



After the Buzzer

Transcript: Bob Wallace's interview with Vicky Neumeyer of the New Orleans Saints/New Orleans Pelicans and Nona Lee of the Arizona Diamondbacks

Episode posted: November 12, 2018

Bob Wallace: Welcome back to After the Buzzer!

This is our fourth episode, and we want to thank everyone who has tuned in so far. If you like what you're hearing, please leave us a review! From Apple Podcasts, go the "Ratings & Reviews" section of our podcast. If you're listening on Stitcher, go to [Sticher.com](https://www.stitcher.com) and search for "After the Buzzer" to leave us a review. We appreciate your feedback and look forward to bringing you more great commentary on sports and business.... just like we will today with our fantastic guests, two highly respected general counsels for professional sports teams in three different sports.

They are also two of the highest ranking female team sports executives — Nona Lee and Vicky Neumeyer.

Nona is senior vice president and chief legal officer for Major League Baseball's Arizona Diamondbacks and has just completed her 19th season with the club. Nona's achievements have included negotiating D-Backs media and facility construction agreements and assisting the baseball operations department with the preparation and presentation of salary arbitration matters.

Nona is well respected both in the Phoenix area and nationally. She is a board member for Arizona State University's Sports Law and Business program and the founder of the Phoenix Women's Sports Association, a nonprofit whose mission is to help girls and women find their power through sports. Nona is nearing the end of her term as president of the Sports Lawyers Association

and has served on the Women's Sports Foundation, which was founded by tennis great Billie Jean King.

Vicky Neumeyer is senior vice president and general counsel for the NFL's New Orleans Saints and the NBA's New Orleans Pelicans, both organizations owned by the Benson Family. Vicky provides legal consultation and services to both clubs and has done so since 2000 for the Saints and later for the NBA Pelicans. She is responsible for drafting key documents, including leases and sponsorship and broadcast agreements. As a key member of the two franchises' front offices, her counsel is always sought in identifying and analyzing business and legal issues.

Vicky has extensive experience in sports law, including antitrust, labor and organizational matters. Prior to her sports career, Vicky worked in the EXXON corporate litigation department and was a judicial clerk for the Supreme Court of Louisiana. Vicky sits on the boards of the Texas Gulf Coast & Louisiana Make a Wish Foundation and the Louisiana chapter of the Girl Scouts. She is a member of the Arizona State University sports law program and the Sports Lawyers Association.

In this week's episode, Vicky and Nona talked to me about: Their careers and backgrounds (HINT: One of them was a college athlete and one of them claims to have no athletic skill whatsoever); The issues they deal with as team general counsel — including big data and the legal and business implications of streaming broadcasts; Their approach to being senior-level executives in male dominated sports; And what the future might look like for aspiring women wanting to enter the sports world.

Here's my conversation with Vicky and Nona.

Well, I'll go alphabetically and I'll start with Nona. And Nona, tell me a little bit about your role as general counsel of the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Nona Lee: My primary responsibility is really leading the Legal Department and supporting the executive team. Essentially handling all major legal issues for the organization, managing outside counsel relationships when appropriate to do so. And otherwise just guiding my staff.

Bob Wallace: How big is your legal staff at the Diamondbacks?

Nona Lee: Well, our department is five or six people, depending on the time of year. We have three attorneys, myself, our general counsel Caleb Jay, our associate general counsel Maacah Scott. Typically we have an intern. Right now I'm actually hiring, looking for a paralegal. And we also have our legal assistant who's been with us for several years.

Bob Wallace: Do you find that you're trying to bring more stuff in house? Or are you still relying on outside counsel a lot?

Nona Lee: No, we've really brought most things in house. Our project list averages, between the three lawyers, about 400 projects at any given time because we do handle the majority of the issues internally. What we do outsource, aside from insurance defense, which you would expect, is protracted matters and matters requiring special expertise.

Bob Wallace: Vicky, how about you? Tell me a little bit about your role and if you think it's appropriate, to differentiate between your role as a Saints general counsel and as the Pelican general counsel, and is there a difference in those two?

