

WOMEN WHO LEAD

Influential women leaders who are driving innovation and growth in the Puget Sound region

Ex-Storm CEO tackles football crisis

INNOVATIVE TRAINING PROGRAM AIMS TO REDUCE PLAYERS' HEAD INJURIES

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Shortly after Karen Bryant left her job as CEO of the Seattle Storm in 2014, she decided to get in her sand-colored Volvo XC90 and just drive.

"I literally threw a sleeping bag, a pillow, my golf clubs, three books, a cooler and I was like, 'I don't know where I'm going, but I'm just going to drive south,'" she said.

She ended up in Bend, Oregon, where she rented a bike, drank beer with strangers and bought a guitar.

It was the start of a year off that she said allowed her to catch up with friends and family and "for the first time in a long time, really own my time again."

Bryant started in women's professional basketball

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way players tackle, and coaches are the vehicles through which we can do that.”

KAREN BRYANT,
Atavus CEO

when she was 29 years old and became the first female sports executive in Seattle as general manager of the Seattle Reign at 30. She joined the SuperSonics in 1999 to help form and run the Seattle

Storm, becoming the president and CEO when it became an independent franchise in 2008.

That year off empowered and motivated her for what was next.

In July 2017, she became CEO of Seattle-based Atavus Sports, which teaches football and rugby players safer ways to tackle. Since Bryant joined the team, she has been head down building out the staff, adding four new direct reports, and expanding more directly into football.

“This opportunity came along at the perfect time for me with where I was in my career,” Bryant said. “I had a chance to reset and recharge and then just dove right back into something that just has so much opportunity.”

Founded in 2010, Atavus’ tackling system uses an online curriculum and analysis to change how tackling is taught, practiced and executed. The goal



ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

Karen Bryant is CEO of Atavus, which teaches football and rugby players safer ways to tackle.

is to teach rugby-inspired tackling that doesn’t involve players hitting each other in the head.

Over the last five years, Atavus was able to grow its revenue on the rugby side roughly 80 percent.

With the addition of football last year, the company expects revenue to grow at least 150 percent in 2018, Bryant said.

The opportunity is enormous. Roughly 700,000 coaches are working with more than 4.5 million youth and high school football players in the U.S.

“Our mission is to change the way players tackle, and coaches are the vehicles through which we can do that,” Bryant said. “They are the gatekeeper. We want to inspire them to want to change. We want to arm them with resources and tools to make that change more efficient.”

Atavus works with coaches and players at all skill levels. It has worked with the Seattle Seahawks, Michigan State Uni-

versity, the University of Washington and high schools across the country with groups like the Texas High School Coaches Association.

It was Bryant’s background at the Storm and her experience as a coach herself that attracted Atavus to her, said company co-founder Chris Prentice.

“Her unique background in sports and her global relationships have allowed her and her team to develop a business strategy that leverages the company’s products across the diverse spectrum of football and into other sports,” he said.

As a sports fan herself, Bryant said getting involved with a company that is so passionate about safety concerns, particularly around head injuries, was right up her alley.

“Football is in crisis. Let’s just be candid,” Bryant said. “If we can play a small part in being part of the solution, then we’ve done our work.”

KAREN BRYANT

Company: Atavus Sports

Title: CEO

Previous position: CEO of WNBA’s Seattle Storm

Education: B.A. in communication from University of Washington

Hometown: Edmonds

Lives in: Madrona

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ “Sometimes the work can wait. It took me a long time to accept that fact. I still work a ton and career is really important to me but there are boundaries now.”
- ▶ “As an incoming CEO, assess the business needs along with your own strengths and limitations as a guide to building a relevant and complementary team.”
- ▶ “Constantly check in on alignment with key stakeholders — board, management, customers, partners. It’s the only place from which you can truly optimize culturally and economically.”