

CAREER SPOTLIGHT: EMILY LEKAHAL

Emily Lekahal is the Assistant General Counsel for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. JD from the University of Minnesota; BA from Colorado State University.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Please briefly explain your career path and what led you to your current position.

I was lucky enough to get an internship with the Minnesota Vikings early on in my law school career. What originally was supposed to be a temporary winter break position during my 1L year turned into a standing internship until graduation. At the time of graduation, the Vikings didn't have any full-time legal positions open but were gracious enough to refer me to several firms, organizations, and sports properties both in Minnesota and elsewhere. One of these referrals led me to the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) in Daytona Beach, Florida. I didn't know much about women's golf at the time—but this was one of the best jobs I could have asked for to start my sports career. I worked with the LPGA for over two years, but I knew that I eventually wanted to get back to the National Football League (NFL). When a position opened with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers (the Bucs), I could not turn it down. I moved to the other side of the coast, and now, I am going into my 5th season with the Bucs.

2. What is something that has changed since you began working in the sports industry, and how has that change impacted your current job in the industry?

I think remote work has been the biggest change in several industries, but especially in sports. When the Bucs initially shut down due to COVID in 2020, the business staff didn't return to the office for over two years. Before that, working remotely in this industry (especially on the team and league side) was kind of unheard of . . . which was understandable. Sports are about live events, building relationships, and connecting with fans and people in person.

While that remains to be the focus in the sports industry, we have seen a shift in workplace practices that now allow for a more hybrid approach for employees. For better or worse, it is something that has changed how companies recruit and retain employees, and it will be interesting to see if this is something that continues for the foreseeable future.

3. What was your first “win” that made you confident that you belonged in your job or the industry overall?

Your career is going to be full of so many wins (big and small). I’m not sure I remember my first win, but I definitely remember that “winning” feeling early on in my career, after taking the lead on a contract negotiation, a board meeting presentation, or even just sending an email to an owner or commissioner advising on a business decision. I think it is natural to question whether you belong where you are, so it is important to hold on to that “winning” feeling even in the “losing” moments.

I’ve also been very lucky to work under great attorneys and leaders who instilled that winning confidence in me from the start. They valued my opinion, encouraged me to speak up in meetings, and delegated important projects early on to show that they trusted me and that they knew I could handle this job.

4. What key issues in the sports industry are especially relevant right now, and what do you see becoming more prevalent in the next 5–10 years?

I think right now in Florida the biggest trend that we are watching is the future of legalized sports betting. Obviously, it is a complicated issue at the moment, but I believe that an upcoming decision will have a major impact on Florida sports properties. Digital assets (NFTs, Fan Tokens, Crypto, etc.) are something that I have been TRYING to wrap my head around for the last year or so, and I think that will only become more and more prevalent. I also think things will continue to rapidly change as it relates to sports media, content distribution, and broadcast deals due to new technology and changes in fan preferences.

5. What impact would you like to make on the sports industry throughout your career?

I want to impact those trying to break into the industry. I feel an obligation to help do what so many people did for me. People were so gracious to take a phone call, meet for coffee, pass along my resume, or put in a good word for a job opening. Each gesture made such an impact on getting me to where I am, and I want to do that for someone else. We can always do more to pay it forward for others. Seeing people land a dream position, even when you may have had the smallest role, is such a great feeling. I will never forget those people who had this impact on me and my career, and I will continue to help do that for others.

6. What is the biggest risk that you've taken in your career? How has that risk helped you in your career or what lessons did you learn from it?

The main advice I got throughout law school was to go to a law firm for at least a couple of years and then try to break into the sports law industry. And I do not think that was bad advice. Honestly, some of the feedback I received when interviewing for positions in sports was that I didn't have the law firm experience that they were looking for.

When I graduated from law school, I had an offer at a mid-size law firm in Minneapolis. I turned down that offer and continued looking for something in sports. This was a big risk for me. I wasn't offered the position at the LPGA until after I received my bar results, which meant months without a job and months without knowing where I was going to live.

Obviously, it worked out for me because again, the LPGA was one of the best positions that I could have asked for, but that was a really stressful time. I remember questioning my decision to turn down the position at the law firm, and I still think about what would have been different if I didn't.

While I do not have law firm experience, I was really fortunate to get an in-house position doing exactly what I wanted to do right out of school. It is most likely that I wouldn't have moved to Florida without taking the LPGA job, and I am really lucky that I ended up here. Of all the places sports could have taken me—Tampa, Florida is at the top of my list.

7. What is one of the biggest misconceptions in your industry?

I would say the biggest misconception, for at least my position as counsel for an NFL team, is that I do the player contracts. I cannot tell you how many people had asked me if I did Tom Brady's contract when we originally signed him.

For the most part at the Bucs (and also several other NFL clubs), the business side and football side are fairly separate. Player contracts are heavily governed by the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the NFL and NFLPA, and the people in our organization that are way more knowledgeable on the salary cap handle those directly. Every other agreement that you can think of, however, comes through me and my team.

8. What is one piece of advice that you would give to students trying to break into the sports industry?

It is important to know that there is no magic formula to break into the industry. Focus on developing strong experience (wherever that may be) and be persistent in seeking out opportunities.