



Brett Yormark
Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment

Brett Yormark, CEO of Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment, is responsible for all operations of the company's expanding portfolio of venues, which began with the building and opening of Barclays Center in 2012. Since then, BSE has bought the iconic Webster Hall, the equally historic Nassau Coliseum – rebranded NYCB LIVE, home of the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum – and the LIU Brooklyn Paramount Theatre. All three venues have either undergone or are undergoing renovations, with the Coliseum debuting with a Billy Joel concert earlier this year. Yormark also oversees the business enterprise that manages and controls the NBA's Brooklyn Nets, the NHL's New York Islanders business operations, and the Nets' NBA G League affiliate, the Long Island Nets.

These are heady times for the company in a marketplace that always sees competitors on the horizon. Yormark explains why they've chosen the direction they are heading, who reports to whom, and why they have a West Coast office, among other things.

Can you please tell us about your background? You have been credited with playing a big part in the growth of

NASCAR but there isn't much information about your history before that.

I started my career in 1988 working for the then-New Jersey Nets. I cut my teeth in the business as a ticket seller, right out of college. I went to Indiana University and always aspired to be in the sports business. I was provided an opportunity to start at the lowest possible level, at that point in time. The only way you could break into the industry was to sell tickets and that's exactly what I did.

Back then, franchises were a lot smaller than they are today. The front office staff; there weren't many of us. In many respects, you did a little of everything. At that point in time, when I started with the Nets, I sold season tickets. I was also involved in group sales and I also played a role in game presentation / operations because everyone wore different hats. Back then, in the late '80s, when you wanted to work for a professional sports team, you did whatever it took to be successful.

By day I was selling tickets to hopefully sell seats and, at night, I was part of the game presentation staff.

I was there for about 2 1/2 years and I wanted to diversify

my role and go do my own sponsorship track (I dabbled with sponsorships when selling tickets). Again, you sold everything. Following the Nets, I went to work for a company called KATZ Sports, part of KATZ Communications. I moved to the Midwest and I sold the TV time for the Milwaukee Bucks, the Milwaukee Brewers, Minnesota Timberwolves and Minnesota Twins. I really developed a skill set for sponsorship sales although it was predominantly TV sales. I worked very closely with the teams to package and sell sponsorships. From there, I went to the Detroit Pistons. If you think about my career, I learned the ticket sales with the Nets, I learned sports TV sales at KATZ and I kind of combined both skill sets and really became a sponsorship seller at the highest levels when I joined the Detroit Pistons. They were the first team to build a new building – the Palace of Auburn Hills – so in addition to selling the Pistons I was selling lifestyle sponsorships to the Palace, I worked on Pine Knob and I was selling sponsorships to events at Pine Knob. I guess in some respects, that was the first introduction to the part of the business that was not sports, more entertainment. And I really liked it. and that's how I started diversifying my skill sets.

Are there any of those skill sets that you use today?

When I worked for the Pistons, at a much lower level obviously, it gave me insight and exposure into my current environment. It wasn't just team-focused, it was building-focused and entertainment-focused. I learned how things were becoming integrated at an early part of my career. It gave me great exposure to beyond the team side of things, which I enjoyed. Following

that stint, I returned to the Nets at a high level, as senior VP of sales. I parlayed the early years of the Nets, the sports/TV sales at KATZ and more of that fully integrated sales environment at the Pistons and Palace and Pine Knob to a senior position at the Nets. From there I went to NASCAR because I was back in New Jersey. NASCAR was looking to open a New York office. They were looking for someone to open that office, staff it, and really concentrate on bringing in good brands to the sport. And that's what I did there. I really loved the track I was on because I was able in my different stops to gain great insight into the business but also a much-needed skill set to sell more than just sports. Then, going to NASCAR afforded me to be on the more national platform. And you know what happened since then.

You've been credited with having a major role in NASCAR's expansion, yet you left.

NASCAR was definitely a great run for me and gave me exposure to national brands, and how to truly sell and package on a national level, and I spent eight years there. But, obviously, having the opportunity to become the CEO of the Nets, having started there in 1988, and the opportunity to move the team to Brooklyn and build a world-class venue like Barclays Center, I jumped at that opportunity. Even though NASCAR was a great place, I just felt this was a dream come true.

When you took the position of Nets CEO, what were the first things you knew you had to do?

