

Brookfield banker has NFL side job

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(Photo: Michael Sears/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Dave Schuelke has two jobs.

One of them, his primary job as president and chief executive of Spring Bank in Brookfield, is more important in the grand scheme. Financial services are crucial to the economy.

But it's his other job — that one that takes him to Lambeau Field for each Green Bay Packers home game — that catches people's attention.

Simply put, Schuelke is the person who controls the radio receiver in quarterback Aaron Rodgers's helmet that lets Coach Mike McCarthy tell him which play to run.

Actually, Schuelke turns on and off not only the sound device in Rodgers' helmet, but also in the opposition quarterback's helmet and the helmet of the one defensive player on each team who also is allowed to hear a coach's orders remotely from the sideline or booth before a play.

He is what the National Football League calls the “coach-to-player” official or operator. He’s been doing the job for more than 20 years.

“I even hate to call it a job, but you get paid for it,” Schuelke said. “You take pride in doing it well. It’s all part of this big production — the NFL. You want to do it well.”

On a day-to-day basis, running a community bank is Schuelke’s top priority and passion. Spring Bank is the last totally new bank to be opened in Wisconsin, or, as Schuelke says, it’s the state’s youngest bank. It was started by Schuelke and investors in 2008, just before the Great Recession erupted in earnest and starting sucking the life out of the U.S. economy.

However, even though the timing at first glance would appear very unfortunate, a brand new bank had one big advantage its competitors didn’t have — it had no bad loans on its books. So instead of looking inward to try to clean up existing messes, as other banks were forced to do, Spring Bank was able to look outward and seek to carefully grow.

And as bigger banks rushed to comply with regulatory mandates and needed to shed small but good loan accounts, Spring Bank was there to scoop them up. It has grown steadily in today’s more-normal market as well.

Spring Bank’s assets — a bank’s assets are made up mostly of its loan portfolio — have more than tripled from about \$70 million in 2009 to almost \$236 million today. The bank’s annual profit has increased each of the last five years, coming in at \$2.4 million in 2015.

At 60, Schuelke is a veteran Wisconsin banker who has worked at some of the largest financial institutions, such as the old First Wisconsin and Bank One (now Chase). And it was a friendship in the industry that resulted in his side job with the NFL.

Back in the early 1990s, just about the time the legend of Brett Favre was about to be born, Schuelke was asked by a fellow banker, Jerry Mortell, if he was interested in helping with some sideline work during a Packers preseason game at old Milwaukee County Stadium. The Mortell family has been the official game clock operator at Packers games for years.

Schuelke’s first NFL-related job was done on a volunteer basis, mostly just for the experience of being part of the action on the sidelines.

“I think the first time I did it, I was essentially holding a cord for somebody. The other responsibility I had — this is when they still fired off a starter’s pistol — was carry the gun,” he said.

In the last couple of minutes of a quarter he would follow the line judge up and down the sideline and would hand him the pistol shortly before time expired.

“Boom. And he hands it back to me, and I put it in my pocket,” Schuelke said.

But about 24 years ago, the NFL decided the game needed more offense and less stoppage — fewer timeouts resulting from coaches not being able to get play calls to the quarterback fast enough.

“So they created this system where the coach could talk to the quarterback,” he said.

The NFL asked the Mortells whether they knew anyone who could handle the control button for the helmet radio for Packers games and could pass a background check. Jerry Mortell, who now works for Nicolet National Bank in Green Bay, asked Schuelke to consider it. He said he thought about it for a couple of days because of the time commitment. He opted in.

Before long, Schuelke was sitting in a booth along with the game clock timekeeper and play clock operator at Lambeau Field, holding a device with a button that lets him begin and abruptly end a coach’s ability to remotely instruct his quarterback which play to run next.

After the previous play has been whistled as over, the play clock starts at either 40 seconds or 25 seconds (it starts at 25 seconds following a penalty, timeout or other official clock stoppage). Schuelke opens up the radio line between the coach and quarterback as soon as the play clock starts. Then he watches both the play clock and the snapper. The communication is one way — from the coach to the player.

“When there is 15 seconds left on the clock, you cut them off,” Schuelke said. “You cut off at the snap of the ball, or with 15 seconds on the play clock, whichever occurs first.”

The same button controls — at the same time — the ability of a coach on the opposing team to tell the one defender whose helmet is equipped with a battery pack and receiver which defensive formation to use.

“The most common question I’ve been asked over the 20-some years is, ‘Do you get to listen to what they’re saying?’” Schuelke said. “And I say, ‘That would be too much fun, and the answer is no.’”

Of course, Schuelke has to pay intense attention to what’s happening on the field and the seconds on the play clock.

“It’s a fun thing, but you do watch the game with focus,” he said. “You have to watch the game to do the job, but you’re not high-fiving. You enjoy a good play, but you’re moving on. You are not chattering about it.”

Schuelke also is Mortell’s backup on the game clock. The NFL has him run the clock for one preseason and one regular season game a year, just to make sure he’s ready.

Each stadium has its own time-keeping teams, and on-field crew members meet with them before every game.

When the helmet communication first was introduced more than two decades ago, some veteran quarterbacks accustomed to calling their plays didn't like it, Schuelke said, with one allegedly claiming it didn't work just so he could still make the calls.

Today, it's the norm, and teams are very efficient in how they use time between plays, said Schuelke, himself a former quarterback at Brookfield Central High School.

Schuelke acknowledged the job has affected how he watches games when he's not working.

"It doesn't interfere with me watching a Badger game or another pro game," he said. "But I am in tune with, 'Oh, he should start the clock now.'"