

Block Party

Thankfully, Chris hasn't figured out that he's far too smart and informed to be wasting his name on us, so we're glad to have him here again.

In the November issue of Chicago Magazine, there was an article done by Andreas Larsson on Rocky Wirtz and the Wirtz family that is worth going out of your way to find. While containing some interesting facts and insight into the business of the Blackhawks this is more of a story about Rocky, his late-father Bill and Grandfather Arthur, and the association amongst those men than it is a chronicle of a hockey organization.

It's been 17 months now since Rocky Wirtz, on his 55th birthday, announced he would be taking over the Blackhawks and occupy the Chairman's position that had been vacated since Arthur M. Wirtz, his grandfather, died in 1983. Preceding the October 5, 2007 announcement that Rocky would assume the Blackhawks' saddle, the team also made it known that his younger brother Peter Wirtz was resigning from his position within the organization to the shock of just about everyone.

Rocky himself claimed he was blindsided by Peter's resignation, saying it "hit me like a sledgehammer." But Rocky is either being coy or deceiving based on the facts as we know them.

It was at his own father's wake where Rocky took brother Peter aside and informed his younger kin that things within the Hawks' organization were about to change. Peter had been groomed under his father and expected to take on the role of Blackhawks president whenever Bill passed away since "Dollar Bill" certainly would never step aside. Because of his father's failing health in recent years, Peter had already taken on many of the responsibilities of President and it was slowly becoming his organization.

However, when Rocky Wirtz did what seemingly no one in the family expected him to do, take over the Blackhawks, Peter was instantly disenchanted.

Rocky's ace-in-the-whole was a decade-old succession plan detailed by his grandfather Arthur, written at a time when Arthur presupposed his eldest grandson Rocky would follow in the footsteps of his father in running the family company and Blackhawks when the time came. But ever since graduating from Northwestern, Rocky exhibited little interest in the Blackhawks and focused on a more lucrative facet of the family business, liquor distribution.

Scenes have now been documented of Rocky offering advice in years past to his father and younger brother on how to improve the Blackhawks such as televising home games but his thoughts were always ridiculed and as Rocky told the Daily Herald last year - "I wasn't putting my nose in the hockey team because the last few years, I knew -- and their body language made it pretty clear -- that they didn't welcome my opinion".

Taking the Chairman's spot and informing his own brother his place in the organization was up for evaluation was the elder brother's revenge. For Rocky, as calculated as it could possibly be waiting for his father to die, he planned this all along. As he told the Daily Herald - "Sitting back, I knew there'd be a time for me, and I was hoping the franchise wasn't too far gone that I couldn't bring it back."

Peter Wirtz served under his father with the Blackhawks for twenty years mostly on the marketing side. In 1999 he was promoted to Vice President after Tommy Ivan passed away. He endeared his father and in many ways Bill was admittedly Peter's best friend. Peter wanted to be just like him and there would be no better way in his mind than to carry the family legacy running the Blackhawks. But Rocky wasn't going to let that happen.

While officially Peter Wirtz left the Blackhawks on his own accord, it was more like a dismissal. Rocky admits in the Forbes article that he and his brother have never been close and the two have barely spoken since Peter sat down with him last October to explain his decision.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with what Rocky did. In the wake of Bill Wirtz's death, not only did he get the Hawks, William Rockwell Wirtz also inherited the family business Wirtz Corp and thus presided over all operations including the Blackhawks. Ultimately the succession plan was irrelevant. His insistence referencing the succession plan could just be a way of pointing out to his brother this is the way it was supposed to be all along; a wait your turn kind of thing, or simply satisfying a guilty conscious.

Rocky didn't even attempt talk his brother out of leaving the Blackhawks, instead choosing to send an attorney to convince Peter to stay on board. Hardly an illustration of a sincere sibling.