We were in a challenging state. We had declared to the New Jersey community that we were leaving the state. Looking back, we may have done that prema-

turely but it was something I inherited. It was part of the narrative. So, while the team was in Jersey you had an eroding fan base because the fans were no longer invested; they knew we were leaving to Brooklyn. It took a lot longer to get to Brooklyn than anticipated, so that fan base really started to erode and, in the later years in Jersey, it surely showed. While that was happening, the team and the product weren't up to the caliber we hoped it would be. It was tough to time the arrival in Brooklyn, strategically, while building the team and attracting the right players. Being a team in flux, it was very challenging.

So that was one part of it – maintaining the business and being somewhat relevant in New Jersey even though you declared you were leaving.

The other part of the job, obviously, was while we were making a living in Jersey, we needed to seed the brand in Brooklyn to create the anticipation for our hopeful arrival which, again, took a little longer than expected. But we finally arrived here in 2012, which was almost seven years after I hired. But I'm a guy who likes to look at things as half-full so, even though it took us longer to get here than anticipated, it also gave us a chance to seed the brand, seed the business, create the right narrative for our eventual move and, when we finally arrived here in Brooklyn, we did it in a way that was truly grand. And it was built up over the years so when we got here, the fans truly embraced us.

So, despite some of the challenges we had in Jersey, given the delays in getting to Brooklyn, in some respects those delays helped us build a greater moment when we ultimately arrived.

In 2012, was Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment the name of the company that ran Barclays Center alone or were there other properties?

That's a good question. Here's a little peek under the hood: We were Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment *en route* to Brooklyn but what defined BSE was truly just the Barclays Center and the Brooklyn Nets. Our vision was that if we got to Brooklyn and did it the right way, launch the Barclays Center in grand fashion, become a destination, reinvigorate the Nets with the opportunity to rebrand them – which we did – that ultimately there would be a journey beyond just arriving in Brooklyn. And that we could ultimately evolve into a real sports and entertainment company. I think in a very short period, as we embark on our fifth anniversary, we've done that. Now, when you think of Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment, we've got three verticals: we've got our team vertical, which is the Brooklyn Nets, the operating rights to the New York Islanders, and also we own and operate the Long Island Nets, which is our G League team at the Coliseum. Our second vertical is our venue business. Beyond Barclays Center, you're aware of NYCB Live, home of the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, you're obviously aware of our recent acquisition of Webster Hall, and then we have the downtown Paramount, which will commence renovation in December. And then we have our emerging business group, which is truly what I like to define as our incubator business hub, businesses we want to get into.

Within that vertical we've got BSE Experiences, which is our foray into the experiences business. We've got ENTITLE, which is our naming rights company, a joint venture with



THE PARAMOUNT THEATRE IN BROOKLYN as reimagined by Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment. The renovations, which are just beginning, include restoring the 1928 theatre's rococo ceiling and Wurlitzer organ as well as bringing back 1,500 seats to the original 3,000 capacity.

(sports marketing guru) Lonnie Cooper and Cooper Holdings in Atlanta, and then we have our foray into the lifestyle and performance merchandising business with Brooklyn Boxing and our eCommerce site *BrooklynBoxingShop.com*. So, we've grown enormously over the last five years. We've got offices now in Brooklyn. We have an office in New York City on Park Avenue, and we have an office in Century City in Los Angeles.

If you think about the growth of BSE, it started with a team and a building and now it's three teams, four buildings and an emerging business group that affords us the opportunity to be somewhat entrepreneurial with businesses we want to get into. It's been a nice run.

Was building a vertical for venues part of the plan in 2012?

Well, our goal was not to stop at Barclays Center but to go beyond it if we had the propensity to do so. I guess you could say it was opportunistic.

The Islanders came here from Long Island, Nassau

County put out an RFP, we responded to it, we won it, and now, suddenly, we've got a footprint in Long Island.

On the heels of that, the downtown Paramount in Brooklyn approached us and said, "Boy, would you guys like to get involved? We've got a venue here that's been dormant for years that, back in the day, was a true destination for some of the greatest artists," and we took advantage of that. And then we finally sat down and said, "We've got this Paramount thing, we've got Barclays Center, we've got the Coliseum, we can no longer be opportunistic; let's be strategic about our expanding portfolio."

