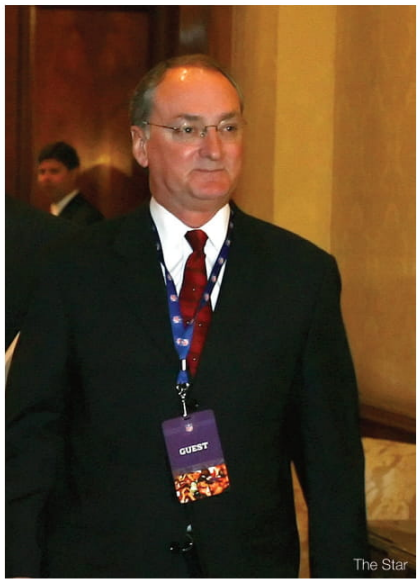
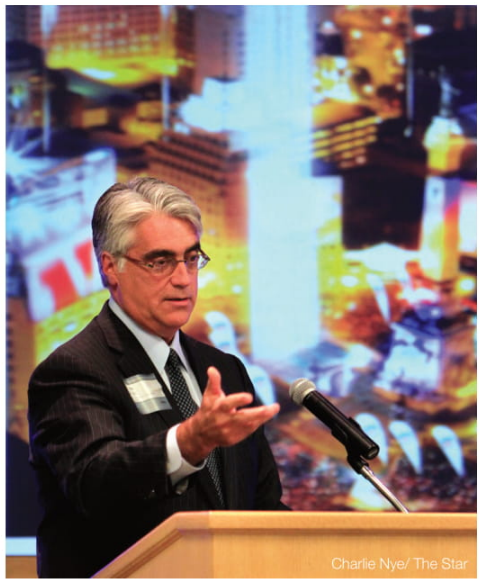
Q&A Indianapolis Sports Strategy

James T. Morris



Jack Swarbrick



Mark Miles

Indianapolis experienced the same flight to the suburbs that plagued many Midwestern cities in the 1960s-70s. In response, civic leaders conceived a big idea: to rebuild the downtown by making it the amateur sports capital of the world. Never mind that it lacked any notable amateur sports assets at the time or that the infrastructure was wholly inadequate to support such a scheme. These things could be acquired and built. What was essential was leadership, and the city had that in abundance.

American Outlook (AO) interviewed three architects of Indianapolis' sports strategy who now occupy major positions in the Indiana sports industry:

James T. Morris – President of Pacers Sports and Entertainment. Morris played an integral role in conceiving the sports strategy as chief of staff to former Mayor Dick Lugar and served as one of its sponsors as President of the Lilly Endowment.

Jack Swarbrick – Athletic Director, University of Notre Dame. Swarbrick was a chief author of Indianapolis' most important early big proposals for major events and he was the point person for the effort to entice the NCAA to move its headquarters to the city.

Mark Miles – Board Chair, Indianapolis Super Bowl Host Committee – Miles was a key implementer of the sports strategy through such roles as president of the Indianapolis Pan Am Games Host Committee in 1984 and president of the ATP tennis tournament in Indianapolis from 1985-1990.

Notably, each of the leaders' initial comments credited dozens of other leaders who contributed to the sports strategy's success. While it is impossible to properly identify all the actors, it is easy to articulate the outcome.

According to the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, the amateur sports movement generated over $1 billion to the local economy between 1977-1991 thanks to 330 amateur sporting events and 4.5 million spectators. Overall since 1979, the city has hosted over 400 major sporting events with a $2 billion economic impact.

AO: Let's start with who came up with the idea of making Indianapolis the amateur sports capital of the world.

Morris: Without a doubt, the answer to that question gives the formula to our success. It was collective action in the most generous and dynamic sense. First, we didn't set out to be a sport capital per se. What we needed to do was rebuild a square mile downtown region that was decimated by the suburban flight. Great city leaders such as Ted Boehm, Tim Binford and Chuck Whistler worked with my old boss and then-Mayor Dick Lugar in the late 60s and early 70s to bring it back to life. We designed two big strategies. The first was something called Unigov that consolidated city and county governments in 1970. The second plank was to design a community economic development strategy.

Swarbrick: That's where sports entered the picture. Congress passed the Amateur Sports Act of 1978, which established the US Olympic Committee and national governing bodies for each Olympic sport. Up until that time, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) governed the separate sports through an AAU committee structure. Spinning these entities off as 38 separate businesses created a significant economic development opportunity. We were successful in attracting USA Track & Field, USA Gymnastics and USA Diving to make Indianapolis their headquarters.

AO: So how did the sports strategy take shape in response to these events?

Swarbrick: It was a three-step process. First, we needed to win some of these governing bodies' headquarters placement in Indy. Second, we needed to build world-class facilities to house the eventual games. And following successful completion of the first two things, we needed to win bids to host major championships.

