

Packers' Russ Ball a man of immense influence and intrigue

The widely respected lead contract negotiator and salary-cap guru has extensive behind-the-scenes responsibilities and a body of work that makes him a compelling candidate as a team president or general manager.

By Michael Cohen, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

On a frigid December afternoon at Soldier Field, the chief power brokers for the Green Bay Packers leapt from their chairs to celebrate a touchdown.

The three of them — President Mark Murphy, general manager Ted Thompson and vice president of football administration/player finance Russ Ball — traded high fives as the Packers raced to a 17-point lead over the Chicago Bears. When the celebration was finished, Ball gave his colleagues individual pats on the back.

Fans of the Packers will recognize Murphy and Thompson as the foremost executives for a franchise valued at almost \$2 billion last year. The former represents the business face of a brand with global outreach. The latter serves as the football architect for a perennial Super Bowl contender.

But fans are much less likely to recognize Ball, the third oligarch and a man the Packers intentionally shroud whenever possible.

“I don’t think they really let Russ talk to anyone,” a league source said.

Ball, 57, is among the most intriguing figures in the Packers organization simply because the general public knows nothing about a man with immense influence. He is lauded as the team’s lead contract negotiator and salary-cap guru, but his responsibilities are said to extend much further. His talents are viewed as indispensable.

He has been described by Murphy as the “unsung hero of our Super Bowl” and by coach Mike McCarthy as “the best I’ve ever been around.” He is devoutly loyal to the organization and the epitome of a company man. He will not discuss business dealings with his family. He cuts off contact with his brother during the draft and free agency each year. (Randy Ball, a former collegiate head coach, is a pro scouting assistant for the Kansas City Chiefs.)

Around the league, Ball’s peers view him as a legitimate candidate for general manager jobs and wonder why he doesn’t have one already. In Green Bay, Ball is the dark horse to take over whenever the 64-year-old Thompson retires.

“He likes what he does now,” said Russ’ oldest brother, Rick Ball, “but he would love the opportunity to be a general manager.”

Obscurity lingers because Ball has been barred from speaking to the media since his arrival from New Orleans in 2008. The Packers declined multiple requests to interview Ball for this article, citing the longstanding team policy. Even Thompson would not discuss the specifics of Ball’s responsibilities during an interview with the Journal Sentinel last week. (The media guide says his daily supervision includes the following departments: athletic training, equipment, video, corporate travel, player development, family programs and public relations.)

Instead, the story of Russ Ball is told through interviews with those around him, and more than 30 agents, team executives, current and former coaches, family members, owners and college teammates offered a window into a man whose talents extend far beyond the nebulous titles he has held.

Taken together, their insights trace his silent rise from a Missouri weight room to the inner circle of the Packers’ front office.

On Aug. 28, 1959, a car salesman named Craig and a stay-at-home mom named Roberta welcomed their third and final child to the family, a redheaded baby called Russell. He was eight years younger than his middle brother, Randy, and 10 years younger than his oldest brother, Rick.

The family lived in Columbia, Mo., home to the state’s flagship university. Craig worked as an auto wholesaler buying cars with minor defects from dealers around the city. He fixed the problems and sold the cars at auction for a profit. Rick eventually followed him into the family business; Russ followed Randy into coaching.

Roberta managed the house and monitored the youth sports careers of her three boys. She was a soothing presence for Russ and a disciplinarian for Randy. Everyone in Columbia knew her as Bobbi.

“We were blessed to have two great parents,” Randy said. “A lot of kids don’t have two parents nowadays, and both our parents were very active in our lives and showed us a lot of love and showed us the right way to do things.”

As the boys fell in love with sports, every game became a family outing. It began with Russ watching his older brothers in football at David H. Hickman High School. It continued with long drives across the state to support Randy, who played guard at Northeast Missouri State (now Truman State). In between, the whole family cheered for the Missouri Tigers, led by future Packers coach Dan Devine.

The older brothers returned the favor by watching Russ play just about everything: football, baseball and basketball. Despite the age difference, Rick and Randy hardly ever missed a game. And they never missed a chance to pick apart Russ' performance the way siblings do.

“This wasn't anything our parents really endorsed or really knew about,” Rick Ball said. “We were thinking to ourselves, 'This is a little embarrassing, we can do better than this.' So we'd take him (in the backyard) and work him over. I remember him sweating so hard, but he stayed with it. He did just what we asked him to do.”

Many of those traits were derived from their father, who served as a role model for all three boys. Craig had become a terrific conversationalist through his career in sales. He could talk to anyone at any time and always made sure to listen. He did his best to impart those skills in his sons.

Just as admirable was his quiet sense of determination, the extent of which remained veiled until the boys matured. Craig steered the family through monetary hardships in the early 1960s, according to Rick, but the struggles never were apparent because he always made things work.

“He gave everything to the family, he really did,” Rick said.

