

Alisa Bleske
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When I enrolled in the Sport Management Program at the University of San Francisco, I wasn't looking for a completely new skill set, I was looking for a translation. I needed to understand how the operations work that I had already built a career around would function inside sports: what it would be called, who would report to whom, and what the job would look and feel like once it was no longer centered around a bar or bat mitzvah.

For the first two weeks of the program, I assumed I wanted to build a career in events and activations because it seemed like the closest translation of what I already did. It didn't take long to realize that wasn't the right fit. The events and activations side of sports leans heavily into partnerships and marketing, and neither of those pulled at me the way I expected they would. What I found, once I started paying attention, was something I had loved for years without knowing what to call it: football operations in its fullest sense. The before, during, and after of a major event—the planning no one sees, the execution that must look effortless, and the breakdown and debrief that tell you what to improve the next time.

I love football for the same reason I love managing events: not just the game itself, but the coaching, leadership, and teamwork that surround it. So much of what makes a team successful never touches the field. It happens through travel logistics, credentialing, scheduling, and hundreds of decisions that allow players to perform at their best. I want to be part of that team—not watching from a distance but helping make everything else possible.

There is no single blueprint for football operations. Masteralexis explains that while organizational structures differ across sport organizations, their effectiveness depends on how responsibilities align with the organization's mission (Masteralexis, 2024, p. 31). My interviews

demonstrated exactly that principle. Tommy Mazzariello, Manager of Stadium Operations, described the Rams' separate stadium operations and team travel departments, Brian Hampton, Assistant General Manager of the 49ers explained their smaller logistics structure, and Ricky Martinez, Coordinator of Football Communications, outlined the Chargers' unified football operations model. Although each organization structured the work differently, every role existed for the same purpose: removing distractions so the team could perform at their best.

Tommy helped me appreciate how organizational structure is shaped by a team's environment. I was surprised to learn that the Rams' stadium operations department consists of only three primary full-time staff members supported by a handful of seasonal interns. Despite its size, that team is responsible for coordinating all Rams home games and events at SoFi Stadium. Their structure also reflects the unique reality of sharing a stadium with the Chargers. Unlike the 49ers, who are the primary football tenant at Levi's Stadium and oversee their own football logistics, the Rams operate within a shared facility where responsibilities must be coordinated between two NFL organizations, Sofi Stadium staff, and Legends Global, the hospitality team. That conversation reinforced that football operations is not one standardized model—it evolves to meet the needs of each organization.

My interviews also demonstrated that football operations can look very different depending on the level of competition. Carter Henderson, Athletic Director at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, explained that supporting a collegiate football program means caring for the whole student-athlete. Operations extends beyond practice and travel to include academics, compliance, housing, nutrition, and personal development. Players are also students and young adults who need the care and support to further their education and sport. Professional football, by

comparison, functions much more like a business, where athletes are employees and departments are generally more specialized.

Across all my interviews, it was important for me to get a sense of each person's work-life balance in their current positions. The differences in their answers were just as meaningful as the similarities. Carter Henderson challenged my assumption that changing industries later in life was a disadvantage. Rather than thinking about work-life balance, he described work-life integration—bringing his family to games and trips so that work became something they experienced together instead of something that pulled him away. He also viewed this stage of *my* life as an advantage because I could fully commit to the demands of the role. Nate Kasmer, Assistant Director of Football Operations at UCLA offered a different perspective. Unlike many NFL football operations positions, where responsibilities are highly specialized, Nate took a role that spans football analytics, equipment management, and day-to-day football operations. In his position, he contributes wherever the program needs support, illustrating how collegiate football operations professionals often wear multiple hats. He also described saying yes to every opportunity, sacrificing vacations and much of his personal life because he believed giving everything to the job is the only way to succeed. That philosophy contrasted with what Tanner Schultheis, Travel and Logistics Coordinator, described at the Los Angeles Rams, where employees are given dedicated professional development time during the day (through workouts and other breaks). The organization recognizes that investing in its people is essential to long-term success. While I respect Nate's level of commitment, it also struck me as a path that could lead to burnout. In contrast, the more tenured professionals I interviewed recognized that long-term success requires sustainability.

