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**HOW TO MANAGE “JOB OVER” VS “GAME OVER” DECISIONS OF
PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES AND BUSINESS LEADERS.**

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Professional athletes are held up to children as role models they might wish to be like as adults.

When we become adults, professional athletes are held up to us as sources of inspiration for business models of competition, team spirit, initiative, and perseverance.

In this article we will examine a third area where professional athletes can be role models for business leaders: managing the inevitable Game Over vs Job Over scenario.

Game Over Scenarios:

A Job Over scenario for a professional athlete uses an agent to find another team to play on.

The business equivalent if Job Over scenarios is that the leader is terminated, and a recruiter opens the door to a comparable role in a new organization.

But for professional athletes there comes the day when the Job Over scenario no longer works. The new scenario is Game Over: time to find a new game to play.

For business leaders, sometimes it is a boss who informs you the game is over. And sometimes it is your body screaming at you.

Game Over scenarios are difficult for professional athletes: they are too old to be re-employed in the same job yet too young to spend the rest of their lives playing golf.

Business leaders often get the Game Over call at a similar stage of life: too old to return to the old game but too young to consider retirement.

Game Over scenarios can be frightening for athletes and for any professional in the arena of life.

David Ostrowsky (2014) has written an excellent account about how professional athletes reinvent or fail to reinvent themselves when they reach Game Over.

How do athletes react when confronted with Game Over scenarios and what can business leaders learn?

here are three tracks that athletes can take: Game Not Over; Move to Adjacency; and Move to Chapter Three.

Game Not Over:

Ostrowsky describes the humiliation of baseball's Willie Mays' leaving the San Francisco Giants for the New York Mets when his powers as a player were gone. The same could be said of legendary Chicago Bulls' Michael Jordan when he joined the Washington Wizards. Former Boston Celtics great Antoine Walker once earned over \$100 Million in Boston but ended up playing for the Idaho Stampedes making \$25,000 a year.

Says Ostrowsky:

“Retirement is inevitable even if some can't admit it. Father Time has an undefeated record in the history of professional sports.”

It is no different in business.

Some of our law firm clients used to provide equity partners with “of counsel” status. But some realized that this status allowed lawyers to think Game Not Over and retain their best clients. This was not in the best

long-term interests of the firm. Now an increasing number of senior partners are being asked to physically leave the firm.

Whether the person is an athlete or a successful leader, old habits are hard to unlearn. But old habits that yielded tangible success in the past are the most difficult of all habits to unlearn. Sometimes athletes and business leaders need an objective third party to help them work through Game Over or Job Over scenarios.

Whether there is a third party or not, the marketplace will eventually scream a Game Over response.

Adjacency for Professional Athletes.

In professional sports there are several roles that are a natural extension of past activities. Moving from player to coach of players is one example. Larry Byrd and Yogi Berra made such transitions.

In our work with professional athletes, many think about being coaches of local college or university teams.

Another adjacency is to view sports as entertainment. Entertainment role models might include television commentator Lou Merloni. The former Boston Red Sox infielder made a career in hosting a Boston sports station talk show. Former Red Sox player Jerry Remy served as color commentator on the New England Sports Network. Jerry Rice, Rebecca Lobo, and Mike Ditka found new professional lives as commentators for ESPN.

Since professional athletes are performance artists, why not find roles in performance art? Bubba Smith was defensive lineman for the Baltimore Colts. He later played the role of Moses Hightower in the movie Police Academy. He also played roles on such television shows as Charlie's Angels, Married with Children, and Family Matters.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the legendary Center for the Los Angeles Lakers, appeared in the comedy movie Airplane. He also appeared in Full House and The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.

Joe Louis was the world's heavyweight champion from 1937 to 1949. When his boxing career was finished, he also went into entertainment: he was hired by Caesar's Palace Casino in Las Vegas to sign autographs, shake customers' hands, and play golf with special guests.

Adjacency for Business Leaders.

We see the same dynamics within business leaders. If the Game is Over, one natural adjacency is being on Boards of Directors or coaching leaders.

The problem with adjacency is that it works for some people but not all people.

Professional athletes may be naïve about the requirements for admission to join the faculty of higher education institutions and not ESPN may have all the basketball commentators it needs.

A business leader who waits until age 65 to begin designing a board of directors' career has probably waited too long. Coaching often seems attractive until they learn that you still must learn to sell. And the dynamics of selling can become unpleasant for some leaders who have become too comfortable being on the buyer side of the discussion table.

Chapter Three.

The late Harvard Business School Professor Anthony Athos once said that there were three chapters to a professional life:

Chapter 1: Learn the Game as defined by others.

