League of His In a League of His Own

Armstrong, president of the Seattle Mariners Baseball Club, chose Purdue from four schools. He grew up in Louisville, played sports, and had a chance to sign a professional baseball contract out of high school. But his parents thought he should get an education, and his math and science scores pointed toward engineering. He entered Purdue in 1960 and played baseball for the Boilermakers his freshman year.

“It was tough,” Armstrong says. “I realized right away that I needed to be serious, but it was a great experience. Purdue provided personal guidance and opportunities in just about any endeavor.”

Armstrong liked the management orientation of industrial engineering. He also was on Class Council for three years, worked as sports editor for the Debris, and was selected to be a junior partner, he took a leave of absence to become president of a Los Angeles law firm, specializing in business and corporate law. After being one of baseball’s weakest franchises, Armstrong was asked to take over running the Mariner following the 1983 baseball season. Argyros sold the Mariners after the 1989 season, and Armstrong went off and did other things, including being interim Athletic Director at the University of Washington in 1991. Faced with the threat of losing baseball in Seattle, a new ownership group came together in 1992, purchased the team, and reinstalled Armstrong as president and COO.

Career Surprises

Armstrong spent his undergraduate summers working as an engineer, but in his senior year, he decided to take the law boards and received a scholarship to Stanford Law School. Then the week he took the bar exam, the U.S. government called. “The second day of the bar exam I got my induction notice; the day after that, I joined the Navy; and two days after that, I got married.” Thanks in part to having an engineering degree, he qualified as an officer of the deck on an attack aircraft carrier.

Returning from duty, Armstrong joined a Los Angeles law firm, specializing in business and corporate law. After being selected to be a junior partner, he took a leave of absence to become president of a national furniture manufacturer. After three years, the travel took its toll. “I came home from a trip one day and my neighbor was teaching my daughter how to ride her bike. I was missing too much.” Through a former client at the law firm, Armstrong met and joined George Argyros, an Orange County real estate developer.

Argyros, currently the U.S. Ambassador to Spain, installed Armstrong as CEO of his real estate company, while he made other investments, including the purchase of the Seattle Mariners Baseball Team.

After three years of producing impressive results with the real estate company, Armstrong was asked to take over running the Mariners following the 1983 baseball season. Argyros sold the Mariners after the 1989 season, and Armstrong went off and did other things, including being interim Athletic Director at the University of Washington in 1991. Faced with the threat of losing baseball in Seattle, a new ownership group came together in 1992, purchased the team, and reinstalled Armstrong as president and COO.

Looking Ahead

Since 1992 the Mariners have gone from being one of baseball’s weakest franchises to becoming one of its strongest and most successful, setting a major league record of 116 wins in the 2001 season, and playing in beautiful new SAFECO Field.

“My career has been surprising to me because it has been so serendipitous,” says Armstrong. “Only my mother felt it was logical, and she saw that in hindsight.” He credits his wife of 35 years, Susan, with being the greatest influence on his career, always providing unconditional support.

“One of the things I’ve learned in retrospect is how practical a Purdue degree is,” says Armstrong. “Immediately upon graduation you are equipped to make a contribution. I like that about Purdue. In engineering, the only constant is change. You have to remain flexible and adaptable and maintain a sense of humor. You have to be prepared for opportunities when they come along and not be afraid to take prudent risks.”