Now, how we look at it is how do we connect with artists early and often in their careers where they can get to know us and, together, we can create an affinity for our venues? So, when we think about Webster Hall and Paramount, that's the start of the progression ladder. That's where we connect with these artists early and often, and we position Barclays Center and to a lesser degree the Coliseum, as aspirational plays.

When you're connecting with those artists and they're playing in these smaller rooms, we want to give them the vision and the aspiration to one day play Barclays Center and, the next night, the Coliseum. And that became our strategy.

So that's kind of how we evolved into the venue business and how we think about the venue business moving forward: it's about truly diversifying our venue portfolio, it's about connecting with artists early and often, it's about positioning Barclays and the Coliseum as aspirational plays and whatever can reinforce that strategy for us.

When you look forward, does that necessarily mean the same market?

No, it can mean diversifying our footprint. So, could it mean one day being in London, where there is a lot of emerging talent? Yes. We're very interested in that market. We think there are opportunities there. When we think about our next stop, that is certainly high on our radar screen.

That moves us to Tina Suca and Andy Miller on the West Coast. Suca used to be the GM at the Coliseum but she's on the other side of the country — but will work with Webster Hall. Ultimately, how does a West Coast office work?

Our belief is that there is a lot coming out of that marketplace regarding content. It's where many of the artists and managers and, obviously, promoters, reside so to have a face to our business, and someone who sees it and is as professional as Tina, to have someone in a relationship marketing role, but also a transactional one.

There are a lot of jump balls that come here to New York. Which venue do you play, and

why? Having someone out there reinforcing 'Why Barclays Center' 'Why NYCB LIVE is critical for our business.

From a commercial standpoint, Andy is a great addition to the team because we're selling nationally; we're selling on both coasts. A great example: Honda is the official automobile of Barclays Center. And they're located in California. That's why we need to be out there to further develop commercial relationships. They play different roles but they're complimentary. Tina obviously on the content programming side and Andy on the commercial side.

What comes first in the chicken or egg scenario — is renovation on the front end of these conversations or is it individually assessed?

We were only in the ground-on-up business with Barclays Center. Since then we've been acquiring facilities that need some work. The Coliseum was antiquated. It needed to be recreated and reimagined. We put upward of \$165 million into it. We redesigned it so there was a new look, feel, or flavor. When you think about Webster Hall, it has an incredible heartbeat, soul, it has a history, and we're not going to compromise that. But do we need to get it, operationally, to present day? Yes. That's going to be a different type of renovation for us. We like grittiness, the history of Webster Hall, but there needs to be some customer service enhancements that make it easier for people to get in and out, and for them to function while they're there.

That's much different than recreating a venue like the Coliseum. And then the Paramount — your question has got me thinking — is a combination of both. The Paramount has



YORMARK MEETS WITH CONOR MCGREGOR prior to the **Mayweather vs. McGregor World Tour** at Barclays Center July 13.

great history and some of its original architecture is still intact, which is terrific. So we need to contemporize the Paramount but we also want to speak to its heritage and history. Our design team is doing an incredible job of balancing the new and the old. As I think through it, Paramount is a combination of what we are doing at Webster and what we did on Long Island.

You have a unique load-in at Barclays Center (with its load-in elevator). We suppose that there is a sensitivity for that to other buildings.

Of all the companies out there right now, there is no one out there right now more focused on the artist experience, and that includes load-in, load-out, all that good stuff. We're very cognizant of it. Barclays Center has a smaller footprint that has its own challenges. Yes, that one is nontraditional but it's worked flawlessly. When people come through those truck elevators they kind of look at it like we're high tech. We're in Brooklyn, and Brooklyn has become the second coming of

Silicon Valley, so to be different and unique kind of speaks to the makeup of the community.

I think artists have gravitated to it. In fact, on our turntable, we did a fashion show. We turned it into an opportunity to be a part of Fashion Week. It was one of the most talked-about fashion moments in the city. They brought in a Ferrari, parked it on the turntable, and that became the centerpiece of a world-class fashion show. It's become quite a bit of a positive.

When it comes to the Coliseum, that's an easy load-in, load-out on 77 acres. No issues there. It's a very typical setting.

Webster Hall and Paramount, they're located in an urban market, right in the middle of the city. We're looking at them no differently. How do we optimize the artist and production experiences?

