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Welcome to The Native Voice

The Man Behind The Curtain, Sam McCracken



By Lise Balk King

The Native Voice

BEAVERTON, Ore. – Anyone who knows about Nike’s Native American initiatives knows Sam McCracken. He’s the guy who has the choice job of representing one of the most influential sports companies in the world, placing product on the top athletes, developing strategic relationships with tribes and schools, and representing the voice of Native America to the powers that be in the Nike empire.

This is a dream job for just about anybody interested in the high profile and high energy world of sports marketing. It’s impressive that Nike has a “Native American” position, and it’s impressive that Sam holds the title of Manager of Native American Business within their Multicultural Business Division. What’s most impressive, however, is that the job didn’t exist before Sam McCracken came along and worked at Nike as a receiving clerk in their distribution center at Wilsonville, Ore.

The Native American Business Division at Nike was created with Sam’s help, ideas and insistence that it was a viable business opportunity for the sports giant. Sam’s been with Nike for six years now. This is the first time he’s done an interview with a native publication about his life and work at Nike.

TNV: You are from the Ft. Peck Assiniboine Tribe in Montana. Did you actually grow up on the reservation?

SM: I did. I was raised by a single mother who remarried when I was about

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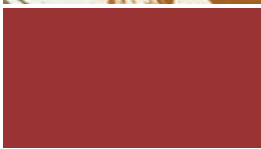
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12. We moved off the reservation so she could work as a surgical nurse in California. I'm from a farming and ranching family. We own a ranch called Thunderbird Ranch. It's seven miles west of Wolf Point, Mont. I only knew one thing growing up – how it was to be an Indian. I didn't know what it was to be non-native.

TNV: Did you participate in sports as a kid?

SM: Yes. It always was a big part of my life back there. There was a Little League there; I guess it would be more called "youth baseball." It was run by the city of Wolf Point. I played there.

TNV: What did you do before you came to Nike?

SM: I was a Teamster. I worked in California since the age of 19, doing general Teamster work. But my passion was coaching basketball, so I coached and basically worked my job around coaching.

TNV: I want to talk about your dream as it seems like such an unreachable reality for some. How did you come to work for Nike?

SM: I tend to think a lot of it is fate. Because when you're in the kind of position that I'm in, sometimes you pinch yourself to just make it feel like reality.

When I was coaching, I had a close friend named Tony Dorado, who is currently an employee here at Nike. He had moved up to Oregon to coach a high school basketball team. I contacted him in 1997 when he was a human resources manager at Nike. I told him that my job was really sporadic – Teamster work is seasonal and it was really a tough time for me at that time in my life. So I needed to make a change or do something about it.

I gave Tony my resume, and in 1997 I came up to visit him over the Memorial Day weekend. By the time I got home from that trip, Nike had called and said they were interested in interviewing me for an entry-level warehouse position in their Distribution Center. So from Memorial Day weekend to my hire date in late June of 1997, I had to pick up, find a place to live, and move my family to Beaverton, Ore.

TNV: What catapulted you from loading dock to sports marketing and "bridge building?"

SM: The main thing that helped my job evolve to what I do today is my involvement in Nike's Employee Networks. (Editor's Note: The Nike Employee Networks work to build awareness and understanding of the unique dimensions of each network, support all Nike employees with tools and resources, and support Nike communities and strategies around the world. There are six networks—Native American; Latino; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender & Friends; Disabled; Asia Pacific; and African American.) In July 1997, I was approached by the Director of United States Human Resources who was also overseeing all of the employee network leaders. He asked me about becoming the Chairman of the Native American Employee Network. I was a relatively new employee, and I really didn't know what it was or what it really meant, but we met and talked about it, and I was named chairman of the Native American Employee Network.

In mid-1999, I was approached by the Tribal Public Health Director for the Ft. Peck Tribe. She wanted to get access to Nike products to help motivate patients to come to a diabetes clinic that had been set up through a Congressional grant. Her idea was that everyone who came in to get their blood work done would get a pair of Nike shoes. I helped connect the dots for her at Nike (to get her access to Nike products). Then I thought, what if all

of Indian country wanted to do the same thing? So I wrote a business plan and presented it to the head of Nike U.S. sales. Basically, it focused on building a partnership between Nike and the 250 tribes that had received grants for diabetes education, and 188 schools that are part of the Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP). He told me to “go get after it.”

In July 2000, I became manager of Native American business for Nike, which today consists of relationships with 66 different tribes who have direct access to Nike product through their diabetes programs, and potential relationships with the OIEP schools. In addition to connecting through community outreach types of things that tie back to what I currently do, I try to keep them within the world of sport or the world of providing incentives in the prevention of diabetes which is becoming one of the number one killers of Native Americans.

TNV: You're also involved in supporting NABI – the Native American Basketball Invitational. You seem to be involved with other Native Sports events and personalities. You seem to be always looking for Native talent in the sports world, to bring into the Nike brand or have an involvement with. You seem to be looking to any place where there's a Native sporting event happening, where you feel you can make a difference. Can you talk a little about your work in these areas?

SM: I think it just comes that my position here at Nike is to be a face of the community. It needs a real person and that real person can help make connections. So I have to make some difficult decisions about what we are and are not involved with. Right now, with NABI on the forefront...we're really excited to be a part of that, and hopefully that partnership and relationship will grow in the future.

Our mission statement is to bring inspiration and innovation to each and every athlete in the world, with an asterisk next to it saying “If you have a body, you're an athlete!” That doesn't exclude anybody. We also have 10 ‘maxims’ at Nike. We do a gut check on why we're really doing something. If it fits into one of those maxims, then we go get it done. Don't second guess whether you should or shouldn't be doing it, just do it. One of our maxims is “Do the right thing.” When you bring inspiration to a community to do something over and beyond what they'd normally do, it becomes more than just doing the right thing!

TNV: Where would you like to see this all go from here?

SM: I'm one of the keynote speakers at the NABI conference, and I'm going to talk about my goals regarding heightening the awareness of Native Americans in sport. Sports Illustrated recently came out with their issue on the top 100 minorities in sport. Out of 100 people, there was just one Native American named – Calvin Sampson, the head coach of the University of Oklahoma's basketball team.

To me there's an open door there to bring recognition to the athletes in Indian Country. When I open USA Today and see the top 25 basketball players in the nation listed, and none of them are Native, with basketball being the heartbeat of our community...? No one is telling our kids they can't be one of the top 25 players, so let's figure out how to get them there. I'm here to help. Whatever that help is going to be, I want to help them. Because you know as well as I do that if we ever get a Native player into the NBA, it will change the way our kids think.

TNV: Absolutely. The fact that there is so much help out there, including yours, is huge for our kids.

SM: It's going to come, and we're going to get it.

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