Vicky Neumeyer: I would actually reiterate a lot of the things that Nona said. Our legal department is just myself and an associate attorney, who's – Matthew Sharpe, who's been here maybe three years now. So because of that we do outsource probably a whole lot more, and we try to do as much in house as possible. A lot of our work's going to be risk assessment, risk identification and then trying to do things the right way. And the real – I've not seen really any difference between the two. My job can be the same for the Saints or the same

for the Pelicans. It's making sure all the contracts are in place and we're living with all league rules and all applicable laws and trying to keep up with changes in technology actually. That's probably our biggest challenge right now.

Bob Wallace: So when you walk in the door on any given day, do you know whether you're going to deal with Pelican business or Saints business? How do you do that?

Vicky Neumeyer: I have no clue. You should see my desk. There are post-it notes all over the place, and that has a Saints' line, a Pelicans' line and then the Benson family have a lot of other entities that I also am involved with. So it can be anything.

Bob Wallace: So how long have they owned the Pelicans?

Vicky Neumeyer: I think it was June of 2012.

Bob Wallace: Do you find – I know there are a few other NFL owners that own franchises in other leagues. Is this a unique situation where – I mean, I know your president oversees a lot of the operations of both franchises, along with your general manager. Is this different, the same or what?

Vicky Neumeyer: I find it's been pretty much the same. The management team is the same over both entities. Although when it comes to certain things like corporate sponsors, ticket sales, community appearances, youth programs and that, then we differentiate. But most of the other people that I know that are in similar situations, it's pretty much the same set up.

Bob Wallace: And Nona you – some of your prior experience is where you work for multiple organizations in different sports. Do you find it the same, different?

Nona Lee: Yeah, you know, I would echo Vicky's experience. I mean, again, on a daily basis you never knew what you were going to get. And you had to learn to handle matters differently somewhat, depending on what the league rules were

for each of the different sports. But it's all largely – at least with respect to team sports, it's very similar. It's just knowing the different rules of the different leagues.

Bob Wallace: So speaking of the leagues and the various teams, we're talking about three different leagues here, the NBA, the NFL and Major League Baseball. Do you see some differences in how those leagues relate to their teams? And what is the preferable method, if you're comfortable enough saying that?

Vicky Neumeyer: For me, I don't see a lot of differences, candidly, in how I anyway interact with both leagues and how the leagues interact with the teams. There's a desire to have a quick response from a league if a club has a question and good customer service, so to speak. Everybody has to live by the CBA and by the big, fat book, of league policies and what have you. And then lay over the top of that your local law. So I can pick up the phone and talk to NFL counsel or NBA counsel and it's pretty similar.

Bob Wallace: Nona, how about with Major League Baseball?

Nona Lee: I think each league is probably a little different, and that's driven largely by the team owners and perhaps by the demographics of the leagues in terms of how they conduct their ongoing business. But largely it's the same. I work strictly with MLB now and have for several years. But I don't recall any significant differences when I was working with Major League Baseball and the NBA several years ago. I think it's all pretty well aligned.

Bob Wallace: You've been involved since there's been a change in commissioners. Do you see a difference in the style of Bud Selig as opposed to Rob Manfred?

Nona Lee: Yeah, I mean, I think there's certain – they're different guys and times are changing. And I think priorities are changing, and there have been some changes. I think there have to be, as the generations change and the priorities and expectations of fans change and technology changes. And so yeah, I think

there certainly have been some changes since the commissioners have changed.

Bob Wallace: So you both have mentioned technology in your answers. What are the technologies that are making a difference in the way you represent your teams? Or the issues that technology has made you confront? Nona, you want to start?

Nona Lee: Yeah, streaming obviously has been huge because the way that people are consuming the product is changing. And so that's not necessarily impacting us directly as a club because, you know, I talked before about some of the differences between the leagues. And with respect to baseball, Major League Baseball advance media, holds all interest in media rights for the clubs. But it's something that certainly impacts the way we think about doing business and the way we do, do business to some extent and how we think about that on a going forward basis.

Bob Wallace: Right, here in St. Louis with streaming, St. Louis is a very popular baseball team. And when they put the baseball games on Facebook only, it created quite an uproar here in St. Louis. We wanted to see our games on Fox or ESPN, and the older generation, which I guess I'm now part of, didn't really like that just streaming it live.

