

TIM LEIWEKE FINDS A HOME

BY JAY L. CLARK

The small, white slips with telephone messages are arranged neatly on the desk but still manage to cover the blotter. Two people sit in the guest chairs scribbling notes feverishly as two more wait outside the door with another list of questions. The telephone blinks from a call holding. Meanwhile, the Nuggets' new Senior Vice President of Business Operations, Tim Leiweke, sits behind the desk, runs a hand through his hair, surveys the mayhem around him, then leans back in his chair and smiles.

For Leiweke, he is where he wants to be, right in the middle of it all. To him, being in the eye of the professional sports hurricane is the best place on earth.

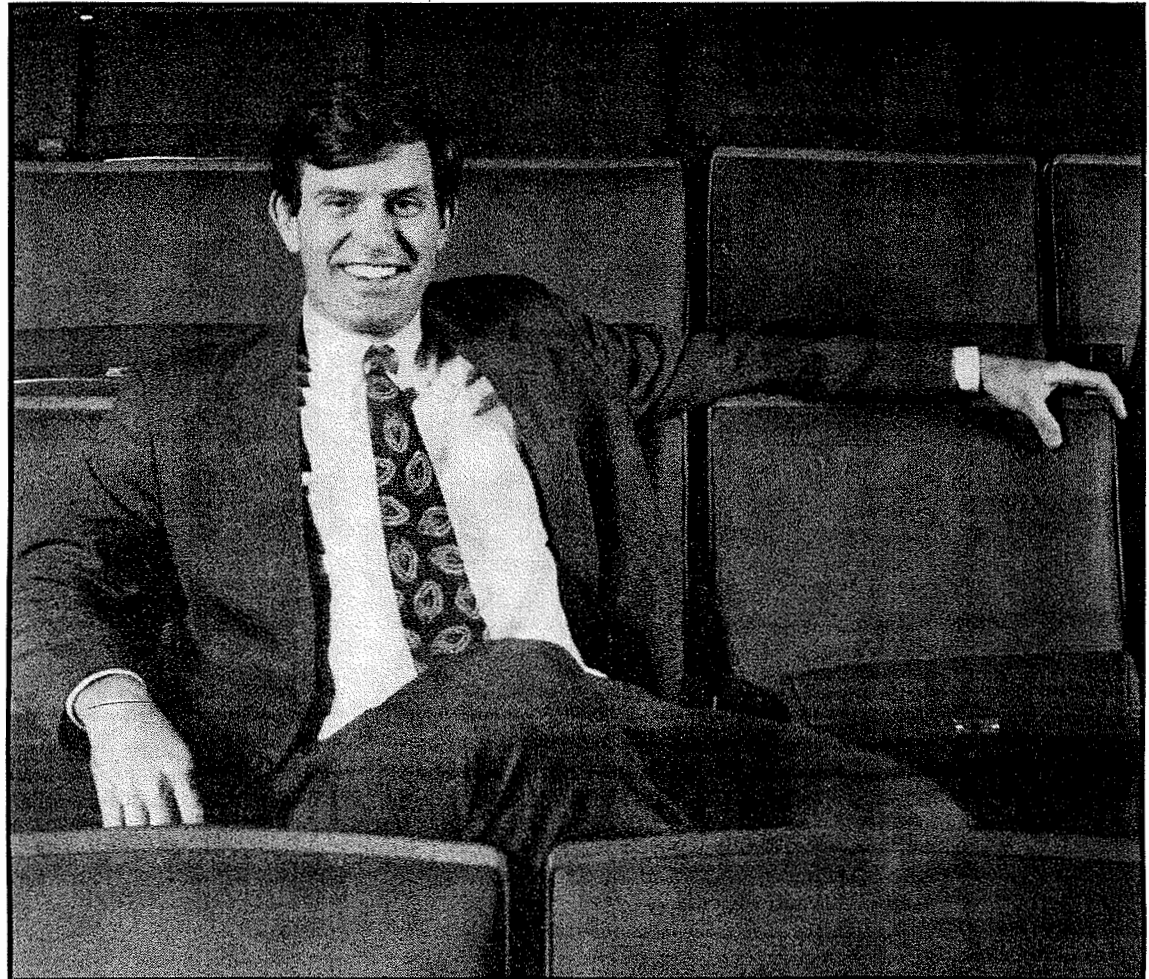
In leaving the hugely successful Minnesota Timberwolves for the Nuggets, Leiweke may have found the Grand Mal of hurricanes in the NBA. The Nuggets finished last in the NBA in attendance, struggled on the court and faced a community on the verge of looking at the franchise with apathy. Obviously, the 34-year-old Leiweke would have his work cut out for him in his new position.

"I had other opportunities, but nothing had come along that I felt was the right challenge," Leiweke said "But to be in the position when you can run a professional sports organization at the age of 34 from a business standpoint, in the best league in professional sports with the best commissioner who's ever run a league, that was not only very challenging but is something I feel after 12 years in professional sports was a very good coming of age."

"When they write the book about case studies of turning around the fortunes of professional sports teams, the Denver Nuggets will be case No. 1, I really believe that," said Tod Leiweke, Tim's younger brother who is a vice president with the Golden State Warriors. "When I heard he was going to Denver, I thought he was the one guy who could go in there and turn things around."

Before coming to work for the Nuggets, Leiweke had already built a resume in pro sports that would be complete if he were to retire tomorrow. How he became involved in professional sports was not premeditated, however, and in his own words "was a fluke."

