

Delivering the Ultimate Fan Experience

An Interview with Scott O'Neil, Chief Executive Officer, Harris Blitzer Sports & Entertainment

EDITORS' NOTE Scott O'Neil is the former President of Madison Square Garden Sports and has overseen some of the most iconic brands in all of sports, including the New York Knicks (NBA) and New York Rangers (NHL). He was the key architect in some of the largest deals in sports history, resulting in record-setting revenue in sponsorships, tickets and suites, while helping in transforming the "World's Most Famous Arena" forever. Preceding his post



Scott O'Neil

at MSG Sports, O'Neil spent seven years as the Senior Vice President of the NBA's renowned Team Marketing and Business Operations group, where he advised NBA, WNBA and NBA Development League teams on all business operations. Earlier in his career, he served as the President of HoopsTV.com and held positions with the New Jersey Nets (NBA) and Philadelphia Eagles (NFL). O'Neil's influence and experience has earned him a place at the podium at some of the largest industry conferences in the world, delivering keynotes at events such as: Leaders in Sport, Beyond Sport, Sports Business Journal's World Congress of Sport, the IEG Pivot Conference, the Ivy Sports Symposium, Sport Marketing Association's Conference and more. He has made numerous appearances on CNN, CNBC, Fox News Channel and Bloomberg TV, and has co-hosted Bloomberg TV. He serves on the boards for the March of Dimes, Zoomi Inc., an AI based corporate learning platform, and Myota, a cybersecurity company. O'Neil earned his bachelor's degree in marketing from Villanova University and his MBA from Harvard Business School.

COMPANY BRIEF Harris Blitzer Sports & Entertainment (HBSE.com) is a leading sports and entertainment company with a focus on delivering the ultimate fan experience and developing and enhancing the communities in which its teams live, work, play and perform. HBSE's portfolio includes premier franchises, brands, venues, and investment platforms, centered around three marquee assets, the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers, the NHL's New Jersey Devils and the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey. In addition to these marquee franchises, HBSE has added

tremendous value through the development of the GRAMMY Museum Experience at the Prudential Center, the mixed-use 76ers Training Complex in Camden, New Jersey, an NBA 2K League Team (76ers Gaming Club) and New Meta Entertainment, a digital sports and entertainment company, which includes the renowned esports organization, Dignitas. HBSE is also actively engaged in new ventures, including HBSE Ventures (HBSEV), a venture capital business focused on sports

technology, entertainment, performance and analytics; Elevate Sports Ventures, a top-tier sports and entertainment consultancy; and the Sixers Innovation Lab, which supports rapidly growing, early-stage companies in the consumer product space and provides industry-leading consulting and investment opportunities to startups with potential. The HBSE team, from its leadership through the entire organization, strives to positively impact the communities in which it operates through the powerful platform of sports.

How critical is culture to the success of Harris Blitzer Sports & Entertainment and how do you describe the HBSE culture?

At HBSE we aspire to create the best place to work in the world. We have a culture that celebrates hard work, an entrepreneurial spirit, diversity of thought, approach and experience and those who believe that our platform can be leveraged to change the communities where we live, work and play for the better. We spend an inordinate amount of time on leadership development and obsess about learning and growing as professionals and people. We fight the status quo and challenge assumptions and each other, because we are interested in operating at a world-class level. We believe that the right data, research and analytics will help us learn from our failures quicker and avoid making the same mistakes twice, but we fully recognize that to accomplish something great, we will have to take risks and they will not all give the outcome we intended. We treat people with respect, always, and celebrate character as much as we celebrate talent.



The Philadelphia 76ers of the National Basketball Association (above and opposite page)



How has HBSE adapted its business to address the challenges caused by the pandemic?

We run a business that is driven for and by fans attending our games, shows and concerts live, and that is not currently happening. We have also had a very difficult financial year. Our thesis, though, since the COVID-19 shutdown has been relatively simple: focus on total wellness of employees, preserve the culture even as we work remotely, take the necessary steps to preserve the machine we built to drive the business so we will make a near full rebound over the 2021-22 season, manage expenses tightly and be opportunistic in looking for growth opportunities. The organization has continued to thrive as a culture and through our results.

HBSE is committed to corporate responsibility and community engagement. Do you feel that this is a responsibility of leading companies and what do you see as the role of business in being a force for good in society?

Doing good is good business – it helps recruit extraordinary talent, strengthens communities and enables learning, development and engagement internally. When you work at HBSE, you commit to serving 76 hours in the community. Our players with the Philadelphia 76ers and New Jersey Devils can be found visiting children in the hospital, marching for social justice, engaging in causes on social media, celebrating the military and providing opportunities for those less fortunate. Serving others is in our DNA at HBSE.

Will you discuss your new book, *Be Where Your Feet Are*, and your vision for writing the book?

Be Where Your Feet Are is a book for leaders and aspiring leaders and is perfectly tailored for the world today as we begin to define and create the new normal. It is a mind-body-soul meets leading-with-purpose book about understanding your core commitments as a leader and living a life that is present and dedicated to learning from your experiences. The book features insights and life lessons from some of the most influential

business, sports and entertainment people and personalities in the world – from athletes to an NBA Commissioner, and even an award-winning filmmaker. It is not a victory lap tour – instead, the book is a raw and unadulterated look into some missteps, failures and subsequent lessons. The book is intended to introduce themes and exercises on topics like WMI (what’s most important), API (assume positive intent) and *Be Where Your Feet Are*, which dispels the notion of work-life balance. My vision is that this will push readers to assess their priorities, challenge their notions of success, and plan to take a step toward being more present at work, home and in relationships.



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Was it important for you to highlight your own struggles, successes, and actionable lessons as a thread throughout the book?

In this filtered, Instagram world we live in, we often have this view that everything is picture perfect. Life on the other hand is, well, messy. Career trajectories are rarely linear and even the most overtly successful ones are littered with unseen issues and failures. Relationships too are often a far cry from the fairy tales we watch on the silver screen. We lose our jobs, we say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, yet it was important to me to showcase why failure, disappointment and mistakes are often better teachers than smooth, easy wins.

Who were you focused on reaching with the book and what do you hope people will take away from it?

The book is targeted for anyone interested in getting better, being better and doing better at work, life, relationships and in their community. *Be Where Your Feet Are* is written for high-performance leaders and aspiring leaders and will stretch C-suite executives and those who are looking to get there some day.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in building a career in the sports and entertainment industry during this challenging and uncertain time?

Over the years, I have seen a formula for success in young people in the sports and entertainment business and it is very simple: work unreasonably hard, be intellectually curious and be an extraordinary teammate. If you lean into these three core tenants, good things will happen in your life and career. I also encourage people early on in their careers to go on LinkedIn and find similar situated peers and reach out to connect, share thoughts, ideas and what is working. In the end, the world is small and getting smaller so the ability to have relationships and market data come in very handy along the way. ●