Nona Lee: I think that's the tension that we're seeing and yeah, the changing of the guard so to speak. And baseball in particular, trying to stay relevant with a new generation that is attached to technology and likes faster paced action, so to speak.

Bob Wallace: Vicky, how about in the NFL? Technology, how is that affecting what you do? Is it social media? Is it streaming?

Vicky Neumeier: It is – from my perspective anyway at the club level, and I'd say both leagues, social media and just trying to keep up with what is the newest social platform

and where can we get the most engagement for our fans, and where can we deliver the best content? And data collection is another big, big area and what can you collect? And when you do collect it, what can you do with it? How long can you keep it? And there's a lot of policing and oversight that's involved with that.

Trying to go to paperless tickets and I'm old school. I've got hard copy contract books. I have them all electronically, but I like to feel the paper and go and get my contract book and flip through things, or my policy book or what have you. And there's a lot to be said from the – with the younger people coming in and they want to go to the barcode on your phone to get into the building, instead of hard tickets or even PDF tickets that you can send to somebody and print. And we've got a good chunk of our season ticket holder base, especially on the Saints side, who want that hard ticket. They come into the ticket office, and they pay for their tickets, and they don't want to deal with email and have an account manager and do whatever changes they have to do electronically. They'd much rather come in and talk to a person. So those are some balances there, having to do it both ways. Kind of old school and new.

Bob Wallace: Yeah, I mean, at one point tickets and the printing of tickets was a big deal for teams. We used to try to make them pretty because everybody wanted their tickets. Now, as you just said, the young people want their tickets on their phone. They just want to be able to put it on a monitor and walk into the stadium. They don't want to have to worry about it. The whole exchange of tickets, all of that has come into play. Well, both of you talked about a little bit about how your demographic has changed a little bit. How your crowds and your fans are younger. They want things to happen more fast. Address what you think that means for the future of your sports, the changing dynamic.

Nona Lee: Well, for baseball, I think the commissioner's already addressing it to some extent with respect to pace of play and with the league looking at different ways that fans consume the product and figuring out ways that baseball can be

relevant to a generation that has a very different focus. So I know they're looking at that. The clubs look at, at least I can speak for the Diamondbacks, I know that we look at that regularly in terms of how can we connect with our fans in a way that's relevant. What is meaningful to this new generation? How do we get and keep their attention? And so it's not cut and dry. It's an ongoing exploration, so to speak. And it's going to take time. It's going to be shifting.

Bob Wallace: Vicky, the Saints' fan base is a very mature fan base as I remember. They've got a lot of people that have been coming to Saints' games for years. How are you guys dealing kind of – moving a new generation in as your fan base ages?

Vicky Neumeier: Along the same lines as what Nona is talking about. Again, just from something as easy as tickets. Keeping the commemorative tickets (inaudible) that somebody can come in and pick up but yet making tickets available by a barcode on your phone and also looking at the right ways or the new ways – and it's constant. It's like every social media update that we have, we typically have them monthly. So there's a new platform out there, and you're seeing less subscribers on platform A than you did last month because everybody's switch over to platform B.

Trying to stay relevant with that as well as some of the entertainment that we have in the venue, for instance. Music is a big – you can't please everybody, you know. Some want the typical New Orleans sort of jazz. Others want rap, and players have their own music they want. And so – and that's just a very – one very small example of how there are so many different ways to try to engage your fans and give everybody a little bit of what they're looking for.

Bob Wallace: I'm aging myself, I just would like some quiet when I go to the stadiums. {Laughter} Just so I can talk to the person I'm sitting next to, just for a minute. So are either one of your entities involved in this – the e-sports craze that is happening?

Nona Lee: Ours is not, so I'll defer to Vicky.

Vicky Neumeyer: No, you know, we have not. We've looked at them, but we have not. Neither team has engaged yet.

Bob Wallace: All right, well, one of the reasons I was happy to have both of you on is because I really do think you're leaders in terms of – pioneers in terms of what you're doing. Two of the highest ranking female executives in professional sports. Tell me a little bit about how you got to where you are and then how are you dealing with being probably a lot of times the only woman in the room.