In 1979, he was working as a junior partner in a consulting firm when his brother Terry recommended him to the ownership of



the St. Louis franchise in the Major Indoor Soccer League as somebody to take over its sales and marketing. Initially, Leiweke was

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not too interested, but the two sides worked out a deal where he would take a one-year leave of absence from the consulting firm to work for the Steamers.

"I thought it would be a fairly interesting adventure," Leiweke said. "Then the Steamers ended up averaging 14,000 people per game the first year and that was the end of the consulting business."

From St. Louis, Leiweke moved to the Baltimore Blast of the MISL where he became the youngest general manager in professional sports at age 24. From Baltimore, he went to Kansas City, where in addition to running a Marketing and Consulting firm with his brothers Tod and Terry, he enjoyed some of the best years of his sports career with the Kansas City Comets of the MISL. He served two stints with the Comets from 1981 to 1984 and from 1986 to 1988. While with the Comets, Leiweke oversaw a franchise on the cutting edge of sports marketing and promotion and one which the Kansas City community embraced.

"Nobody ever gave indoor soccer any credibility or any chance to succeed. There, we were selling

out every night," Leiweke said. "We were hotter than the (NFL) Chiefs, hotter than the (baseball) Royals, hotter than the (NBA) Kings. We were the hottest sport in town. Everybody, and I mean everybody, in Kansas City loved the soccer team. Except the Kings."

"When I was with the Kings (as head coach), I tried to get our people to go down the hall and see what he and his brother were doing with the Comets because I was so impressed with them," said Cotton Fitzsimmons, now the head coach of the Phoenix Suns. "Unfortunately, because of the egos or whatever, nobody would go talk to him. I was very impressed by what he was doing, not only with soccer, but with the community."

While the popularity of the Comets boomed, the Kings, struggled for survival and eventually moved to Sacramento. While the Comets were averaging 14,000 per game in Kansas City, the Kings were averaging around 6,000 per game. Now that he is with the

Nuggets, one of the NBA's struggling franchises, the irony is not lost on Leiweke.

"A lot of people blamed my brother and I for running the Kings out of Kansas City," Leiweke said. "So it is somewhat ironic that we go from a situation where people are blaming us for running a franchise out of town to now I find myself in a situation where my task at hand is to restabilize a franchise that some people thought would leave town."

"When the ownership of the Kings came to me and asked what I thought we should do, I told them to get Tim to run the sales and marketing and oversee the business side and I would run the basketball side. They didn't and the Kings had to move," Fitzsimmons said. "I truly believe if we could have had Leiweke running the business side and me running the basketball side, the Kings would still be in Kansas City."

"A lot of the time you can't say something like 'Tim Leiweke saved the Comets,' but with him you can. Just look at the evidence. The Kings had to leave Kansas City when Tim was running the Comets and when he went to Minnesota, the Comets had to leave Kansas City, too."

Fitzsimmons is the man who Leiweke credits with interesting

him in the NBA. Leiweke and Fitzsimmons forged a relationship while in Kansas City; Leiweke was with the Comets and Fitzsimmons was head coach of the Kings. The two remain close friends today.

Growing up in St. Louis, Missouri, sports played a large role in the Leiweke family. Besides always playing whichever sport was in season, be it football, basket-

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ball or baseball, Leiweke spent a summer as a batboy for the St. Louis Cardinals. But with his reaction to sports towards the end of high school, he did not foresee himself holding a high profile in the sports world in the future.

"My brothers went on to do well in sports in high school and college," Leiweke said. "I was a

fairly good athlete in high school, but it's funny, I got caught up when kids were kind of revolting against sports. And I revolted.

"Everybody expected me to come along and because my brothers were so good and they were All-State, to be another good athlete and play in all the sports. I didn't like that, so I revolted."

He may have revolted against playing sports, but the drive to succeed never left him. After his second successful stint with the Comets, Leiweke moved to Minnesota, where his profile in the sports world reached another plateau. In his first season in Minnesota, the Timberwolves drew 1,072,572 fans, setting the all-time single season record among basketball, football and hockey teams. The Wolves joined the Detroit Pistons as the only non-baseball team to draw over 1,000,000 fans in a single season.

Also with Minnesota, Leiweke played a major role in the construction of the Target Center, the Timberwolves' new home and one of the premier arenas in the NBA.

"I loved the staff in Minnesota, they were a great group," he said. "Drawing over a million fans that first year was great. Learning how to build and open an arena was a great experience. From a learning standpoint, Minnesota was the

perfect place for me to be during that point in my life. Everything worked out well with Denver because I felt I had done everything I could do in Minnesota."

Now in Denver, Leiweke is tackling his latest challenge with customary zeal. A lifelong midwesterner, he said Denver is the nicest place he has lived in, which works out well since he plans on being here for the long term.

"I heard somebody once call him 'The Beethoven of Sports Promotion.' He has the great ability to get people emotionally involved and feel like they 'own' a team," Tod Leiweke said. "That is what he will bring to the people of Denver. From season ticket holders to corporate sponsors, he will be selling partnerships and make people feel like they are a part of the team's success."

Right now though, it is time for another meeting. Before heading out, he tries to find some time for yet another client, but it will be tough. His day-by-day calendar resembles a graffiti-covered warehouse wall. Suddenly, a sly smile crosses his face.

"This is wild, isn't it?" he asks. "I love it."

It is the eye of the hurricane. For Tim Leiweke, it is home. ●