Do you bring in Disney for customer training at all the venues, like you did at Barclays Center?

I'm a very customer-focused executive. We were one of the first to do Disney Institute. They've done all our onboarding and reinforcement training



Erik Anderson

YORMARK AND JAY-Z, who owned a portion of **Barclays Center** at the time, have a discussion during the NCAA tournament game between Kentucky and Maryland in 2012.

and it's really made a difference. We just had Paul McCartney and his entire production grabbed me and said, "Brett, we have never been in a nicer building than this building." Everyone smiles. If they don't know the answer they go find it. They're just a pleasure to deal with.

I hear it often and it makes me feel good to hear about it. Eighty percent of our employees are from Brooklyn. There's a great pride factor in servicing and hosting friends, families, colleagues, neighbors. But it goes beyond that. The pride factor is not just about the people they know, it's about making artists and customers want to keep coming back. And they feel they have a major role in making that happen.

Now that you think about it being five years in Brooklyn, we're seeing artists come back. We're seeing artists vote yes for Brooklyn because of the building, because of the customer experience. People might

feel customer service might be an added benefit? No, we think it's something that keeps people coming back and it's also a major retention vehicle for us.

Barclays Center, on our Midyear 2017 chart, was listed No. 9 for arena ticket sales worldwide. Would you like to guess where the other eight are located? It's a trick question and we'll just answer it: Every one of them is outside the U.S.

I was about to say that! I was about to say outside the U.S.

Listen, I think it validates a couple of things. I think it validates that when we built Barclays Center, we realized it would be additive to the marketplace. This wasn't about cannibalization. New York is big enough where all the venues in town can be successful.

We think Barclays Center is truly special in the market. We think because of where it

is located, because of Brand Brooklyn, because of the hip-cool factor, because of the architecture, the customer service, the culinary offering – all those things have created an incredible point of difference for us.

You can't get to the No. 1 ranking without having the right content or happy customers. They go hand-in-hand. Now, if you know me, you know that I've often said I'm happy but never satisfied. So, I'm thrilled and humbled and happy that we have the No. 1 ranking in North America but am I satisfied? Absolutely not. Can we continue to get better? For sure. Can we introduce new and exciting things to our building? Yes, and we are.

We certainly don't rest on our laurels but ...we're happy, just not satisfied. It seems like we've been here for more than five years. The industry sure feels we have been here for more than five years. I describe Barclays Center as a "mature startup." When we got here, we had never operated or booked a building. We've only been doing it for five years. We're appreciative but we can get better.

We're learning things every day. We can use data to drive our success; data we can capture.

How does everything break down, who does what? Keith Sheldon (exec VP of programming) Steve Rosebrook (regional GM of Barclays Center and NYCB LIVE), Nick Vaerewyck (senior director of programming, NCYB LIVE), yourself, etc. How is that all integrated?

Keith Sheldon is our executive vice president of programming, so all of our programming reports to him, including Nick. Steve Rosebrook operationally runs the building of Barclays Center and provides oversight

at the Coliseum. He has a GM out there that reports to him. Keith oversees Barclays Center and the Coliseum. Steve has operational oversight of both buildings. And I'm the CEO of Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment, and both of them report to me.

Digital ticketing. Where does it stand, where would you like to see it?

We are moving toward a point in time where we will be paperless. We are using the Coliseum, in many respects, as an incubator. For a recent Islanders game, we went totally paperless. It was flawless. I think you can see us going in that direction on a full-time basis. There might be some events over the next 10 months at Barclays Center where we go paperless but I think a full roll-out for the 2018-19 season is what we're focused on.

What is the Goldilocks principle for New York? Do you have too few, too many or is it just right?

I think it's just right, right now. When I was at NASCAR, it was during an incredible period of growth. Having a bit of scarcity is a good thing; it enables you to manage pricing effectively – meaning up. Scarcity is good. It creates more demand.

When things were going good, the tracks expanded their seating capacities. But they overbuilt and now they're struggling. You hear it all the time. Seats aren't sold.

I think New York is in a good place right now from an entertainment perspective. There's vibrant venues, big and small, that appeal to all different types of artists, and fans have incredible access. I think we're in a great place. I do not think we need another venue nor do I think the market can support another venue. *Joe Reinhartz* ★