quite see how we could make a sponsorship work for them. On the way out of the meeting, located in a large warehouse in the west part of the Salt Lake Valley, I bumped into a neighbor who just happened to head up the camera department. I told him the purpose of the meeting, and he immediately jumped in, indicating that he had his own departmental budget and would love to see us put something together. He wanted to do something in the arena. Back at the office, I grabbed Dave Allred, who headed up PR, and Grant Harrison, and we brainstormed. Luckily, it was Dave who came up with the final idea, because the press was his domain, and our contest winner would be invading his space: the guest press photographer. Each game, someone who entered their name at ZCMI's camera department would be selected to sit on the floor of the arena for one quarter just like the professional photographers. ZCMI would supply a camera via Olympus Cameras, their key supplier at the time, for the guest to use. He or she could click off as many photos as they wanted. ZCMI would process the film for them. We were even able to get a few players to autograph them from time to time. The winner also had a pregame dinner (with his or her guest) in the press room and two tickets to the game. Other ZCMI buyers/department heads noticed. Within a couple of years, they became one of our premiere sponsors, and we involved multiple departments in varying sponsorships. It was hard work because we weren't holding hands with one client but more like a half dozen. Fulfillment and activation was complicated and extensive. I had violated one of Larry's rules to keep it simple, but our client was spending well over six figures. It had started with one \$25,000 sponsorship. He liked seeing exponential growth in a sponsor. So did I.

While the team was collectively hanging their heads after the shocking loss to Golden State, Golden State was losing to Phoenix. In fact, they only won one game to Phoenix's four. But then Phoenix lost to the Lakers four games to none. The Lakers were clearly far and away the best team in the West. That made our first-round exit more painful, knowing how well we had played the Lakers the year before. A couple of bright spots were evident, however. Karl Malone averaged 30 points as well as 16 rebounds a game in the series, and John Stockton tallied 27 points and 13 assists. What's more, they each averaged about 45 minutes a game (out of 48). More than impressive. Amazing. Mark Eaton grabbed 11 rebounds, and Thurl Bailey averaged 12 points and eight boards. Griffith and Bobby Hansen averaged 12 and 11 points respectively. Obviously, Karl, John, Eaton, and company couldn't log that many minutes for the rest of their careers. They needed help, but it didn't come right away.

The following season, 1989–1990, even though the team notched 55 wins and made the playoffs for the seventh consecutive year, they again lost in the first round. This time, they did manage two wins in a five-game series against Phoenix. Painfully, we had to watch shooting guard/forward Eddie Johnson bank in a three-point desperation shot to win the fifth game—and the series.

Those were long days. We were just as discouraged (maybe more so) than the team, and so were the fans! Some of our fans were clients. As a sales team, we decided not to spend too much time presenting next year's sponsorship proposals to clients and prospects for at least a few weeks. We worked on administrative things, made plans, held meetings, walked through a whole bunch of "what-if" scenarios, and dodged clients. On the other hand, the team always met the next day and heard from the coaches. There were one-on-one meetings with players and the coaches. They gave their players "homework" and told them to improve and get ready for next year. Then they cleaned out their lockers and left town within 24 hours. I wanted to do the same.

Leaving town did seem like a good idea. No one likes to be swept in a series, especially when you have home-court advantage and the second-best record in the West. Although I didn't want to talk to or even bump into clients, they did want to talk. Like us, they were fans, and they were hurting. It took time for me to discover this important truth about sports marketing: It takes time for a client to cancel a sponsorship. A bad playoff series doesn't matter. At one NBA league meeting, the Dallas Mavericks Head of Sponsorship Sales, whose team had been awful for at least three years, said he thought they were just starting to see some sponsors back away. So what was the key to keeping good clients? Obviously, providing exceptional marketing value and special, unique opportunities was critically important, but it really came down to something much more valuable to clients. Something so easy that most companies don't even think or worry about. Even today, this is something I don't see many companies emphasize: service. Tom Peters, a highly-regarded business author, wrote a book about it. It was called *In Search of Excellence*, and after months of researching successful businesses, he concluded that when all is said and done, the one trait that the most successful companies shared was offering exceptional service to their customers. He called it "a blinding flash of the obvious."



One of the most challenging client recoveries we ever attempted came sometime in the mid-nineties. It was all about service, or rather lack of it. We were a well-respected, seasoned playoff team starting to make a charge for a championship. In the summer, well before the season started, Larry Baum received a letter from a newer client, Eagle Hardware, firing us. It was obvious that it had nothing to do with team performance. We simply had not fulfilled all the activation elements in our agreement. There was a middle man, an advertising agency that also looked culpable. We all agreed it was an important relationship (any relationship is important, for that matter). And we weren't accustomed to losing a client.

