

Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and allow them a chance to offer some keen insights into how they see themselves and most importantly just what makes them tick. I'm Kirt Jacobs host of Leadership Landscape where previous interviews have included former mayors, state politicians, national round sports writers, heads of major business concerns, community activists, and developers. Today our guest is Steve Sexton president of Churchill Downs. You probably know that little racetrack out the way but I'm going to read a bit of his bio to you. He's a native of Topeka, Kansas. He graduated from Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, California with a major in economics and psychology.

Throughout his extensive racing career, Sexton has managed and marketed top horse racing facilities throughout the country including Santa Anita, Golden Gate Fields, and Lone Star Park which he helped establish as a new and vibrant Southern racing center. Sexton first it became involved in racetrack management at Santa Anita in 1983 as a sales promotion manager. He first became involved in racetrack management when he held the post of sales promotion manager at Santa Anita. In 1985 Sexton was appointed assistant marketing director at Ladbroke. Got it right Canterbury Downs. He was promoted to assistant general manager and director of marketing for Ladbroke Golden Gate Fields in 1986.

In 1991 he was appointed general manager at Thistledown. May '94 he was appointed to B.P. assistant general manager at Lone Star Park and was heavily involved in the startup of the Texas racetrack becoming executive vice president and general manager there in January of 2000. In April 2001 he joined the Arlington team as exec-

utive vice president becoming president of the Arlington Heights, Illinois racetrack four short months later. While at Arlington Park, Sexton guided the track through preparations for the first Breeders Cup World Thoroughbred Championships to be hosted by an Illinois racetrack. The 2002 event generated worldwide wagering over 116 million dollars, a Breeders' Cup record. It was a sellout crowd of over 46 thousand people at Arlington and it wagered 13 1/2 million dollars on that day. This kind of success.

Obviously, led him in early 2003 to assume his new duties as president of Churchill Downs becoming just the 12th person to hold that important post in the 129 years since the track opened and conducted the first running of the Kentucky Derby in 1875. Since arriving in Louisville in 2003, Sexton has joined the boards of Greater Louisville Inc., the Kentucky Derby Museum and the gallop palooza community effort. Sexton oversees all of Churchill Downs Kentucky parimutuel operations including Trackside Louisville and off track betting, better known as an OTB facility, in training track located five miles from Churchill. You're a busy guy. He also manages the company's interest in Kentucky Off Track Betting Inc, a collection of OTBs as they call it, owned in partnership by Kentucky's thoroughbred tracks and Kentucky Downs.

It is a thoroughbred racing and simulcast facility in Franklin, Kentucky. Sexton also serves the racing industry as a director of the Thoroughbred Racing Association's University of Arizona racetrack equine program advisory board and the equibase management committee. If that isn't anything he's got going on, next on his plate is the sixth time that Churchill Downs will host the Breeders' Cup in November 2006. It was previously held here in 1988, 1991, 1994, and 2000. The 2006 Breeder's Cup which will be televised live on ESPN consists of eight championship races with purses and awards totaling 14 million dollars. Sexton and his wife Kim live in Louisville with their children Taylor and Cali. Welcome Steve. It's quite an honor to have you here just a few months before the the big race day. You just had one back in May.

Steve Sexton: Thanks. Glad to be here.

Kirt Jacobs: I appreciate it. The first question we ask all our guest is what drives you to excel in this industry?

Steve Sexton: I think really what drives me is a sense of urgency and at the same time a sense of accomplishment. I think that kind of goes back to probably my early days. And that is growing up in Kansas. if you... there's a tremendous work ethic there. And if you if you put your mind to it and you set some goals and you maintain them in your work very hard at it you're going to you're going to accomplish some things. You're going to go really as far as you want to go. And during my career I've really always had that sense and also I had the sense that if if you're not out there working as hard as you can and trying to improve yourself trying to prove your business somebody else is. And if somebody else is doing it they're probably going to get ahead of you. And so I really focused on that. Tried to focused teams that I've managed in various facilities on the fact that we have to always continue to try and improve and do better. Even to the degree where after a Derby or after a big event that we host we ask everybody to simply make notes of what they think we can do better the next year. We pull them out. We revisit them and we say OK we know we're not perfect. And we're probably never going to be perfect and we aren't. And I think that sense of urgency and accomplishment to just continue to drive in me.

