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Philips Arena chief Williams named Hawks president



Byron E. Small

Bob Williams: "With respect to the business community, Bob is the face of the organization," says Michael Gearon Jr., one of the owners of Atlanta Spirit.

About six weeks ago, a couple of key Atlanta business leaders called Bob Williams to find out who would be the right person to contact to make a proposal related to the [Atlanta Hawks](#).

Williams, who has served as president of [Philips Arena](#) since it was built and before that as president of the Omni Coliseum, said their call served as a "wake-up call" for him and [Atlanta Spirit LLC](#). Atlanta Spirit owns Philips Arena, the Atlanta Hawks and the [Atlanta Thrashers](#).

"The business community would look at the Atlanta Hawks and wonder who was accountable," Williams said. "It could have been construed as being rudderless."

That's no longer the case.

Williams has now been named president of the Atlanta Hawks, in addition to being president of Philips Arena.

He also is executive vice president of Atlanta Spirit. That makes Williams in charge of all the shared services of the three brands — finance, administration, human resources, legal, sponsorships and information technology.

Don Waddell is president of the Atlanta Thrashers and also is an executive vice president of Atlanta Spirit. Williams, Waddell and Hawks General Manager Rick Sund each report directly to the owners of Atlanta Spirit.

Michael Gearon Jr., one of the owners of Atlanta Spirit, said Williams' new title solidifies this evolving role with the organization.

"With respect to the business community, Bob is the face of the organization," Gearon said. "Bob has been performing in this capacity for several years. This crystallizes that relationship."

When Williams graduated from The [University of Georgia's](#) [Grady School of Journalism](#) in 1975, his passion was the Atlanta Hawks and professional basketball.

At a job interview with the Atlanta Hawks, Williams told them: "It was my dream job to work for the Hawks and that I would work for nothing."

The Hawks offered him a full-time job paying \$500 a month. That was in October of 1975. He had a myriad of jobs with the Hawks, including a short stint as the team's public address announcer.

Williams then went to work at the Omni Coliseum, becoming its president in 1994. A few years later, the Omni was torn down and replaced by Philips Arena. In his role, Williams was involved in the arena's design and construction.

"It was a defining moment in my career because I played a large role in so many of the design issues," Williams said. "The end product has a number of fingerprints on it, including mine. Now Philips Arena is one of the most successful arenas in the United States."

What is probably more remarkable about Williams' career is its longevity. No other manager or executive has more years with the organization than he does.

Gearon said Williams has worked for a host of different owners, including Tom Cousins, Ted Turner, [Time Warner](#), AOL and the Atlanta Spirit.

"He survives because he's exceptional at what he does," Gearon said. "He's hard-working; he's loyal; he gets results; and it's not about him. He's a survivor, but it's more than that. He's a doer."

Williams admits that he prefers working behind the scenes where he can build consensus and successful collaborations.

"I don't need to be in the spotlight," Williams said. "You are not going to see me going down to the locker room and hanging out with the players. My job is to continue to build the brand."

That theme was echoed by several people who have worked with Williams during his career.

Joel Katz, one of the nation's leading entertainment attorneys at Greenberg Traurig LLP, said his clients — some of the top names in the music industry — all enjoy playing at Philips because of Williams. "He takes care of people," Katz said. "I'm a great friend and admirer of Bob. He has great integrity."

Doug Hertz, president and chief operating officer of [United Distributors Inc.](#), a wine and spirits wholesaler, said he has worked with Williams on several sponsorship deals dating back to when he was running the Omni.

"We've had some complicated opportunities," Hertz said. "We have had some business deals that have not worked out but because of the way he handled it, our relationship actually got stronger."

As for Williams' expanded roles with Atlanta Spirit, Hertz said "they couldn't have picked a better guy. It's about as good a move as the Atlanta Spirit could make. The ownership of the Atlanta Spirit has really a need to have a 'go-to' guy, someone who is in charge. The community has wondered who was running the show down there."

Over the years, there have been some high-profile executives who have had similar roles. Stan Kasten served as president of the Atlanta Hawks and the [Atlanta Braves](#). Bernie Mullin served as president of Atlanta Spirit, overseeing the three entities. After Mullin resigned two years ago, Atlanta Spirit decided the three brands needed to be marketed as separate entities.

That's especially true of the Atlanta Hawks. In the past five years, the Atlanta Hawks have been gaining momentum, going from 13 wins to 53 wins this past season.

"We're improving our record every year. It's my job to make sure that that ascension continues on the business side," Williams said. "Fortunately we've got a great product."

Sports promoter Bob Hope of [Hope-Beckham Inc.](#) remembers first getting to know Williams back when Ted Turner bought the Hawks in 1976. Turner had charged Hope with filling up the Omni at Hawks games through off-the-wall marketing ideas.

One idea was to have indoor fireworks, which Hope had been assured would be safe. But when the fireworks went off, they hit the ceiling and the scoreboard, which Williams said never worked right again.

"I liked him in my old wild promoter days because I was totally aware that Ted wanted me to steamroll things to get them done," Hope said. "Most people would have fought every crazy thing I did. Most only tolerated me, but Bob had a way of helping me out. He knew we had to push hard to get attention and attendance and he would help while others would argue. I always appreciated that."

Hope also remembers when he needed to book Elton John for Priceline many years ago.

"I was told by Howard Rose, Elton's agent, that Bob is the only guy he trusts in the entertainment business," Hope said. "Howard can be very difficult. To have him say anything positive about anyone is rare."

Meanwhile, Williams said he has always stayed grounded by recognizing he just works with top athletes and performers and knowing he's not one of them. "We sell sports and entertainment," Williams said. "The work is still fun for me and stimulating. You never get jaded to it because it is the coolest industry in the world."

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