

RICK BRIMEYER

Learning from the pros

I've been a fan of professional sports since I was 7 years old and my family moved into a neighborhood overrun with pre-adolescent boys that could have served as the inspiration for the movie "The Sandlot."

There was a degree of innocence associated with pro sports in the mid-60s.

Today, I often hear fans lament that "it's just a business nowadays" as stars change teams more frequently than some people change their furnace filter. Perhaps I'm a bit of an outlier, but I find the business aspects of professional sports interesting, and, in some cases, even educational.

Rarely is the culture of any business organization as transparent as that of a professional sports team.

We get to watch players and coaches interact as they go about their daily business. What's going on behind the scenes is readily available through sportswriters.

The organization's success is also clear by simply reviewing their win-loss record and standings for their respective league.

I'm particularly fascinated with organizations that are successful year in and year out since pro sports leagues adapt rules to promote parity such as



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the draft sequence which lets the weakest teams from the prior year select the (supposedly) best new players first.

How do these successful organizations maintain their edge despite these rules? How do they keep players motivated despite the enormous financial rewards of even limited success?

The San Antonio Spurs have been the NBA's benchmark for success, qualifying for the playoffs for 17 consecutive years while winning five championships.

They sold more than 99 percent of the tickets available for their home games last season.

But perhaps what's most noteworthy is how the Spurs win. They rank in the bottom half of the NBA in terms of team payroll. Yet they totally

dismantled the star-studded Miami Heat during last season's NBA Finals. During the course of the series, the organization's secret weapon was obvious to even the casual fan — teamwork.

And so it should have been no great surprise this past August when Spurs coach Gregg Popovich hired Becky Hammon as an assistant basketball coach, thereby breaking the NBA coaching gender barrier.

Hammon is a 16-year veteran of the WNBA, a league which relies on team basketball rather than isolating stars for thunderous dunks.

Hammon, a member of the San Antonio Stars, worked with the hometown Spurs this past season while recovering from an ACL injury. Popovich, widely recognized as the best coach in the business, knows exactly what he is getting.

Like the unique style of team ball that his Spurs play, he's able to see possibilities that others are missing as they blindly follow the established rules of hiring only men, and specifically former players. He no doubt started with a list of skills and values that were important to him and the organization and cast a wide net

that extended beyond the usual stereotypical suspects.

Thinking outside the box — or the country — is a practice which the Spurs employ when identifying players for their organization. Of the 92 players from outside the U.S. on opening-night rosters for the 30 NBA teams last October, nine were with the Spurs. That's more than three times the average (2.8 international players/team) for the rest of the league.

Teamwork is apparently a value and a strategy that permeates the organization. A core group of players has been selected not only for their skills but for their chemistry.

They've remained stable and drama-free. The five starters plus the first player off the bench for last season's opener had a combined 47 years of experience ... with the organization! That's unheard of in pro sports. Popovich himself is entering his 19th season.

Both the selection of coaches and players personifies what Jim Collins refers to as getting "the right people on the bus."

If your organization is to successfully imbed its stated values into its culture those values must become part of the consideration for

hiring, evaluating and promoting employees.

That means deliberately defining the values and skills that are critical. It means opening the field to candidates outside of the historical boundaries of gender, race, age or those bearing your last name.

And it means deliberately introducing interview questions, feedback discussions and promotion dialogues that discuss behaviors that support those identified necessary values.

Late this month, the 2014-15 NBA season will

get underway. While not a huge NBA fan, I will be following the San Antonio Spurs with more than casual admiration.

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