To become successful in my role in football operations, I built a plan using Angela Duckworth's goal hierarchy. My highest-level goal is clear: to become a leader in the field of football operations. Supporting that goal are several mid-level objectives, including continuing my education, intentionally building relationships throughout the industry, gaining progressive football operations experience, strengthening my leadership abilities, and developing a professional identity rooted in service and operational excellence. Duckworth's framework reminded me that while the specific opportunities I pursue may change over time, those broader objectives remain constant (Duckworth, 2016, pp. 61-73).

When it comes to securing a position with a professional football team, Ricky Martinez's interview confirmed what I had already witnessed in my own job search. Once you are sitting in the interview, the organization has already decided you can do the job. They are testing for fit, work ethic, personality, and whether you are willing to do whatever the team needs. But the part that has stayed with me the longest is what he said about his own hiring: he knew there were roughly 15 people more qualified than he was, but his connection got him in front of the hiring manager before those 15 résumés ever reached their desk. His advice was not to network passively and wait. It was to actively work those contacts so that when something opens, the people who could hire you already know you would be a good fit. Masteralexis reinforces this idea by explaining that higher education serves as an important bridge between students and the sport industry, creating opportunities for mentorship, professional networking, and career development. Rather than viewing networking as simply exchanging contacts, I came to understand it as an intentional process of building relationships through academic programs, faculty, alumni, and industry professionals. My interviews demonstrated exactly what the literature describes: meaningful professional relationships often begin long before a job

opportunity exists, making networking one of the most important foundations for establishing a career in sport management (Masteralexis, 2024, p. 480).

Brian Hampton spent our conversation getting to know me rather than simply walking through his own career. Because he understood my background, he was able to answer my questions as they applied to me instead of offering generic advice. What came out of that was direct advice I was not expecting. He told me my experience was valuable in a way most students in this program will not have access to for years. Taking the first job that comes along wouldn't serve me, nor would it be fair to my extensive experience. Seasonal work is fine, even good, he said, but only if it is seasonal work in my specific trajectory, not just any door that happens to open first.

He wanted me to reframe how I was thinking about my own experience and start believing that I have a lot to give this industry. The next day, unbeknownst to me, he put me in touch with Tony Vroman, Executive Vice President and General Manager of Levi's Stadium, who formerly ran Sofi Stadium. Tony had contacts in the Los Angeles area, and Brian asked him for a favor. Tony then referred me to Tommy Mazzariello with the Rams and Shelby Thorpe with SoFi Stadium. I did not ask him to do any of that. His willingness to make those introductions told me he believed my experience was worth investing in. These opportunities only happen because someone is willing to recognize potential and invest in another person. My career has been based on caretaking of relationships, not just scheduling, which is the essential backbone to football operations. And breaking into the field depends as much on relationships as résumés.

Brian Hampton's willingness to invest in me also changed the way I think about leadership itself. Before these interviews, I viewed networking primarily as a career strategy. Now I see it as a leadership responsibility. Every meaningful opportunity that has come from this

program has started because someone was willing to give their time, answer a question, or make an introduction, primarily by those in leadership roles. That realization has reshaped how I want to approach my own career. Success is not just measured by the positions I hold, but by whether I become someone who opens doors for others the way these professionals have opened doors for me.

Wooden writes that many exceptional achievers are both doers and dreamers and that distinction matters to me. I am not choosing between executing well and thinking ahead; I want to be someone who does both. Wooden also states that it is the leader's responsibility to identify and correct the "rivets" holding a plan together, and to determine how much attention each one deserves (Wooden, 2005, pp. 136-147). To me, that is what separates a manager from a leader: a manager executes a plan as given, while a leader is also watching the plan itself, catching what is coming loose, and deciding what needs attention in service of the larger outcome. This distinction also requires emotional intelligence. Bradberry argues that effective leaders recognize and manage their own emotions while understanding how those emotions affect others. Football operations depends on exactly that ability. Whether managing travel disruptions, responding to unexpected challenges, or supporting coaches and players under pressure, emotional intelligence allows leaders to remain composed while helping others perform at their best. Looking back, I realized emotional intelligence was a common thread running through almost every interview, even when no one used that phrase directly. Whether discussing hiring, organizational leadership, or work-life integration, the leaders I spoke with emphasized trust, adaptability, and relationships as much as technical competence. Those conversations reinforced Bradberry's argument that leadership depends as much on understanding people as managing processes (Bradberry, 2025, pp. 177-182).

