

## CAREER SPOTLIGHT: SCOTT WILKINSON

Scott Wilkinson is Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer for the Atlanta Hawks and State Farm Arena. In 2004, Wilkinson assumed responsibility for all Hawks and State Farm Arena legal matters. He is currently responsible for all legal and business affairs of Atlanta Hawks, LP, Arena Operations, LLC, Atlanta Hawks Foundation, Inc. and ATL Investco, LLC (and its various related affiliates). Wilkinson attended Duke University on a football scholarship and earned his A.B. degree, *cum laude*, in 1985. He earned his Juris Doctor from Duke in 1988.

### QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

#### I. CAREER QUESTIONS

##### **1. What sort of current challenges do you face in executing your role?**

The newest and biggest challenge is pandemic-related. Before COVID, developing relationships with my internal clients was easier with everyone in the office or with everyone physically present at Hawks games. By walking around the three floors of our office or by attending games, I could interact with my clients and often received legal questions or projects by being in their line of sight and easy to access. “I meant to call you and ask if you could help with . . .” was a phrase I heard often before COVID. Now, I am hearing less with our new flexible, remote work policies and less employees at their workstations. Also, turnover within the company during COVID for the past two years has made meeting new internal clients more difficult. I am informed of names and titles when new employees are onboarded, but it could be a month or two before I actually meet them. I believe that being in the office and accessible to all levels of employees is critical to being an effective, trusted in-house lawyer, so adapting to the new remote workplace is (and will continue to be) a major challenge. With my two outstanding Hawks’ co-counsel, Caren Cook and Allie Chinsky, we try to schedule short legal updates/educational classes with various departments during their weekly meetings, which has been helping with relationship building.

##### **2. From your experience, what are ways junior attorneys can be immediately impactful to their employers?**

Junior lawyers who bring energy and enthusiasm to work every day make almost as much impact with their attitude than they can with their work product. When a young lawyer is going full speed and embraces new work—no matter how boring, mundane or even administrative—small mistakes are easier for senior lawyers to deal with and correct.

Having an open mind to professional improvement and not being defensive in a learning environment is also a plus.

Further, while seeking and taking on new work from your direct report lawyers, it is important to strike a balance between knowing what you do not know and stretching your legal skill set into new areas. Being confident in your abilities as a lawyer is one thing, but charging ahead alone in a totally new area of the law can be a mistake. It is a difficult balance to describe, but you will know it when you see it. Make your impact by aggressively accepting new challenges, but do so responsibly and by seeking appropriate guidance.

## II. TREND QUESTIONS

### **3. Law students interested in entertainment and sports are learning that it is an industry of client base and less of a practice area. What practice area expertise do you see a need for in the industry in the next few years?**

I think that a legal generalist will always be useful and successful in the General Counsel role, especially in entertainment and sports. For example, most people would not connect legal experience in the military with in-house success, but thirty years after practicing as a Marine Corps Staff Judge Advocate, I still reach back to use things I learned trying criminal cases as a USMC defense lawyer, counseling young Marines and their families and advising senior officers. However, there is growing need for specialists within in-house legal teams. I believe real estate might provide the biggest opportunity for new attorneys trying to break into the industry, with many teams (including the Hawks) in all major sports leagues worldwide leading or participating in real estate developments around their stadiums. Young lawyers may also find opportunity in the areas of tech, data privacy, and environmental, social and governance (ESG). The Hawks have seen an explosion of work in all of these areas over the past two years.

#### **4. What sort of permanent shifts will the industry adopt on the tail-end of the pandemic?**

Like most other industries, remote work arrangements are likely here to stay post-pandemic. Obviously, employees will still need to attend games or events in person, but the non-event work week will see a mix of remote and in person work arrangements.

I am still unsure about a full shift to cryptocurrency acceptance, but the Non-Fungible Token (NFT) may catch on beyond its current sports collectible use due to its potential utility as a ticket for a game or event. Teams could track fan data better and capture a piece of each resale. The Hawks and a number of NBA teams have begun experimenting with NFT collectibles as part of their fan experience offerings, like the bobbleheads and Beanie Babies of the past.

#### **5. With entertainment and sports being a difficult field to break into, what advice would you have for law students trying to do just that?**

First and foremost, spend at least five years in a large law firm billing hours and learning as much about being a lawyer as you possibly can. It really does not matter what area of the law you work in, just put in the time and get that foundational experience. Second, bill an hour each day to yourself, meaning, spend lunch or dinner building your network or participating in sports and entertainment associations while you are grinding out the law firm hours. Third and most importantly, be patient. It could take you a while to break into the industry, do not give up too early, it is worth it to keep pushing and readjusting your plan and your goals. Note that it took me *almost a decade* after law school graduation to get my first in-house sports team opportunity.

### III. PERSONAL QUESTIONS

#### **6. What is your favorite music album of all-time?**

It is impossible to narrow down to just one, top ten would be easier, however, I will list three of my top ten in alphabetical order by band: At Filmore East, the Allman Brothers Band; Licensed to Ill, Beastie Boys and Siamese Dream, Smashing Pumpkins. Music-related career facts not on my resume—I was a bouncer for a Grateful Dead concert in 1982 and also for Eric Clapton in 1985. No incidents reported for either show....

**7. If you could add two expansion teams for any sport, what sport would it be and where would the new teams be located?**

I would add two NHL teams, one in Atlanta and one in Kansas City. I will note that neither of these would be prudent business decisions nor would they be strategic expansion for the NHL. I just miss having an NHL team in Atlanta after the Thrashers left for Winnipeg and I would love to see Kansas City (one of my former hometown areas) add a winter sport.