The notion that family supersedes everything came from their parents, both of whom are deceased. But in the 1990s Craig and Bobbi convinced their sons to join them in buying a house on Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri. The cost was split four ways, and every year their families convened for swimming, boating and fishing. The parents viewed the house as a way of keeping everyone close.

“They just drilled to us there's nothing more important than family,” Rick said. “If things get bad or rough, the people you can count on will always be your family.”

(An aside: Rick recalls a memorable evening in which Russ took the family's 26-foot pontoon boat out on the lake. The boat ran out of gas during the return trip. Russ dove in and pulled it to shore.)

The old grandstand at Vernon Kennedy Field held 5,800 people when Russ Ball arrived at Central Missouri in 1977. The Mules hadn't enjoyed a winning season in seven years, but teammates remembered the stadium as being mostly full — at least until the second half.

“People would come to watch the band,” said Jim Giokaris, an outside linebacker. Most of them left shortly thereafter.

Ball caught the attention of teammates and coach Walt Hicklin during his first training camp. Though he was an undersized offensive lineman, Ball played with admirable determination. He was known for being the first player on the practice field each day.

“In fact, normally he was early,” Hicklin said. “And he just had a great attitude with the kids, with his fellow teammates. A real team man all the way.”

Ball was named the starting center as a true freshman and held his post for the next four years. The Mules ran an I-formation offense under Hicklin, and offensive linemen pulled to lead the way. Ball had quick feet and a low center of gravity. He looped around the line and flashed a hint of speed with tailbacks in tow.

Al Molde took over as head coach for Ball’s senior season in 1980. Molde was a stickler for conditioning, so every Sunday his players ran the length of the field 28 times. Ball was known to offer encouragement in the brutal Missouri heat.

“That’s pretty tough after you hung out all night Saturday drinking beer,” nose guard Perry Foster said with a laugh. “I ran down the field several times puking and stuff.”

Teammates respected Ball for his maturity on and off the field. He was the “demo-type athlete to do things perfectly and do things right,” according to defensive tackle Elmer Thornton, and led the Mules out of the locker room before kickoff. He often gave a speech in the pre-game huddle.

“He was a heck of a guy, man,” Foster said. “Just a good, down-home, All-American guy. Everybody loved Russ Ball.”

“He was also very loyal,” Giokaris said. “I mean, if you were his friend you were his friend. He’d do anything for you.”

Off the field Ball was known as the consummate student-athlete. He brought his schoolwork on road trips so he could study before the games. He helped his teammates with assignments during mandated study hours.

Thornton described him as “a king of all boy scouts.” Everyone expected him to be successful.

“You know those stories that say nice guys finish last?” free safety Phil Burbridge said. “Well, that’s not a true story when it comes to Russ Ball. A nice guy finished first.”

Ball graduated from Central Missouri in 1981 and immediately pursued strength and conditioning, the latest fad in sports. He spent eight years as the head strength coach at Missouri while earning a master’s degree in human performance. By 1989, he’d latched on with the Kansas City Chiefs and first-year coach Marty Schottenheimer.

As the assistant strength and conditioning coach, Ball worked alongside Dave Redding, better known as Redman. They were part of a staff that included future head coaches Bruce Arians, Bill Cowher and Tony Dungy. In the next three years, Herm Edwards and Mike McCarthy would arrive as well.

Redding and Ball brought opposite personalities to the weight room. In Redding the Chiefs had their bellowing taskmaster whose ferocity matched the sport itself. In Ball they uncovered a keen thinker and tireless worker whose skills were universal.

As a balancing act, it worked.

“Redman was the energy bunny, and Russ was the calming force,” said Edwards, who coached defensive backs. “Redman knew how to get them to the mountain, but you needed a plan to get them to the (top). Russ would always plan out the strategy.”

Fellow coaches said it was obvious Ball’s ambition stretched beyond the strength and conditioning program. His role expanded as Schottenheimer recognized new applications for his talents.

Schottenheimer trusted Ball with everything from player attitude problems to disputes between assistant coaches, and every successful task led to three or four more. Ball became known as a fixer who never turned down a job. His jack-of-all-trades reputation still applies today.

“That boy had his hands in more pies than anybody I’ve ever seen,” offensive line coach Alex Gibbs said. “... It didn’t matter to him what it was, how bad it was, what he had to do. He was going to do it and he would do it better than everybody else.

“Guys like Russ save head coaches. I mean, they just save them.”

Ball started his days early and ended his nights late. He arrived at the facility long before practice began to interact with players and learn more about their lives. He spent his evenings holed up watching film. Sometimes he watched alone; sometimes he shadowed scouts or assistant coaches to see how their jobs were done.

“He was always pushing that envelope of trying to learn more to try and develop players,” Edwards said. “... He gets a lot of respect from the players and agents alone because of what he’s done to get there. He wasn’t given the job (in Green Bay). He actually had to work for it. He ain’t part of the family that owns the team and guess what, 'Wanna learn how to be a scout? OK, you can go over there and learn.' No, no, no, no, no. He had to earn it. He was on the back end of it. He was in the weight room.”