Chapter 2: Win the Game as defined by others.

Chapter 3: Define the Game YOU wish to play.

Much of GAME OVER OR GAME ON focuses on how athletes move from a physical-oriented environment to the more intellectual –oriented pursuits of business, politics, and community development. The book contains inspiring stories but the message that comes through is that these reinventions are not really reinventions.

Professional athletes are known for their competitiveness, diligence, and perseverance. Athletes are simply taking these skills into new areas.

Consider Detroit Piston's star Dave Bing.

During Bing's professional career in sports, he spent eight consecutive summers as a management trainee for the National Bank of Detroit. Bing knew his basketball career had a looming expiration date. He used the off season as a time to learn a new craft before he needed to engage in that craft.

After his athletic career was over, he became an entrepreneur. The Bing Group was an auto supply business with four workers and \$180,000 in loans. In 2009 the Bing Group had annual sales of \$300 million and he sold the business. Once again, Dave Bing had the courage to reinvent himself. He launched a political career and became Mayor of Detroit from 2009-2013.

When our business leaders reach Chapter 3 we often ask them to read Viktor Frankl's book MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING.

Prior to German's invasion of Austria, Frankl had a comfortable life as a physician in Vienna. That game was abruptly over when he was imprisoned four different labor/death camps between 1942 and 1945. His parents, pregnant wife, and brother were all killed.

As a prisoner, Frankl observed that some of his fellow inmates gave up on life. Some even sought it through suicide. And yet others managed to preserve under seemingly hopeless conditions.

Why?

Frankl's book MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING was his attempt to make sense of the senseless. And yet it has great value for those finding themselves moving into Chapter Three.

He argues that we cannot avoid suffering. We can only make a choice about how to find purpose in suffering.

Frankl's purpose in life became the desire to observe how his fellow inmates dealt with unbearable suffering and then to write a book about surviving suffering. MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING is the consequence of that purpose. It has sold more than 10 million copies in twenty-four languages.

The fundamental question Viktor Frankl leaves us with is the need to put aside "how am I going to live?" to focus on the more uncomfortable "'why' am I alive?"

This is THE fundamental question to ask when confronting Chapter Three.

The Example of Tom:

As a child, Tom was sickly and thin. He majored in accounting. In middle age became CFO of a chain of drug stores. During this period, a doctor discovered that Tom had an allergy to a certain type of protein commonly found in milk products. Tom changed his diet, joined a gym, and got an MBA. He was larger, stronger, and more confident.

The owner of the drug store franchise had an idea that Tom opposed. Tom continued to oppose this idea despite the CEO's insistence on it. Eventually, Tom was fired by the CEO.

Tom's original focus was his anger over being fired for simply doing his job: providing objective counsel about the financial consequences of a strategic decision. He also focused on the humiliation of being fired, and how would he ever get re-employed.

Our intervention, however, focused on the meaning of the firing in Tom's life. He had reinvented himself through a new diet, exercise, and an MBA. Perhaps Tom had been hired by the drug store chain CEO because he knew that Tom would bend to the CEO's demands. But that was the "old" Tom. Tom's firing was a "red badge of courage."

We designed a job search campaign around the theme of Tom not being afraid to speak truth to power.

And how did this new Tom wish to spend the rest of his professional career?

Tom became a successful entrepreneur/CEO.

Conclusions.

If we are lucky enough to live long enough, we will reach the Game Over stage. Athletes reach it earlier than most of the population. But it will come for all of us.

Not long ago, the answer to Game Over was "retirement."

But for professional athletes and for many business leaders that is not an appropriate response.

There is a natural temptation to not wish to think about Game Over but diagnose the situation as Job Over. Impartial counsel may be critical to avoid public humiliation. There are too many people who are too willing to tell you what you want to hear.

In the end the marketplace will tell you what you need to hear.

Game Over options include finding adjacency options or Chapter Three.

Before asking yourself "how" to I make a living, consider asking "why" am I alive and what is my mission?

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About the Authors



Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

Its mission: help companies achieve Leadership and Career Success for valued senior level talent. Core services revolve around retained search, leadership coaching/career management, and executive outplacement.

Each month PSYCHOLOGY TODAY publishes their perspectives about leadership. To date there are over 300,000 downloads.

NAVIGATING THE WATERFALL is Stybel Peabody's book about leadership and career management in the 21st Century.

Stybel Peabody clients include three of the Big Four CPA firms and 60% of the largest twenty law firms in Boston. The readers of Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly voted Stybel Peabody "Best Outplacement Firm" for three years in a row.

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