In a sense you never get a depiction of Rocky's true allegiance. And whether that's fair or not I don't know, but his words and more importantly his actions would indicate he may have rarely seen eye to eye with Bill. While he makes it clear he loved his father, his reverence seems to be reserved for grandfather Arthur.

Most telling is how Rocky wasted little time moving into Arthur's old office at corporate headquarters. Since Arthur passed in 1983, his office has sat just as it

did the day he died, untouched and unoccupied. Apparently a homage to Arthur, Bill Wirtz would have never approved of such a thing.

Being now the first Wirtz family member to be resoundingly celebrated is fitting Rocky just fine. Whether it's putting himself front and center prior to puck drop for the home opener, glad-handing on the United Center concourse or watching just about every game from his usual perch in section 119, he's embracing his newfound notoriety with a frisky wide-smile that sometimes borders on giddiness.

As mentioned in the article, it was his brother Peter who insisted the team honor their father before last season's home opening game with Detroit. The entire Wirtz family stood in the 100-level center ice suite mortified as a large percentage of the 18,000 fans in attendance booed and shouted obscenities during a ceremony conducted by general manager and Bill Wirtz underling Dale Tallon. Catcalls rained during a moment of silence for the Wirtz family patriarch. According to Rocky, he was the only one in the family who expected it.

Peter Wirtz was not interviewed for the story (I would assume he declined but that isn't stated) and there are some obvious hard feelings still within the family over Rocky's treatment of his brother. Even though the two must co-exist as business partners inside the United Center and work in the same offices at 680 N. Lake Shore Drive (Rocky on the 19th floor and Peter on the 20th) they barely speak to one another.

Asked by the interviewer if he thought Peter felt spurned by the decision to not immediately name him president last October Rocky said, "I don't know."

No matter how much money Rocky made for his family running the liquor businesses or assisting in the various other family holdings, he was never a really public figure until he took over the Blackhawks. The public legacy of the Wirtz family has always been the Blackhawks and Rocky had been separate from it until now. Seventeen months ago, it was predestined for Peter to become the face and ruler of the franchise but in one swift and harshly cold swoop his brother took that away from him. Again, whether right, wrong or ultimately best for the team's future existence, it is the path Rocky as inheritor of the family

business chose.

Briefly touched upon is John McDonough's entry. McDonough, as mentioned in this month's Forbes, fired more than half of the Hawks existing 35 employees after months of evaluating operations. Included in the blood-letting was long-time Blackhawks public relations director Jim DeMaria who quickly took a role as Vice President of Bismarck Enterprises, which operates the United Center concessions and vending, thanks to his good friend Peter Wirtz.

Undoubtedly the biggest admission in the article came from its most unlikely source, former executive vice president Bob Pulford, who had this to say about being removed by Rocky from his position with the Hawks just days after serving as pall bearer for long-time friend and associate Bill Wirtz: "I've been in hockey since 1955," Pulford says. "I was probably obsolete. It's time to move on."

It's evident there are mixed feelings within Rocky today and he does his best to summarize his actions in his first year on the job:

"My father was a superb businessman and he did what he believed was right for the team. But what he really was adamant about was moving the business ahead," the son says. "So how we get there is going to be different, but he'd be quite happy with the way things are going." Of course he adds, "if he was living, I couldn't have done it."

Mark Weinberg, former editor of the Blue Line and author of the book *Career Misconduct: The Story of Bill Wirtz's Greed, Corruption and the Betrayal of Blackhawks' Fans* was interviewed for the article, summarizing the past year with this quote:

"From a fan's perspective it's great - he's doing everything right.

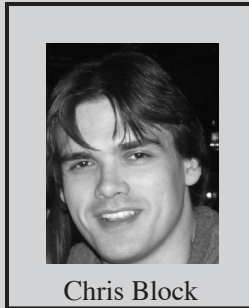
"On a deeper psychological level, I think one has to ask, 'What's going on here?' With the things Rocky has done, and the speed with which he'd done them, there's almost and 'In your face, Dad' quality."

And in your face too, brother.

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