Nona Lee: I will say that, first of all, I didn't have any immediate plans to get into sports. I became a litigator initially, and for me, I was a former athlete. I played college basketball at Pepperdine. Prior to that I was an AA swimmer and water polo player. Frankly when the WNBA started, all I could think about was, how do I merge my practice with my passion? And was very lucky to do that in somewhat short order, first going to work for an outside counsel firm that represented the Diamondbacks. And within a couple of months thereafter, having had the opportunity to go in house with the Phoenix Suns and at the time the Suns, Diamondbacks (inaudible) were all jointly owned.

So that's how I got into sports, and frankly, it never occurred to me that being a woman was an issue at all with respect to being in professional sports or being a lawyer or anything else. I don't approach things that way. And I get asked that question a lot, and my approach has been, if I don't make the fact that I'm a woman an issue, usually no one else does. I just approach my job and my practice as being a good lawyer, being a good practitioner.

And so that being said, have there been some challenges? From time to time yes, because my approach to this notwithstanding, not everyone approaches it the same way. And it's gotten better over the years, but yeah, I mean, it is a male dominated sport and people tend to get used to playing in the sandbox with the people they're used to playing in the sandbox with. But what I'm

happy to say is that I've seen a tremendous shift over the years. And we see so many, at least I do, so many more general counsel of women lawyers in sports now. For example, when we go to the Major League Baseball club counsel meetings, which are coming up next month, I am always struck now by how many women there are in the room. And I haven't counted, but I'd easily say there's half. Happy to see the numbers are growing.

Bob Wallace: Before you expanded on your answer there, I was going to call you on the fact that you were saying that you didn't feel that there was any tension by being a woman and that you have never had to sort of stand somebody up and say, hold on a second, we're going to deal with it this way.

Nona Lee: No, and I have – I'm not saying it's been a perfect world. As I said, there have been some. I'm just – I never made it an issue. I never – I get the question a lot with especially young women saying, well, have you had challenges? Is it okay? Is it difficult? And I just never let even the concept of that enter my mind. It's never been a concern for me that it would be a challenge. Has it been one from time to time? Yes, it has been. And what I've done is continue to put my best foot forward, stand in my strength and be who I am, be the best practitioner that I can be and demonstrate that I belong there. And if I didn't, I wouldn't be here.

Bob Wallace: Have you noticed any difference – the NBA is always characterized as the league that is a little bit more forward thinking than the other sports leagues. [Ken Shropshire and I were talking](#) on one of our podcasts about the front offices of – or the top management in those leagues, and Major League Baseball is not very diverse. Where the NBA has always been more diverse. Do you notice some differences in that?

Nona Lee: Well, I think you can look at the demographics and they speak for themselves. But what I can say is that I think Major League Baseball is doing a great job of shifting the paradigm within the league, starting at the top. And they're investing a lot in making that happen. It doesn't happen overnight. But I know

that the leagues are focused on it. I know that our organization is very focused on it. I know internally I focus on it. I mean, my department just won an award for corporate diversity for our department because it's so diverse.

But I think it takes focus across the league, across the teams and it's changing. But certainly it's not where the NBA is or the WNBA is. But I think it'll get there with focused effort, and it certainly has that now.

Bob Wallace: Vicky, do you notice a change in NFL meetings with the number of women that are participating at meetings and stuff?

Vicky Neumeier: Oh, most definitely. Yeah, there – we had NFL counsel meetings in May, and all of the legal staff from each team were invited. And looking as well at the NFL staff itself, the number of women has grown by leaps and bounds, in the NBA as well if you look at their front office staff and then also club counsel. And just looking at the membership even at the Sports Lawyers Association, when you look at the two leagues and who they send or the individual clubs, the number of women is amazing.

Bob Wallace: Good. Well, that's progress although Nona, I may take you up on that – change doesn't happen overnight. We've been a lot longer than overnight in terms of change in leagues in diversity and giving people opportunities for – to show what they can do. I had a long discussion at our last Sports Lawyers meeting with someone from Major League Baseball who was saying that she didn't believe that the Major League Baseball's Rooney Rule worked because the teams were just checking a box and they weren't giving people an opportunity. And she thought what baseball needed was more of a remedial program so that – and my argument was that, Nona Lee doesn't need a remedial program. She just needs an opportunity, right. So I think that there – yes, we have made some progress, but I still think there's a long way to go. Is there a glass ceiling for women in the four major male sports? Vicky?