Kirt Jacobs: Whom do you credit most influential in your life? Anybody that you want.

Steve Sexton: I think it have to be most important my father. My father was a high school basketball coach in Kansas for over 40 years. I had the privilege of going with him to games, to practices. Here's a guy who grew up in Kansas who coached a basketball team and those days you know the '60s or '70s washed the team's uniforms. Had practice on Saturdays and Sundays. Watched video tape scouting and didn't have the luxury of being able to travel and go watch other teams play. So he'd call, get tapes watch them in the basement. It was about as grassroots as it could be. But also learning that the more that he focused on the job that he was asked to do the better he did. And the more he spent time on it and the more he knew that he had to continue to improve the better he would do as

a coach. And the better his team would do as a result.

Kirt Jacobs: What would you consider the most defining moment of your life Steve? You have one. It can be more than one.

Steve Sexton: Yeah it's actually I'd say it's a couple. Personally I'd say that the birth of our son and then currently birth of our daughter. I mean it's just an incredible feeling. And when you in life when you come encounter a lot of business situations. Some of which you think are really important and some things that may not go your way that you may think oh gosh you know how dramatic that is. And then you have a child and you see really what's important in life. Some of those things in business while they may be you know half a million, multi-million dollar situations...

Kirt Jacobs: Right

Steve Sexton: ...and you have a child growing up you really see the things in the values that are really important life. And it makes you not take yourself too seriously. And look at your people and understand that you know their health, their families are very important. If you're going to be successful business wise but having a child really can open your eyes in that respect. And then I'd say concurrently, not as important as that but from a business perspective working for folks like Dick Duckess Swan and ??? Senior, both of whom are very successful business people. I've had different opportunities in different situations with with both of them. Where really just kind of learned that if you focus too detail oriented you maintain a business acumen but you have high integrity and you're fair to people that the end result will be good. Good not only for you but good for your company and your business and there's various situations. I think out of that but having a child is right at the top.

Kirt Jacobs: Great. That is a great answer. If there is one what is your biggest professional regret? In other words if you could arm-chair quarterback your life, it's not over by any stretch. Pardon the pun in horse track racing lore but what would that be? Could be more than one.

Steve Sexton: yeah I'd say not starting well business. A couple years after I got out of college just trying it. Just saying you know I'm going to try something I haven't done before. Now granted I had a big student loan when I got out of college so I didn't exactly have a lot of venture capital...

Kirt Jacobs: Right. Right.

Steve Sexton: ...or anything but just starting it and trying it and making it go. I'm 47 so if I'm not that you know that flexible as a as I could have been years ago. But really trying something on my own. And then I think any time over the course of somebody's career if they think back to think did I make the right decisions at the right time to take the right opportunity. and I'm not so sure you can really look back and say gee I should take another fork in the road because when you make a decision you've got to keep going forward and don't worry about what you could've done but there are a couple decisions maybe in my career that I may have done differently. I took the first two or three jobs out of college but you know it is what it is you just have to have to make do with what you have.

Kirt Jacobs: You know if it's working well. You have a pretty good bio. I mean look what you're doing now. On the flip side of that Steve, what is your biggest professional triumph? If you could name one. It can be two. You've served at a lot of tracks.