Ball stayed in the weight room for eight years before crossing over to the front office in 1997, escaping before his body broke down. He spent two seasons as Schottenheimer’s administrative assistant to lay the groundwork for the remainder of his career: two years

as a senior football administrator for the Minnesota Vikings; one year in Washington as director of football administration; six years and multiple job titles with the New Orleans Saints; and the last nine years with the Packers.

The constants of Ball's administrative path have been salary-cap management and contract negotiations, which are among his chief responsibilities in Green Bay. He honed those skills in Minnesota under-then director of football administration Rob Brezezinski. He was described by former Vikings President Gary Woods as having an IQ "far above that of a strength coach."

"He's a mathematician," Woods said, "and one has to be a mathematician to deal with salary cap. Many teams have PhDs dealing with salary-cap issues."

In 2002, Ball interviewed with New Orleans on the strength of a recommendation from McCarthy, who had become the offensive coordinator of the Saints. And just as he did everywhere else, Ball made a sterling first impression on owner Tom Benson, general manager Mickey Loomis and head coach Jim Haslett.

The Saints, who declined all interview requests for this story, hired Ball as senior football administrator.

"You fall in love with everything that he did," said Haslett, now the linebackers coach for the Cincinnati Bengals. "You see the way he works, the way he interacts with people, the way he interacts with players and agents and everybody else in the building. He's a tireless worker; he's a great family man; he's a great person to deal with."

Ball's experience with different facets of an organization allowed for a complete understanding of the Saints' franchise, according to Doug Marrone, who took over as offensive coordinator in 2006 and is now the head coach in Jacksonville. Ball knew the game well enough to hold his own in football discussions with players and coaches. He also flashed the requisite business savvy to run the financial arm of a professional team.

During lighter moments, Ball could converse about anything from league issues to the current political landscape. The people skills gleaned from his father could be applied in every setting, and Marrone described him as someone you'd gravitate toward at a picnic.

"I just know that if I walked into his room and I was down a little bit," Marrone said, "he was someone that when you walked out of his office you felt better, you were ready to go."

"I really thought he did an outstanding job and I know that we didn't want to lose him."

The sentiment stretched from the Superdome across a parking lot to the offices of the New Orleans VooDoo, an Arena Football League team run by Benson. Ball worked for the VooDoo in a capacity similar to his job with the Saints — managing the salary cap and negotiating contracts.

During four years of double duty, Ball developed a friendship with VooDoo coach Mike Neu, now the head coach at Ball State. Ball was in the room when Neu interviewed in 2004, and their relationship blossomed into daily conference calls and weekly in-person meetings.

Neu was crushed when Ball accepted a job with the Packers.

“It was like losing a brother,” Neu said. “... I was really torn up the day he came to meet me in the VooDoo building and let me know. I mean, I took it hard. I certainly wrote him a letter to thank him and tell him how much I appreciated our time together.”

After nine years in Green Bay and two decades of prior experience, Ball sits at an interesting point in his career. He’s proved himself at every job he’s ever had, and the only positions above him are general manager and team president — Thompson and Murphy.

The idea of Ball as a general manager is one that surfaced repeatedly during the reporting of this story. A number of former coaches believed he has earned the opportunity, and roughly 80% of the agents interviewed by the Journal Sentinel agreed.

Haslett: “I’m surprised that he’s not a general manager in the NFL. ... There’s nothing that he hasn’t done to qualify him to be a successful general manager. He’s done it all.”

Edwards: “No doubt. I hope that’s in his future because he is a credible man.”

Neu: “Without question because he values relationships. ... Russ is one of those guys that can be the glue that brings all those different departments together and do a great job out of it.”

Kurt Schottenheimer, former Chiefs’ assistant: “It’s kind of been a little surprise to me that his name hasn’t come up. ... I don’t know why people wouldn’t take advantage.”

The reality is that Ball must fight the stigma attached to executives whose backgrounds are primarily financial: Without experience in a personnel department, people question his ability to make football decisions.

“We’ve talked about it,” Ball’s oldest brother Rick said. “The only thing that’s ever knocked him and he’s been underestimated on is his ability to recognize talent. He’s even concentrated more on talent the last probably five or six years, just so that he does know that (it) isn’t a hindrance to him.”

Ball’s heightened emphasis on talent evaluation has included more time observing practice, more attention to the on-field portion of the NFL scouting combine and more

direct contact with players, his brother said, “even though that’s not his job.” He often works until 9 or 10 p.m. regardless of the time of year.

Those efforts align with Thompson’s yearly assertion that Ball is involved in personnel and draft meetings to absorb as much information as he can. But it’s clear Ball is proactively seeking more knowledge on his own, just as he has done throughout his career.

“He doesn’t want to have that as a reason for not being able to assume the position,” Rick Ball said.

Until a general manager opportunity arises — if it ever does — Ball will plug away in anonymity behind the public personas of Murphy and Thompson, whose faces are synonymous with the organization.

But Ball should not be understated, even if we never hear his voice.