

## November/December 2016 *Wingfoot* Spotlight: Falcons Execs Find Success on the Run

By Barbara Huebner

Rich McKay and Scott Jenkins have a lot in common: As president and CEO of the Atlanta Falcons, McKay is responsible for the high-stakes financial success of an NFL organization, while Jenkins is general manager of the under-construction Mercedes-Benz Stadium, a futuristic facility slated to be completed in time for the 2017 Falcons season.

They are also both regular and serious runners, with five marathons apiece on their resumes. Just as impressive, both men finished on the podium for their age groups in the 2016 Rise Up and Run 5K/Walk Like MADD presented by Northside Hospital, a partnership between the Falcons, Atlanta Track Club and the Georgia chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Jenkins won the 50-54 category in 19:56, while McKay was third in his 55-59 age group in 22:37.

Both also readily draw parallels between the roads to success in running and in business.

“It’s all about mindset,” said McKay, 57, who came to the Falcons from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a team that won Super Bowl XXXVII in 2003 under his direction. “In big projects, you have to see the end goal and keep working toward it. It’s the same in long runs. Don’t get ahead of yourself in mile 2 and start worrying about the finish; go through the process and you’ll be just fine.”

“When you break down a complete project, it’s like running,” echoed Jenkins, 53, who most recently was vice president of ballpark operations for the Seattle Mariners. “You put one foot in front of the other to get to the finish line.”

And, of course, the eyes and expectations of a football-loving region are on both of these men every day, bringing pressure akin to that of a quarterback who knows there’s a 260-pound linebacker just waiting for his shot at the blind side.



Yet McKay and Jenkins arrived at this common point in their running lives by distinctly different paths.

A star athlete at Kenosha Bradford High School, where he was a two-time Wisconsin state champion at 3200 meters, Jenkins went on to compete for the University of

Wisconsin-Madison on its 1982 and 1985 NCAA Cross Country Champion teams, finishing fifth individually in the 1982 race.

His early competitive running experiences, he says, provided a solid base for his business career—leadership skills, social skills, resilience, a desire to be the best, grace in both victory and defeat and, foremost, a good work ethic.

“You don’t get to become good at distance running without the ability to motivate yourself,” he said. “You learn some valuable lessons, how to stretch what you think is possible yet keep your feet on the ground.”

One of his college teammates, Tim Hacker, recalled that Jenkins spent his senior cross country season in 1985 rehabbing an injury. That included countless lonely hours on a stationary bike or in the pool doing harder workouts than anyone else, but Jenkins was determined to get healthy in time to help his teammates at the national championships.

“I could not have done it,” said Hacker, who would win the individual NCAA title that year and is now a cardiovascular research specialist at UW-Madison. “His senior season left no doubt in my mind he would go far in life. To have that focus, confidence, and drive, with only have a small chance of it turning out successful, is something only a few people could do.”

Jenkins came back in time for the final meet of the year, finishing 15<sup>th</sup> overall to help lead the Badgers to their second NCAA team title and becoming an All-American for the fourth time. Yet he calls the 1982 NCAA team title his most satisfying athletic achievement, when a bunch of young homegrown Wisconsin underdogs united to upset seven-time national champion University of Texas-El Paso.

“It’s really a team effort that brings things to the next level,” said Jenkins.

McKay, on the other hand, didn’t even start jogging until his sophomore year at Princeton, and then only after a football injury required rehab.

“I liked it a lot, but for me a mile was a long way and two miles was the end of the world,” recalled McKay.

After college, McKay and several other attorneys at their Tampa, Florida, law firm trained seriously each year for the Gasparilla 15K, always aiming to break 70 minutes, and in 1987 four of them decided to run the New York City Marathon. He hasn’t stopped running since—although after running one marathon each in his 20s, 30s, and 40s, McKay retired



from the distance before looking in the mirror a few years ago and deciding that the only way he would commit to losing weight was to run another 26.2-miler. He has since finished both the 2014 and 2016 LA Marathons, and plans to run Atlanta Track Club's Thanksgiving Day Half Marathon on his way to a third LA run in March.

Although McKay does most of his long-distance training on the Silver Comet Trail ("when you're hair-challenged, shade is your friend," he quipped), with MapMyRun as his training partner ("I want her to tell me where I am and I want her to say it in an angry voice if I'm not keeping my time"), his favorite route is from Piedmont Park onto the BeltLine to Krog Street and back.

"The whole loop is something Atlanta has that nobody else does," he said. "When we finish it, I think the BeltLine will be by far my favorite place to run. I love running with all the people."

Then there's what McKay calls his Uber run: From his home in Buckhead through Midtown to Piedmont Park and Krog Street, ending in a Starbucks at the CNN Center before calling Uber for a ride home. It's a long run he's never tempted to cut short.

"I want that coffee," he said.

McKay usually runs six miles four days a week, except when he's training for a marathon and gradually lengthens one of the runs to 18-22 miles. Jenkins, who no longer runs marathons, runs three or four days a week, with a weekend run of up to seven miles.

Calling his runs "the all-time stress reliever," McKay likes to go out at lunch, giving himself a break in the day when no one can reach him.

And when he returns? "His shoulders are a little more relaxed," said Sammie Burleson, his executive assistant for the past 12 years. At the same time, she said, McKay ends some runs at her desk, sweat still dripping down his face and a towel around his neck, eager to dictate emails on issues that he's been mulling over through the miles.

"I think it helps him be a better person for himself," said Burleson, who credits McKay with inspiring her to start running. "And if you're happy with yourself, you're going to be happier with others."

Clarke Peterson, owner and principal consultant of Atlanta Leadership Consulting and a member of Atlanta Track Club, said that others are likely to be happier with you, too—and that everyone may end up being more productive.

Running provides a healthy way to get focused, Peterson said; a constructive way to cope with the kind of stress inherent in high-powered jobs and valuable space to for people with complex lives to make important decisions.

“The biggest value that can come out of running for an executive would have to do with clarity and stress relief, both for themselves and for others in the organization,” said Peterson, who wasn’t at all surprised by a 2014 finding that companies led by CEOs who had run marathons had a 5-percent greater value. “Balance is very, very important in life, and is certainly important in business.”

He doesn’t have to convince McKay, who says that he recommends running to everybody as a great escape. And if the project seems too daunting and the payoff too far down the road?

“Stay at it,” he said. “I do think people tend to get discouraged, whether they get an injury or it just feels too hard to them. Stay at it and you’ll find #1 you like it, and #2 it is therapeutic and good for the body. And it’s not as hard as you think.”