

5 Questions with... Tal Smith of the Astros

Written by Maury Brown
Tuesday, 11 September 2007 17:24



One aspect of [The Biz of Baseball](#) that I've always enjoyed doing are the interviews we've published. Of all the feedback we get at the *Business of Sports Network*, it is the [long list of Q&As](#) with those that work in sports business that always garner the most interest with readers.

As we are close to the one-year anniversary of The Biz of Baseball's launch, we thought the idea of adding shorter interviews to the site would be appropriate with a series called, *'5 Questions with...'*

For our initial installment, we are fortunate to have **Tal Smith**, the President of Baseball Operations, and currently the Interim General Manager for the **Houston Astros**

(
[read our extensive interview with Tal Smith](#)
[prior](#)
).

With the recent dismissals of general manager **Tim Purpura** and manager **Phil Garner**, Smith, principle owner **Drayton McLane**, and consultant **Bob McLaren** have been working feverishly to fill those positions.

While the series is called *'5 Questions with...'*, Tal Smith is always willing to expand on subjects, even if the interview is conducted in the wee hours of the morning, as this one was.

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Five questions turned out to be a touch more.

Look for more of this new series of interviews including **Rob Neyer** and **Ken Rosenthal** arriving shortly. --

Maury Brown

Founder and President

[Business of Sports Network](#)

(Select [Read More](#) to see 5 Questions with Tal Smith)

Maury Brown for The Biz of Baseball: It's been reported that the Astros have received over three dozen inquires regarding the general manager vacancy. How much of your time has been devoted to the effort, and what is the process the organization is using to sift through so many leads?

Tal Smith: I've spent virtually all of my time on the process. Obviously, we field a lot of inquiries and do a lot of due diligence. The interview process is part of it, but I think it's a minor part. Most of the process involves looking at the body of work that potential candidates have done, looking at their track record, talking to people they have worked with and worked for and so on. That's much more meaningful than the interview. The interview gives you a sense of personality and style and whether this person is somebody you think you could work with; but frankly, we have done seven interviews and as I point out to people, every one of the candidates surprisingly has answered the question, "Do you want to become a champion?" They all answer affirmatively. When they are asked if they hate losing, they all say, "Yeah, I can't sleep after I lose. I'm a winner." When you ask about their wife – if they are married – they all say their wife is a great woman and fully supports them and she loves baseball. The candidates have all said they have a real passion for the game and for the Astros.

My point is, you have to do a lot of work behind the scenes and I think there are a lot of people that don't fully understand the process.

You asked about 3 dozen applications ... we have had some direct applications obviously; and we have had a lot of calls. Drayton McLane, our owner, and I each got calls from other people – agents, newspaper men, friends – other people in the game, recommending candidates. Frankly, when you start this process, I put together a list from my own memory which may not

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be entirely complete, but by my count there is something like 60 living ex-GM's. Now, that includes people that are retired like Buzzi (Bavasi), Joe Brown and Lee MacPhail, that I presume are not really interested in coming back (laughter).

There are a lot of those 60 ex-GM's that are working for clubs today as Assistant GM's or are Scouting Special Assistants or Super Scouts; so you obviously have to take a look at that. Then you look at each organization; and each organization frankly should have two, three, or four people – Scouting Directors, Farm Director, Player Personnel Directors, Assistant GM's – that all obviously have some experience and something to offer, and you sift that. You could well put together a list of 150 people to interview – and obviously you cannot do that. So, you take into consideration the compatibility, how you think they will fit, what you know about them ... and I had somebody here [in Houston] the other day who said it seems like they (the Astros) are focusing on guys who only have close ties to Tal Smith. I pointed out that I have been in the game for 50 years and with my consulting practice, I have worked with 26 of the 30 clubs, so it just stands to reason that I am acquainted with many of these people either professionally or personally. Frankly, I think the people you work with and you know are the people that you are best suited to measure. I use the analogy that it's like elevating an assistant coach to a head coaching position in basketball or football... you're not sure what you are going to get. Some of them may be too soft and not take hold of the situation. In other cases, they may get carried away too much or, on the other end, get carried away, from the standpoint of ego and arrogance.

I think the same thing is a factor here. Obviously, there are a lot of very capable people that deserve consideration from what might be considered a number 2 position in an organization to a number 1 position, but that really requires a very careful examination to see how they are going to handle that. When I talk to newspaper men, I use the analogy that not everybody who is a good columnist or a good sports writer is qualified to become a good managing editor.

