

A new breed of security

Teams, leagues are looking to specially trained dogs to make their venues far safer

BY DAVID BROUGHTON

STAFF WRITER

He was *made* for this job. That's something you might say about someone who's performing at an elite level. Or, maybe you'd say it when someone's work seems to come naturally to him.

In this case, it's when science and technology meet modern-day sports facility safety needs.

Meet Young. He's a Vapor Wake dog. That makes him part of the latest line of defense in sports venue security.

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Learfield's run fuels talk of sale

Could college power bring price of \$1B?

BY MICHAEL SMITH

STAFF WRITER

Learfield last month closed on its 10th acquisition in two-plus years, adding fuel to the rampant speculation that the company is about to be sold again after a flurry of deals and rapid earnings growth.

The question making the rounds now among industry insiders: Can Learfield fetch a price of \$1 billion or more?

Providence Equity Partners, a Rhode Island private equity firm, owns the majority of shares in Learfield, so there's little doubt the company will be flipped at some point. It's just a matter of when.

Learfield officials would not discuss whether it is technically for sale.

"If we were active or inactive, I wouldn't talk about it," Learfield President and CEO Greg Brown said.

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A big splash: How an Olympic pool became a moneymaker

BY BEN FISCHER

STAFF WRITER

The competition pool at the Olympic swim trials was used for cleaning between sessions, but 10-year-old Ethan Knler was soaked.

He was next door at the CenturyLink Center in downtown Omaha, learning to surf on a wave machine sponsored by Marriott Rewards.

She was the USA Swimming Aqua Zone. She was making nervously at her mother, her let go of her instructor. She fell instantly, disappearing.

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► A look inside the USA House in Rio, PAGE 43

► Worries over Rio fail to dissipate, PAGE 44

Bristol brings big-time hospitality to its 'Battle'



A rendering shows planned premium seating behind an end zone at Bristol Motor Speedway.

BY MICHAEL SMITH

STAFF WRITER

Tennessee and Virginia Tech will storm the field in two months in one of the most heavily anticipated events this year, and in the process, they'll run past some of the most unusual on-field premium areas ever devised for the college football game at Bristol Motor Speedway.

Stadium seating on the racetrack, clubs and lounges on pit road, helicopter rides to the stadium — Bristol will have a bit of everything when NASCAR meets the gridiron.

At least four premium hospitality spaces will put fans either next to the field or on the racetrack for the novel Sept. 10 game that will be played inside the transformed

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TURNKEY HAS FILLED ANOTHER KEY POSITION



MARK COYLE
 Director of Athletics



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HNTB, OSports win job at Ohio Stadium

BY DON MURET

STAFF WRITER

The firms that designed a premium-seat retrofit at Ohio Stadium almost 20 years ago are introducing new loge boxes to "The Shoe."

HNTB and OSports, a division of Cleveland-based Osborn Engineering, have been selected to design \$42 million in upgrades to Ohio State's 94-year-old football facility, said Mike Penner, the school's senior associate athletic director for internal operations.

The companies are designing 35 loge boxes and 12 new suites as an extension of a two-level structure on the stadium's west side. The new premium seats are in addition to the 81 suites that have been in place since 2001.

Kansas City-based HNTB and OSports teamed on the initial four-year, \$194 million renovation, which started in 1998. Now they're back in Columbus doing more work after OSports completed a feasibility study supporting

the current project.

It kicks off in 2017, and the new premium seat addition will take two years to finish, said Scott Conlon, director of projects for the school's facilities design and construction group. Some maintenance projects such as waterproofing concourses will stretch into 2020.

Crews will remove about 2,000 regular seats to clear space for the loge boxes and suites. The total number of seats will remain around 105,000; Ohio State expanded the south side by 2,000 seats a few years ago in anticipation of losing the west-side portion, Conlon said.