Larry asked me to go to Seattle to meet with the client and the agency. After several failed attempts with no call backs from the agency,

I finally connected with one of their people. He said, gruffly, I might add, to not even waste my time. The deal had been canceled, for good reason. They had moved on, and they wanted nothing, absolutely nothing to do with us. I countered that this wasn't the way we did business. We'd take full responsibility for the miscues, but a visit would help us understand what happened so we wouldn't make the same mistakes in the future. He finally relented. He told me it would not be a friendly meeting, and it would be relatively short. Not worth the airfare. I said okay. We set a date, and I flew to Seattle to meet our executioner.

When I arrived at the agency, I think they were still surprised I came. They had me wait in the lobby and then ushered me into a conference room. However, the conference table and chairs had been rearranged. It looked more like an interrogation room. I sat in a single chair in the middle of the room across from the conference table where three or four businessmen sat. The rest of the meeting is a blur. For about 30 minutes, I just answered questions. I knew I couldn't blame the agency. They would win a shouting match, so I didn't go there, and instead, I apologized. I told them we didn't do business that way, and me being there was proof of that. I said it was our fault—completely our fault. Finally, the tide turned just a little. They stopped asking questions or accusing us of wasting their sponsorship.

At that point, I told them we needed another chance. We needed to be able to show them what we could do, what a sponsorship package should look like, and how we would execute it. They gave in. The VP of marketing, who was very cold and business-like, told me we had two weeks to put something together, return, and present it. I said I already had some ideas and knew how we could correct things going forward. I don't remember shaking their hands. I think they just dismissed me. My escort, an agency guy, walked me to the front door of their offices.

He leaned over to me quietly, and said, "I cannot believe you pulled that off. You have no idea how mad they are. How frustrated. Angry. They had no intention of letting you present another package. They just wanted to let you have it and then kick you out of the building." He was still shaking his head in disbelief when I said I'd see him in two weeks.

Back at the office, I pulled a couple guys together, including Larry Baum, and began to brainstorm ideas. I cannot remember all the de-

tails of the package, but one of the things we came up with was the Eagle Hardware Starting Lineups. I had been looking for a “hole” in our broadcast, a place where we could insert a feature that would have a prominent position. Eagle Hardware would be the sponsor of the feature at the opening of every TV and radio broadcast. We would feature our starting lineup with stats and information about each player and brand the team closely to their company. This could also lead to promotions featuring in-store displays of their “starting (product) lineup.” They loved the idea. They kept asking questions about how we could link it to their store, to other aspects of our team, and how they might utilize the starting lineup in promotions. We gave them carte blanche to do all the above. And I made sure that we had buyoff by our TV producers and that all the other elements in the package could be activated and fulfilled without any problems. They ended up almost doubling their sponsorship spending with the Jazz.

For the next several years, until Eagle sold their stores to Lowe’s, we managed the account like I knew we could—like we always did. That problem had been an anomaly, and we wanted to prove that to them. I visited their offices each summer and met with the agency in Seattle to review the package, measure results, and map out the next year. I was sad when they sold their company. We kept Lowe’s as a sponsor for the next couple of years, but they eventually began to reduce their footprint in Utah, and I knew it was just a matter of time before they dropped our sponsorship.

In retrospect, I’m glad Eagle Hardware gave us another chance. We salvaged our reputation with an important company. We helped them carve a nice niche and succeed in our market. We created long-lasting relationships. It didn’t matter that they weren’t a local company. It didn’t matter that I had to grovel so much in Seattle. It only mattered that we were able to do things right, even if it was the second time around.

chapter four takeaways

1. Try to stay healthy. Take care of yourself. Above all, avoid breaking your hand if you need it to further your career. Otherwise, it might be costly as well as painful.
2. Don't ever give up. Even though the team suffered some difficult playoff losses in 1988 and 1989, they came back ready to play the next season. Management didn't panic. Our owners didn't panic, either. If you believe in something, stay committed. Don't ask for a trade or let a prized client leave the fold without a fight.
3. Losing a client or a playoff series can be an invaluable learning experience, so take the necessary time to critique your performance and figure out what went wrong. You'll do much better next time. Promise.
4. Building something good will be an uneven process. Few companies or teams reach the desired pinnacle of success quickly. If they do, they'll probably take a temporary tumble, at the least. Choose your battles carefully. The Eagle Hardware experience was highly instructive. I could have told my boss that it wasn't worth saving, and we could replace that client with another and never miss them. But I'm glad I didn't. I didn't think that attitude was in our DNA.
5. What's the most important thing you can do in business? Author Tom Peters said in a "blinding flash of the obvious" that providing "positively outrageous service," was the one thing that separated successful companies from their competition. Worth noting. Worth doing.