Vicky Neumeier: I'll be honest, I have not encountered one. Maybe I'm lucky or maybe that's just the actuality out there. I mean, obviously there are certain areas that I'm not involved in. I mean, I don't walk into the locker room after a practice and nor do I want to. I guess if I needed to I could, and I'd feel comfortable doing it. Just obviously because the sports themselves from the athlete perspective is male dominated, you run into that. But from the business side of things, I don't see a glass ceiling.

Bob Wallace: Have you noticed a difference now that you have a woman owner, Mrs. Benson's taken over?

Vicky Neumeier: You know, she's been involved in it. She was at Mr. Benson's side every day for the 14 years they were married. So she's had input during that entire time. It's been about six months now since Mr. Benson passed, and she's taken over – stepped right in and has done a phenomenal job and wonderful at being available. Going to – she went to the Pelican's game Friday night, the Pelican's game Saturday night. We flew up to Minnesota for the Saints game on Sunday. I came back from there, but she went from there to Denver to take on the Pelican's game again last night.

So you talk about definitely getting immersed in it. I don't think there's been really enough time to say whether there'll be those sort of changes. I don't know that we actually need them. Mr. Benson was pretty – he was old school, but still revolutionary in his own way.

Bob Wallace: Some of the discussion that you hear in the political realm these days is that with more women running for offices, is that women approach problems differently than men. Do you see that? Is there a way that you analyze a problem from – differently than a man? Or do you see a different kind of culture that a woman can enable in an organization?

Vicky Neumeier: A lot of my job is negotiating and handling disputes obviously. So I think I bring more to the table at work from being a mother than being a woman, or

being a parent I should say and knowing how to kind of – like I said before, I make everybody play nicely in the sandbox. And I used to say life is too short to get all upset about things and negative. Somebody actually said to me, life is too long to spend it in a negative kind of funk like that. So just it maybe sounds cliché, but try kindness. Go talk to somebody, work something out and see where you can get with that first. And I don't know if that's a woman's perspective, my perspective or a parent perspective or what, but it works.

Bob Wallace: Nona, do you think that's a woman's perspective, a parent's perspective or just the right perspective?

Nona Lee: I think it's just the right perspective. I mean, that's the beauty of diversity. I mean, your perspective Bob as an African-American man, you bring that to the table in how you conduct business as a lawyer, and I do the same. That's the beauty and the importance of diversity. It doesn't matter who you are. I mean, you bring the sum total of your experiences to the conversation. And it's vitally important that we all do that, to the extent that my perspective is that of an African-American woman, then yeah, I bring that to the table. Is it intentionally just as that? No, it's because it's who I am, and it's part of what I do.

Vicky Neumeyer: I think you're seeing that more in colleges these days, even an acceptance – protocols and procedures, there's a more holistic approach. It's not just all what your transcripts are, your ACT score. And I think businesses are bringing that to the table as well. It's important to know what somebody's experience has been for their discreet responsibilities in the building. But it's also important to see what the person is all about and to look at the person in a holistic manner.

Bob Wallace: Right. Now I'm a firm believer in diversity because I think it makes people think about what they're about to say, think about how they're going to approach a problem, think about what effect that might have on the person sitting next to you who may be different than you and may view it something

– may view this problem in a different manner. So I think that diversity, more than just for the look, is also very important for the perspective that it's going to bring to a particular set of issues. So tell me, if you were a young Vicky Neumeyer, what would you say to yourself? Not that you're old.

Vicky Neumeyer: Oh, but I am {laughs}.

Bob Wallace: What advice would you pass on to yourself? If you would have known 15 years ago what you know now, what would that be?

Vicky Neumeyer: You know, it would be just kind of baby steps and you'll get through it. Don't take it all too seriously, or don't take yourself too seriously. My daughter is 15 and consumed with what she should do when she's out of college. And it's, like, you just don't need to plan it all, and maybe you need somewhat of a direction, but that plan and that road needs to have some curves in it and some flexibility. Because this is a second career of mine, and I would have never anticipated. So it's more just – again, it sounds cliché and trite, but it's enjoy the ride.