The loge boxes provide Ohio State with a midprice premium product to offer donors and alumni. They're similar to HNTB's design of four-seaters at Oregon State's Reser Stadium and Kentucky's Commonwealth Stadium, said Gerardo Prado, the firm's sports group director and vice president.

Adding 12 suites will help meet the demand for more

high-end hospitality at the stadium. Ohio State has a large waiting list for suites, Athletic Director Gene Smith told The Columbus Dispatch earlier this year after the school announced the renovations.

The project extends to remodeling suites and improving infrastructure, such as restoring the concrete surface on the upper deck concourse that was part of the original construction in 1922. For HNTB, it marks the first time the firm is redesigning some of the same spaces at a college football stadium where it did original work.

Back in 1998, Ohio Stadium was among HNTB's first college football projects. Its work there helped the firm win stadium renovations at Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, Michigan State and Purdue. "Ohio Stadium started us on the right track in the Big Ten," said Prado, HNTB's sports principal for the project.

Ohio State selected Barton Malow to build the new loges and suites.

Learfield

■ Acquisitions create a multifaceted company

FROM PAGE 1

Learfield, a Plano, Texas-based collegiate powerhouse that's been around for 44 years, was bought in September 2013 by Providence Equity, which invests in media and entertainment companies such as Hulu, Ironman, Topgolf and YES Network.

Providence acquired Learfield from another private equity company, Shamrock Capital Advisors, for \$570 million, an eye-popping figure at the time.

When the deal closed, Brown, a 32-year company veteran, called it "an exciting new chapter in the growth story." But no one predicted just how much growth Learfield was about to see.

In the last 28 months, it has publicly acquired 10 companies with expertise that ranges from media and licensing to branding, LED video and digital technology.

All of these new competencies have transformed Learfield from a multimedia rights company that was best at selling radio advertising and sponsorships to a multifaceted, diverse business able to address most any need a college athletic department might have. It's also grown from 500 employees in 2013 to 1,000 employees now.

Industry sources say the growth has lifted Learfield's net earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization in the range of \$70 million to \$80 million for the fiscal 2015-16 year that just closed on June 30. If Providence could sell Learfield for a multiple in the 13-15 range, that would put the price at \$900 million to \$1.2 billion, figures that once would have been unheard of for the company.

Learfield also would be selling against its projected earnings for 2016-17, a number that is expected to be closer to \$90 million, sources say, which could drive the sale price higher.

While a multiple as high as 15 sounds ambitious, sources said that Shamrock sold Learfield for a 15 multiple in 2013. The multiple in the next sale will be determined, in part, by how much growth potential is left in the company and other market conditions.

By comparison, IMG, with EBITDA of \$194 million in 2013, sold for \$2.4 billion, or a multiple of just more than 12.

A price tag in the \$1 billion range would

The changing face of Learfield

Learfield acquisitions under ownership of Providence Equity:

2014

- Nelligan Sports
- Sidearm Sports
- Licensing Resource Group
- Strategic Marketing Affiliates

2015

- ANC
- Front Row Marketing (college division)
- KP Sports & Entertainment

2016

- Think Social
- SME
- GoVision

Source: SportsBusiness Journal research

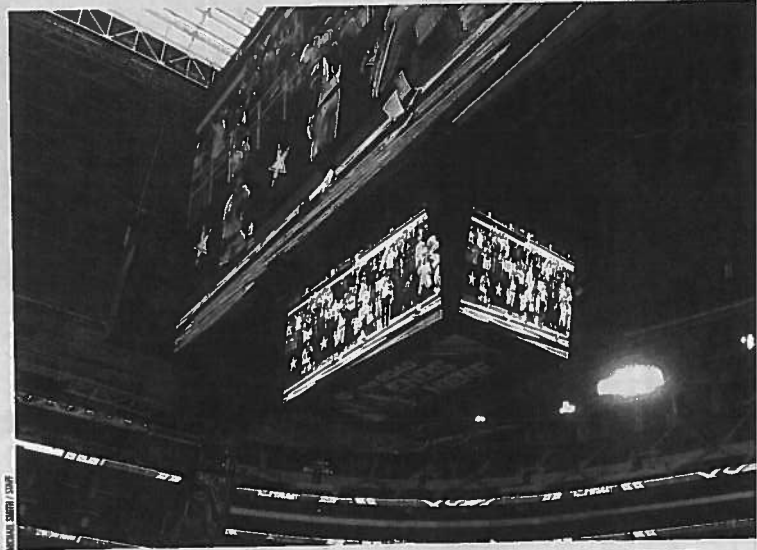
significantly thin out the number of deep-pocketed buyers for Learfield. But other factors, like the presence of a Chinese buyer or multiple bidders, could drive the price up.