Steve Sexton: I'd say the biggest professional triumph has been the opportunity at, I had at Arlington Park where we had we were awarded the Breeders Cup World Championships. We were awarded them in December and to conduct them the following October. Which is about a nine month lead time. And at the Breeder's Cup in a venue like Churchill Downs where we have 50,000 seats as it is a simpler operation. Still a big event but a simple operation. Than it is in a smaller property like Arlington Park. Arlington has about 10,000 seats. So a new marketplace that had never had the Breeder's Cup in the venue they had 10,000 seats to take it to 45-50,000 seats was quite an undertaking to start with. And typically Breed-

er's Cup are awarded more than two years in advance. We had nine months. And so we ventured out to not only erect 45-50,000 temporary seats but also all the amenities that go with it. Don't forget wager windows, restrooms, concessions etc. I but we also established a host committee in the city of Chicago because it's first time the venue had ever been there. We wanted the business community to accepted it. We applied and received government grants for the state of Illinois to help fund the project. And the media coverage was tremendous for Chicago because the event had never been there. And we undertook an event that that is substantial in magnitude. It's not like take the Super Bowl and dropping into new stadium it's kind of the same event. I mean this was we orchestrated with the city, the village of our Arlington Heights, about two weeks worth of activities around the Breeder's Cup on top of the things I mentioned. Topped off by the fact that we ran 175 days of racing the summer before we had the Breeders Cup in 2002. And the only way we could put the seating up was after the races and so at 6 pm every night our crews would start working. They'd work until about 3 am then stop. We do morning training then we do racing then we started again the night before. And the time that it took our staff. I don't think anybody ever would have estimated how much effort we had to put in to the point where we had several that were very very few people who were very exhausted on Breeder's Cup day and certainly there after. Very proud but very exhaust.

Kirt Jacobs: Like your wedding day in a way.

Steve Sexton: It was kind of like your wedding day. So I was very proud of our people but but it was it was quite an undertaking and so it was quite an accomplishment to do that type of thing.

Kirt Jacobs: And it was a Breeder's Cup record if I recall

Steve Sexton: It was a Breeder's Cup record for wagering.

Kirt Jacobs: That answers it for you. What do you find exciting Steve about I mean, obviously I hate to use the word gambler, but I mean you know as a.. you know if you're going, ou know there's

the social aspect, the betting hopefully are going to win but there's also the camaraderie. But for you on the inside of running a race-track how does that excite you?

Steve Sexton: Really really two things. One results were I'm in a position and was as well as a lot of our team members one of them going to position where I can see results. So you can start something from scratch. You can create it. Develop it. Implement it and see what happens. You know sometimes good sometimes bad. You can you can in a Breeder's Cup. OK you can you can start the Breeder's Cup go through it active and people vote with their feet how many people showed up. How much did they wager. Those are your tangible results. Versus some jobs where you're part of the process but you don't necessarily control the finish or you don't see the finish.

Kirt Jacobs: Right

Steve Sexton: Exactly how it was measured so I think the excitement we have is the challenge and the ability to see the results that we see. And then I think variety. Also in a position where I'm fortunate to have a variety everyday. Its not the same thing day in day out. My best analogy to that is when I work for Ed Barlow senior in Cleveland. tracking

Kirt Jacobs: Law developer.

Steve Sexton: Law developer, one of the largest one law developers in the country, certainly at the time owned Thistledown Race-track, one of the worst names of racetracks I think ever, in Cleveland. And he used to call every day and so I would I would you know he called say hey what's going on how you doing what about this what I used to think. Now why is this billionaire developer calling me at Thistledown Racetrack every day to talk. And I got to thinking you know what the racing business changes every day. And there are different things in the paper, in the media, happening in the backside, happening the front side. And that was entertaining and interesting for him so he would call me to talk about it. Versus in the mall business, not that things don't change but they

don't change as quickly...

Kirt Jacobs: Right

Steve Sexton: ...don't change on a daily basis. And so he would call talk about that. So the variety actually is an exciting thing for me as well and interesting.

Kirt Jacobs: What is your favorite word in the great lexicon of the English language? Do you have one? Can be two.

Steve Sexton: I'd say probably action.

Kirt Jacobs: Really

Steve Sexton: Action. I've always had an action orientation. Now that may not be you know sexy. That may not be you know very .. for people who know

Kirt Jacobs: One of those ten our word

Steve Sexton: Yeah. Exactly 10, 9.99 but action. Make things happen. I mean it's better to at least try to do things and some are going to be right, some are going to be wrong. We're going to learn while we go than do it do nothing at all. Or just sit and kind of placate things.