Bizball: As of this morning, you've interviewed seven candidates for the GM position (editors they
note: are Logan White, assistant general manager and director of amateur scouting for the Los Angeles Dodgers, Kansas City Royals special assistant Muzzy Jackson, former Montreal Expos and Baltimore Orioles GM Jim Beattie, former Philadelphia Phillies GM Ed Wade, St. Louis Cardinals GM John Mozeliak, Cleveland Indians director of player personnel Steve Lubratic and Phillies assistant GM Ruben Amaro Jr.). Will the list of interviewees expand, or is the organization working to get the seven down to a set of final candidates?

Smith: We have ongoing interviews – we are still in the 1st round. We have internal candidates

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to consider. Our two assistants, Dave Godfried and Ricky Bennet – both of whom are very well qualified ... and it's been widely reported that Bob Watson, former player and former GM for the Astros, who still makes his home here in Houston and is the current vice president for Major League Baseball, has asked to be considered. We are interviewing Bob Watson and David Gotfried today; Rick Bennet, our assistant GM of player development, will be interviewed on Thursday along with at least one external candidate. Then, the panel – Drayton McLane, consultant Bob McLaren and I – will sit down to review where we are. We have extensive conversations every day to see if we should add other candidates to the 1st round of interviews or not, and that's yet to be determined. I expect there may be a couple of additions, yet again, because of the urging of people and the fact that you want to be thorough and complete – you don't want to miss something. As I said, we could probably interview three people from each organization plus all of the ex-GM's. It's an exhaustive process and most of the work has to be done behind the scenes – not in the interview. The interview is certainly part of it, but it's not the major work.

Bizball: Have you considered Dave Littlefield?

Smith: No. Obviously that is a name that just became available, but we really haven't even discussed Dave.

Bizball: Without getting into specifics, what is the ideal profile you and Mr. McLane are looking for in a general manager? Where, if at all, does an understanding or use of statistical analysis fit into that profile?

Smith: I guess it's like asking about a player ... you would like a 5 Tool player. You want a 5 Tool general manager, as well. Obviously that is a question we have asked because Drayton and I both think that sabermetrics and statistical analysis is a tool – it is a resource that should be employed in conjunction with the normal scouting activities. I think you use everything at your disposal. I think we want somebody that is comfortable and conversant with that; they don't have to do the crunching of the numbers or understand all of the formulas and what-not, but I think they have to be receptive to that. Ideally you would like somebody that has a good sense from an evaluation standpoint; but again, I have to make the distinction that a good scout and the GM position is not the same thing. A GM gets to evaluate his own talent and the rest of the job is managing and directing, and I think some people confuse that and look at people who are successful talent evaluators and believe that is the key ingredient. It is a part that you would like to have in a GM, but not all great talent evaluators are going to become competent GMs.

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Bizball: Is it critical to fill the GM position before finding a replacement for Phil Garner? And, do you have any type of projected target date to have the process of filling the vacancies complete?

Smith: Drayton had initially indicated that he would like to have it filled by the end of the season. Today is the 11th, so that gives us almost 3 weeks, and we are making progress. Whether we meet that timetable or not, I think we have to a chance to obviously, but we want to pick the right person and in some cases it may depend on the availability of the candidate. He may not be readily available. You might make the selection, but if you are asking me from a personal standpoint, I would say the sooner the better.

Bizball: To follow-up, would you like the GM in position to help in the selection of the dugout manager?

Smith: That's something we have covered in the interviews. As you know, Cecil Cooper is our interim Manager and he has been our bench coach for three years. We think he is very well qualified and I think anybody coming in has to operate under the assumption that he is certainly the leading candidate for the Manager position ... and for that not to happen, it would have to be a serious set of circumstances that would cause us to look in another direction.

Bizball: Lastly, rumors are rumors; where they start is often unknown. But, we might be able to put some of them to rest... There has been talk about Jeff Bagwell being considered for the GM position, and murmurs that Craig Biggio might have an interest in the manager's position. Is there any truth to either of these rumors?

Smith: We have the highest regard for both Jeff and Craig, but that has never been discussed.

Interview conducted by Maury Brown on 9/11/2007

Interview transcribed by Mike Elsen, a staff member of the Business of Sports Network

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