



# ICE MAN

*Brian Schoenborn runs a hockey empire out of his St. Cloud office*

By Martin Kuz

**B**rian Schoenborn faced an enviable dilemma when the Sioux Falls Stampede and Des Moines Buccaneers met for the 2006 championship of the United States Hockey League (USHL). As co-owner of the two franchises battling for bragging rights of the USHL, an amateur junior league that serves as a talent pipeline for college and pro teams, he had to decide how to divide his loyalty during the best-of-seven series. His solution balanced a keen instinct for avoiding the wrath of local fans with an open desire to turn pucks into bucks.

"Always cheer for the home team," says the 39-year-old Schoenborn, managing partner of Leonard, Street and Deinard's office in St. Cloud. Besides not getting booed, he explains, "You want to maximize the revenue, so you want it to go to seven games."

That's what happened, by happy circumstance, with Des Moines prevailing. But for Schoenborn, who since has sold his interest in the Bucs, which team won or the total gate receipt mattered less than simply feeling the warm rush of ice fever.

"If you don't combine passion with a business model, you're not going to be successful long-term," he says. "There has to be something that drives you beyond just pure business."

Abiding by that ethos, the St. Cloud native has wedded his twin loves of the law and hockey, pairing them as seamlessly as a Zamboni's freshly laid tracks. In his practice, Schoenborn, who represents pro and minor-league sports teams across the country, has done as much as anyone not named Herb Brooks to promote the sport in his home state and beyond.

Cue the highlight reel. He has helped shepherd construction of a \$44 million, 4,000-seat hockey arena, slated to open in 2011, on the campus of Bemidji State University and an ongoing \$29 million upgrade of the National Hockey Center in St. Cloud. Aside from owning the Stampede, Schoenborn doubles as the USHL's legal counsel, advising teams on matters ranging from arena development and construction contracts to building leases, naming rights and food-licensing deals. (The clubs own the league, mitigating his potential conflicts of interest.) His clients include 1980 Olympic hockey hero Mike Eruzione and retired NHL star Luc Robitaille, who co-own the USHL's Omaha Lancers, and Bob Naegele III, past majority owner of the Minnesota Wild.

Schoenborn also plans to launch a new USHL team by fall 2010, and though he can't

yet reveal the home city, he says, "I really want to bring the league back to Minnesota." (The state has lacked a USHL franchise since 2003.) For his efforts on behalf of the game, Minnesota Hockey, the state's governing body of the sport's amateur side, presented him with its President's Award in 2007. He recalls the honor with the modesty of a fourth-line center. "One, I don't feel like I should be getting anything for a lifetime—I'm still in my 30s," he says. "And two, I never played hockey."

Schoenborn favored hoops and golf growing up. But while attending St. Cloud State (class of '92), where he showed his ambition by winning election as student senate president, he worked on marketing campaigns for the hockey program and met Craig Dahl, then the school's hockey coach. After earning his law degree from the University of Minnesota in 1995, he returned to his hometown to work for Hall & Byers (since absorbed by Gray Plant Mooty). A short time later, Dahl tipped him off to a business venture involving an amateur hockey league. So began a relationship with the USHL that appears to be long-lasting. "The United States Hockey League," he says, "is something I hope to be involved with till the day I die."

The league consists of a dozen franchises in small and midsize markets across the Midwest. The players, ages 15 to 20, live with host families, but while teams cover their equipment and other expenses, the athletes don't draw salaries. The arrangement keeps overhead down and profits up, with clubs clearing as much as 50 percent above their operating costs. As Schoenborn says, "Think of owning the Minnesota Wild and not having to pay the players."

The metrics persuaded him and his business partner, Bill Sexton, a minority owner of the Minnesota Timberwolves, to bring the USHL to Sioux Falls. The duo and two fellow investors bankrolled a \$2.5 million renovation of Sioux Falls Arena, and in fall 1999, the Stampede debuted; a scant three months later, the franchise paid off its start-up debt. The overnight success "kind of became a calling card for me," says Schoenborn, who with Sexton later bought (and eventually sold) the Des Moines Bucs and another USHL franchise in Sioux City, Iowa. "People all over the country started to learn about the Sioux Falls Stampede, and it launched me into a sports business career that I really wasn't expecting."

His second career, in turn, spurred him to finally put blade to ice. Schoenborn and his wife, Debbie, like to take their two children, 7-year-old Katlyn

and 4-year-old Johnny, to rinks in St. Cloud and lay down a few grooves. But don't expect the attorney-entrepreneur to make like Sidney Crosby in a local rec league. "I'm not playing old-guy hockey," he says with a laugh. "I think I'd probably get hurt."

Schoenborn moved to Leonard, Street and Deinard in 2001, and through his USHL ties he has advised and befriended assorted sports luminaries. "He's a key person that all the [USHL] owners talk to," says Robitaille, the highest-scoring left wing in NHL history and a member of an investment group that bought the Omaha Lancers in 2006. "He's one of the most important guys in the league."

His work in sports circles, meanwhile, has led to clients seeking his counsel on other business deals. Naegele, who retains a minority stake in the Wild, recently enlisted Schoenborn to handle details on a real-estate transaction in Colorado, where the billboard magnate now lives. "He takes a common-sense, no-nonsense approach to the law," Naegele says. "That's why he's been successful."

To Schoenborn, the dual roles of attorney and entrepreneur give him a professional edge, fitting together like, well, hand in hockey glove. "I think what separates me from most other sports business attorneys is that I've owned sports businesses, I've developed and owned sports facilities," he says while sitting in his office. Autographs and quotes from Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Edison and other historical figures adorn one wall; another boasts decor that could be labeled Neoclassical Slap Shot: a jersey from the Stampede's championship season in 2007, a Des Moines Bucs baseball hat that commemorates the team's 2006 title, a puck signed by Robitaille, Eruzione and NHL Hall-of-Famer Mario Lemieux. In short, he adds, "Clients want someone who has done it, not just talked about it."

Done it and done it well: His teams have won three USHL titles (the Sioux City Musketeers were champs in 2002), and he has watched numerous players from his rosters graduate to the NHL, among them rising stars Thomas Vanek, Kyle Okposo and T.J. Oshie.

At least once a month, he makes the 220-mile drive south from St. Cloud to Sioux Falls to attend a Stampede game, meet with front-office staff and chat up sponsors. A decade ago, before the team existed, he would pass through town and spot nary a kid playing street hockey. Now? "You see 'em all over," he says. That's what can happen when a lawyer catches ice fever. **L&P**