Kirt Jacobs: Can you define leadership in one word Steve?

Steve Sexton: I would define leadership to be..

Kirt Jacobs: Can be more than one.

Steve Sexton: I define leadership Kirt by using the word motivation or motivator. I think true leaders are those who not only have vision, have planning but just as importantly if they're not motivating and there are different styles of motivation if they're not motivating the people work for me including themselves then it's going to be hard to move the ball down the field. Going to be hard to move

the company and grow it. You're going to have to motivate not only the managers that work under you that manage other people but figures figure a way to make sure that the frontline folks don't matter what industry or company you're in are also motivated make it happen. Without that motivation you're going to a pretty stagnant company and probably not a lot of growth and so I think true leaders have that ability.

Kirt Jacobs: If if you could change one thing and this can be in your life or in general what would that be?

Steve Sexton: Sounds kind of quirky but I'd probably change either their perception of me or to some degree my personality where people would understand truly understand what you really mean when you're talking all the time. I have a I have a sense of sarcasm or cynicism sometimes mostly sarcasms whereby I make a comment and if you don't know me you may look at me and go wow you know gosh you know it was a jerk.

Kirt Jacobs: What kind of guy is that?

Steve Sexton: When I wasn't intending it that way at all. But if I've known somebody for a while they take it for what it is and they laugh. They find the humor in it and so sometimes you get situations or in a business meeting where you say something you may have to talk to somebody for an hour to just kind of assume that they know how you're thinking and they make a comment then we can look at so like what you know I don't get it you know what he talked about so I'd say it's probably something do with that.

Kirt Jacobs: Do you think there's a difference in our leaders today than in past generations. I mean just you know it's a much faster paced society. It's kind of a now. I don't know if it's even self-gratification but I just think it's just the pace do you do you see a difference then when in '83 when you took over that racetrack.

Steve Sexton: Yeah. Actually the change in the leaders who are successful I think nowadays and going forward to can be those who know how to rely on their team members and just as impor-

tantly have the right people the right places. I think in the in the former leadership days if you could call in that people were successful if they could do things themselves. Or they maybe have one or two others who could do it you could do it yourselves. Things are happening so fast nowadays and things are getting so much larger be it the conglomeration of companies together or consolidation certain industries and businesses that you've got to rely on a lot of different people. And if you don't run things are going to pass you by.

Kirt Jacobs: I want to see how this goes over. If you were granted two weeks right today. No obligation. No commitments. Kind of like two week min vacation from life would you what would you do? Just you know no Blackberry, no cell phone, no no e-mail. Have you ever thought about because I lead into that because of and I thought of this question because of the fast paced nature that we have now and sometimes we catch ourselves chasing our tail much more so than we did before the Internet, cell phones and e-mail. So I offer that if you'd like to answer.

Steve Sexton: Yeah I would either. I do that do either two things I would go to a probably a warm international climate and start up a business that had not been there.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Steve Sexton: I'd probably try and find where that would be that maybe an island of who or what have you but I try to start a business and been there. And probably equal with that I would go to a jurisdiction it may not be international maybe domestic and figure a way that I can help people that I haven't helped them before. To refer to one of your earlier questions.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Steve Sexton: I'd say what would you do do what would you change if you could? I would in that context try and make the world a more positive place. You know when we when you look at media reports nightly it's negative negative negative. People...

Kirt Jacobs: The first ten minutes is can be pretty brutal.

Steve Sexton: Yeah it's in the workplace. The easiest thing to do is. Criticized people being negative or why is that the way we could do better but this place isn't a good. The more difficult thing is to be positive, rewarding, reaffirming, complementing and I'm I'm you know I'm a 3 on a 10 scale in terms of my complimentary ability. You may ask of people who work for me that's something I have to learn, to work at

Kirt Jacobs: That's not easy to admit..