Multiple analysts in sports-related mergers and acquisitions disagreed on whether a domestic college business like Learfield might be too U.S.-focused for a foreign buyer, like China's Dalian Wanda Group, which last year bought Ironman triathlons for \$650 million from Providence.

Company officials at Learfield are notoriously quiet about their financials and even now will not confirm the sale price from three years ago.

When asked in recent weeks if Learfield is for sale again, Brown said, "When the timing is right for Providence and for us, we'll probably do something. But there's nothing specific that I'd talk about, ever."

Brown, who joined Learfield in 1984 to sell radio advertising for the Iowa State network, took the titles of president and CEO in 2009 as founder Clyde Lear entered retirement. Diversifying the company has been central to Brown's strategy for earnings growth. After spending nearly 40 years as a multimedia rights holder, Learfield has been recently focused on business extensions that go beyond the core competency in media and sponsorship sales.



Recent Learfield acquisition GoVision supplied secondary center boards at the 2014 Final Four.

Business extensions like video technology, ticketing, concessions, licensing or other areas allow for revenue growth from existing college relationships.

Some of those business extensions were formed prior to Providence's acquisition.

Learfield went into business with its chief rival, IMG College, to create a joint venture called IMG Learfield Ticketing Solutions, which handles ticket sales and marketing for 38 school clients. Learfield also formed a partnership with concessionaire Levy Restaurants at a half-dozen schools.

When Providence, led by Managing Director Michael Dominguez, bought Learfield in 2013, Brown's vision of new business extensions hit warp speed.

The first deal under Providence was for Nelligan Sports, which brought the rights to 41 more schools under the Learfield banner and added 85 new employees in February 2014. Other deals soon followed. COO Marc Jenkins, hired from NASCAR in 2014, was brought in to oversee the new lines of business.

The acquisitions have enabled Learfield to take a giant step toward being a one-stop shop for athletic departments.

Need a center-hung scoreboard? Learfield's got a company for that — it bought ANC last year.

Need a new web developer/operator or a mobile app? Learfield bought Sidearm Sports in 2014 to address that space.

Need a new social media strategy? Learfield bought Think Social, a social media specialist, in February.

The most recent deal — the June 29 acquisition of GoVision from founder Chris Curtis — reflects how Brown's 30-plus years of connections have driven nearly all of Learfield's purchases. Learfield became a client of GoVision years ago, renting LED video boards at Oklahoma and other schools for concerts and fan fests, before ultimately buying Curtis' business.

Last month's acquisition of Ed O'Hara's SME, a New York branding agency, grew out of another business deal. Learfield hired SME to rebrand the company last year and Learfield ended up buying the agency, which has a burgeoning college business already.

"Most of our deals have been opportunistic," Brown said. "If we see something where we can be helpful, and that a deal can be helpful to our business, then we'll have a conversation. ... Providence is encouraging of that."

Brown doesn't see any changes in the philosophy of rapid growth that has blossomed under Providence's guidance, which has increased speculation about the company's future ownership.

"I don't think we see any kind of fundamental shift where we're going to stop having those conversations," he said. "So, yes, if we see something that makes sense, we'll talk about it."