Through these traits of trust and relationship building, I want to become an influential part of football—and I want to become an influential woman in football specifically. There is something worth naming directly here: women are constantly credited with exactly the skills this part of the profession runs on—organization, event planning, travel management, and the ability to hold together a hundred moving pieces at once—and yet, when you look at who has historically held these jobs, it has overwhelmingly been men. I believe my background in operations has prepared me to make a meaningful contribution to the sport industry, and I hope my career encourages more women to see operations as a place where they belong whether it be football or another passion of theirs.

The kind of leader I want to become is not defined by a job title—even one as specific as Director of Football Operations. It is partially defined by how I invest in the people I lead, and also by my willingness to continually invest in myself and the organization I serve. Tanner Schultheis demonstrated this when the Rams started preparing for their upcoming game in Australia. They reached out to other NFL organizations that had already managed international travel. Rather than assuming he had all the answers, he and his team relied on the experience of others, recognizing that learning from outside resources ultimately benefited their own organization despite the competitive nature of the league.

I believe I am a natural teacher, and I want to use that once I am in a position senior enough to grow the people around me, not just manage them. Wooden's idea of attainable greatness is the standard I want to lead by: he expected everyone under his leadership to seek greatness, but only their own, measured against themselves rather than against anyone else on the team. That is the version of mentorship I want to practice—not pushing people to become a copy of me or each other but helping each person find what their own greatness looks like (Wooden,

2005, p. 179). I do not want to be remembered as someone who held a high-level title in football operations. I want to be remembered the way you remember an actual mentor, someone people say they learned so much from, someone who made them better at this work than they would have become on their own.

Carter Henderson said something to me that has stuck longer than almost anything else from these interviews: that this is the perfect time in my life to make this pivot, and that where I am in life is likely to make me more successful at it, not less. I want to be that example for other people someday—the leader who shows a woman considering the same kind of change, at whatever point in her life she is experiencing, that starting later does not mean starting over.

I used to think the years I spent building someone else's career, and someone else's events, meant I was starting over now. I do not think that anymore. I think I was developing the skills for this career long before I knew what to call it. I do not know exactly which organization will make the call, or how long it will take to move from a game-day tent to a director's title. What I do know is that I am no longer waiting to be told I belong here. I am building the case for it, one relationship and one honest conversation at a time, the same way I built everything else that has ever mattered to me. I want, one day, to be the phone call someone else is grateful to receive—the way Brian was for me, and the way I hope to be for someone else someday.

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Interview Contacts

Daniel Bleske – Phone Interview
Former Offensive Analyst
University of Michigan and San Diego State University
Phone: (734) 834-6972

Samantha Feig – Phone Interview
Manager, Team Operations
Los Angeles Rams
Email: sfeig@rams.nfl.com
Phone: (818) 389-8472

Brian Hampton – Phone Interview
Assistant General Manager
San Francisco 49ers
Email: brian.hampton@49ers.com
Phone: (415) 378-1213

Carter Henderson – Zoom Interview
Athletic Director
Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo
Email: csh@calpoly.edu

Nate Kasmer – Phone Interview
Assistant Director of Football Operations
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
Phone: (818) 984-5300

Ricky Martinez – Phone Interview
Coordinator, Football Communications
Los Angeles Chargers
Email: Ricky.Martinez@chargers.nfl.com
Phone: (213) 719-6600

Tommy Mazzariello – Phone Interview
Manager, Stadium Operations
Los Angeles Rams
Email: tmazzariello@rams.nfl.com
Phone: (415) 912-0185

Tanner Schultheis – Phone Interview
Travel and Logistics Coordinator
Los Angeles Rams
Email: tschultheis@rams.nfl.com
Phone: (330) 402-8889

Pending Interviews

Thomas Arguello – TBD - Rescheduled
Chief of Staff, Football
Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo
Email: tthomasa@calpoly.edu

Shelby Thorpe – August 10th
Manager, Events
SoFi Stadium
Email: shelby.thorpe@hollywoodparkca.com