Morris: I think the lynchpin was Mayor Lugar's commitment to building Market Square Arena downtown. Other cities were building their sports arenas in the suburbs where the people were moving. Mayor Lugar had the foresight to build not only a fantastic facility but to do so as a catalyst to other downtown revitalization efforts. The 1980 Final Four basketball tournament at Market Square Arena really put us on the map.

Mayor Lugar had the foresight to build not only a fantastic facility but to do so as a catalyst to other downtown revitalization efforts.

AO: What were the critical ingredients in turning concept into reality?

Miles: People. Our secret sauce is really the generosity of our leaders and the volunteer spirit of our citizens. When we hosted the Pan Am Games in 1987, nearly 40,000 volunteers came out to help. Fast forward to the Super Bowl: our volunteer labor has been the equivalent of 17 years worth of time. Also, we are the only Super Bowl city to have raised the full amount of costs to host the event before the bid was submitted. We had $25 million in hand when making our presentation to the owners in 2008, and we added to that amount over the past two years. Indianapolis has an unprecedented level of public-spiritedness.

Our secret sauce is really the generosity of our leaders and the volunteer spirit of our citizens.

Morris: That reminds me of the time we got our business leaders together to prepare a package for the NCAA to move its headquarters to Indianapolis. Jack was quarterbacking that effort and he was working closely with Randy Tobias who was then chairman of Lilly Corporation. Randy brought 75 of our leading business executives to Lilly and said that if we could control the timing, we wouldn't be putting this package together now. We had just deployed a lot of capital for improvements to our airport and convention center. So Randy said it was important for every voice to be heard. Sure enough, we stayed in the room until all of the executives weighed in and the necessary support was galvanized. I don't know of another city in America that works like that.

AO: What was the significance of the NCAA establishing its headquarters here?

Swarbrick: We needed an anchor tenant to make the sports strategy first class. There were really only two major players: the Olympic Committee and the NCAA. The NCAA had signaled its intent to change locations in an attempt to change its brand in the process. They had become too narrowly defined as an enforcement entity, but it really has an academic mission. They invited 75 proposals, and we did not make the initial screening for top ten candidate cities; however, there were some NCAA officials who protested by saying Indianapolis may be short on certain metrics such as direct flights, but they had attended some of our championship events and said that we were a city that knew how to put on a show.

There are no great cities without great neighborhoods.

Miles: Indianapolis' proposal was very smart. We really listened to the NCAA and therefore didn't bring up sports until the second half of the document. We also didn't stipulate that the NCAA needed to hold a certain number of events in the city as part of the deal. That issue even came up in the negotiations. NCAA officials asked why we didn't insert such a provision like all the other cities. Our response was, "We have won those competitions in the past, and we plan to keep being successful."

Members of the Indianapolis Bid Committee, left to right are Cathy Langham, IPS' Eugene White, Mark Miles and Jack Swarbrick after they made the bid. Photo : The Star

Morris: We knew that the NCAA is a convening organization. Indeed, there are meetings at their headquarters virtually every business day of the year. Our hotel industry grew dramatically in the two decades since the NCAA moved here, and you can draw a direct line to their business. Let me also add how important it is to have university and college presidents from across the nation visit your city. They are influential voices in society generally and of course to their campuses. When they say that Indianapolis is a good place to live and work, it matters. Economically, we raised $50 million for the package to bring them here, and we received a full return on investment within two-and-a-half years.

AO: Did the sports strategy have a direct contribution to winning the Super Bowl bid?

Miles: Surely the combined success of our city's efforts to use sports as a catalyst for downtown revitalization made it possible for us to be competitive. Specifically, I think there are five main factors. First, Lucas Oil Stadium. During our presentation, I told the owners that there were actually 760 million reasons for them to vote for Indy; that is the amount of public support necessary to build that great facility. Second, we doubled our convention center size. Third, we just added a 1,000-room hotel. Fourth, we recently constructed a world-class airport. And fifth, we benefited from the high esteem owners have for our NFL franchise and Jim Irsay.

AO: The Legacy Project was another distinctive of Indianapolis' bid. Where does this fit in the sports strategy?

Morris: There are no great cities without great neighborhoods. One of our biggest ambitions over the years has been to provide inner-city children with the same opportunities that suburban children have to play and develop. I'm so proud of the Indiana Sports Corporation, which has raised well over $6 million through their golf tournament allowing them to fund the CHAMPS (Champions in Life) Grant Program. This has meant greatly expanded opportunities for disadvantaged youth who are really children full of promise.

Miles: Mayor Bill Hudnet declared in the 1980s that we were a "donut city" with an empty downtown. Today, thanks to the sports strategy, the donut is solid. But the core is constricted by a concentric circle of blight separating it from our robust suburbs. The same enthusiasm and effort that we used to rebuild downtown must now be applied to the four to six miles of real estate surrounding downtown. The families who live there deserve it and failing to do so will outright have a corrosive threat to the entire region. Rebuilding the neighborhoods surrounding downtown involves reinventing urban neighborhoods into interesting places where people want to live; transforming urban schools through school-level governance, innovation and accountability; and mass transit connecting residents to jobs and other daily needs.