Bob Wallace: I didn't ask you Vicky, but how did you get to the Saints from your prior career?

Vicky Neumeyer: Well, I am not at all – I am not an athlete. I often tell college students, I can barely play solitaire much less any kind of sport that requires you to walk around. But yet I always did want to work in sports once I got into law school. And so I was an audiologist in a different lifetime and just decided to maybe see what this law school was all about. And once I got into that and took a couple of sports law classes as electives, realized you actually could work in sports as a lawyer. And then again, just kind of tenacity that got me to where I am today. I actually started as an unpaid intern in the marketing department for the Saints, and I'd been practicing law for about 15 years at the time. But I decided getting my foot in the door at some point, some way and just having

the experience was well worth it for me. And that developed to where I am today.

Bob Wallace: Nona, how about you? What advice would you give to a young Nona Lee?

Nona Lee: Don't be afraid to fail.

Vicky Neumeyer: Yeah.

Nona Lee: So often – particularly I have a propensity of trying to be a bit of a perfectionist, and that can really get in your way. And as I've gotten older what I've learned is, no one likes to fail, but there is so much value in learning the lessons from the failures. And they make you a better person, a better lawyer. And so to embrace the failures and learn from them. Don't be afraid of them.

Bob Wallace: So I think that's probably good advice for yourself. But I'm sure both of you get a lot of young people that come to you and say, I want to be you. Or, I want to do something. What do you tell them to do?

Nona Lee: I tell them be better than me. I tell them that yeah, I appreciate that and – but don't just look at what I do. Think about what you can do, and really think about what you want to do and find your passion. And if you want to be a lawyer, become the best lawyer you can be, first of all. And then connect your practice with your passion. But don't limit yourself to someone else's standards. Be everything that you can be, to be the best you.

Bob Wallace: If you had a crystal ball either one of you, is there some aspect of the legal profession and sports that you think will be really important five years from now?

Vicky Neumeyer: This may be very micro-looking, but data, just trying to stay in front of it. Technology again, is moving so rapidly, that once you finally get a policy for

something or get a handle on how you're going to handle it, it's passé and you have to start over again. And so you really, really need to be forward thinking.

Nona Lee: No, I agree. I would say technology, if you can find a niche in that area, it'll be critical because we have all of the artificial reality, virtual reality, all of the different forms of technology and e-sports. And that's the future. I think people who are positioned to play in that arena are going to be well positioned.

Bob Wallace: Well, great. Thank you guys. I learned a lot. I enjoyed having my conversation with you. Nona, you're on the off season. So I guess you can predict that the Diamondbacks are going to be the World Series champs. They're going to knock the Red Sox off next year?

Nona Lee: Yeah, that's exactly what's going to happen. We just picked up Paul Goldschmidt's option, so I think we're good.

Bob Wallace: And Vicky, you're in the middle of the season and you said you're in Minnesota. I believe you guys beat the Vikings, right?

Vicky Neumeier: We did, yes. We won up there. We got a big game – the Saints have a big game coming up against the Rams this Sunday and then the Pelicans are on a – I forget, four or five game road swing right now, nine days they're gone after starting out pretty strongly. So I don't like predictions, I'm just hopeful.

Bob Wallace: Actually speaking of the Pelicans, I was looking at your box score, not that I searched the box scores, but is Anthon Davis hurt?

Vicky Neumeier: He didn't play the last two games.

Bob Wallace: Right, I noticed that he's – okay, he's got something wrong, okay, great. I'm a fan.

Vicky Neumeyer: But yeah, thank you.

Bob Wallace: All right, well, thank you guys very much. Nona, your term is – I guess you got a couple of more months as Sports Lawyers Association president. Has it been a fun period?

Nona Lee: I have thoroughly enjoyed it and am honored to have had the opportunity and will look forward to turning it over to Bobby Hacker in May.

Bob Wallace: So I just want to say Nona has been the president for the last two years. I think you're the second woman to be the president of Sports Lawyers Association and the third African-American. So congratulations to you on all of that and your achievements and your leadership that you have provided. Good luck to you guys and thank you for doing this for me.

Nona Lee: Thank you.

Vicky Neumeyer: Thank you.

THE END