Steve Sexton: Yeah but but to make the world more positive and so if I could if you said Give me two weeks. I'd either go open a business in a country where the business didn't exist. Probably warmer sometime in the winter I assume the two weeks you give us is in February

Kirt Jacobs: Hadn't thought of that part of the question.

Steve Sexton: And or equally go do something to try and help other people who are not as privileged. Who haven't had the opportunities, who haven't had the the breaks or the opportunity that I've had.

Kirt Jacobs: This is a question that you know we like to end on with all of our guests and like you said earlier you're only in your late 40s so hopefully there's a whole another half of a life to go. You have a plaque there but before I read that I don't know if you want to save that. You go for it before I read this question.

Steve Sexton: This is one of the sayings, the attributes, the phrases that we that I've really lived by

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Steve Sexton: And really kind of empowered in our people and basically says if we don't take care of our customer somebody else

will.

Kirt Jacobs: That's a great rule.

Steve Sexton: And so we have really stressed that in the operations I've been at. I would tell you I'm probably one of worst customers or it is because if the service is not what it should be or the attitude.

Kirt Jacobs: Demanding

Steve Sexton: Yeah to the person who's tending to me or my party. It doesn't mean they have to be you know do triple back flips and that type of thing but a positive attitude, a smile a look in the eye, I think you have a pretty common Midwestern characteristic.

Kirt Jacobs: sure

Steve Sexton: I would expect when people are providing a service and so we've really deployed and tried to empower that our people at Churchill particularly with a new opening 2005. And we live by this rule. If we're not doing it. Someone else is going to be doing it. In the marketplace as you mentioned before things are changing so fast that if you're not changing. you're not providing service you can easily get passed by. Combined with the fact that I think this can be a differentiator. And we never talk about where to go for business be it go out for dinner, go to the dry cleaner, go get your car repaired where the case may be if there is a place as good service that knows Kirt Jacobs name. And they know what you're likenesses maybe you're going to be probably a little bit more inclined to go do business with them. And so if we can get a leg up by having that service differentiator in the long run that should help us. Along with the other thing to try to do within our company and so I've tried to live by that.

Kirt Jacobs: Well I think it's remarkable that the modernization that's happened at Churchill Downs and if that's the rule you live by it worked. Back to our question. When the great day comes how do you want to be remembered Steve? You know if it all end-

ed today, a horse ran over you God forbid or what have you on the track. How would you like to be remembered?

Steve Sexton: Well a horse won't run over me on the track because I won't be in front of it.

Kirt Jacobs: You won't be riding one any time soon.

Steve Sexton: If it comes my way over the fence or something I'm not quick enough to move out of the way so that could happen.

Kirt Jacobs: OK OK

Steve Sexton: It may sound trivial but I'd like to be remembered as somebody who made a difference in other people's lives. And that could be not necessarily through business. You know Pat Day, I have spoke a lot about Pat Day because he's made so much of a difference in other people's lives. And he spent his life doing it. Very successful on the track. Very successful, his career has really made a difference in other people's lives. I'd like to know that I influence other people's lives in a positive way. We talked about how negative the world can be and how

Kirt Jacobs: Right

Steve Sexton: You know it's easy to be negative and report the comment that kind of stuff in a negative way but in a positive way influence people's lives. Help them develop their career. Help people who were not as privileged. Financially or or didn't have the breaks that maybe I was fortunate to have and opportunities. But people remember me that I had a positive influence on others' lives not for any one particular thing but just in general.

Kirt Jacobs: That's a great note to end on Steve. I want to thank you for being on Leadership Landscape. It's been quite an honor and maybe won something at the Breeders Cup this year or next year's Derby. If you have a recommendation for a suitable guest or any general comments or feedback. Please feel free to email me at Kirt.Jacobs@LouisvilleKY.gov. That's Kirt dot Jacobs . Untill next

time I'm Kirt Jacobs on Leadership Landscape. Thank you.

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Kirt Jacobs: Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at kirt@moxietalk.com or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at www.moxietalk.com