

Fly, Eagles, Fly!

BY DORI MOLITOR

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The row of vertical wind turbines that will soon be perched atop the perimeter of Lincoln Financial Field will be just the most visible sign that there's something different about the football team that plays there. The solar panels will be a bit unusual, too.

The team is, of course, the Philadelphia Eagles, one of the most successful organizations in the National Football League. Under the team's ownership — Christina and Jeffrey Lurie — the Eagles have made the playoffs ten times in last 15 years. Their fan base, according to *Forbes* magazine, is among the most loyal in the National Football League.

Few might have predicted such success when the Luries bought the Eagles in 1995. While Jeffrey was a football fanatic, Christina was not. Neither had any background in professional sports or an MBA. They were Hollywood producers, who met while working on a film project. He's a former assistant professor of social policy at Boston University and she's a vegetarian who practices yoga and admits to being "very drawn to the world of Buddhism."

They fell in love, but it wasn't until after they were married that Jeffrey popped the real question: Whaddaya say we buy ourselves a major league sports franchise? Christina was understanding — and intrigued. She knew that sports filled a void in her husband's life left by his father's death when Jeffrey was only nine. She figured it would be an interesting adventure, provided she could find just as much meaning in it for herself.

Did she ever. The couple first tried to buy the New Jersey Nets, and then lost out in a bid to purchase the New England Patriots. The third time was the charm, though, and the Philadelphia Eagles were theirs for a cool \$185 million — at the time it was the highest price paid for a professional sports team in history. Today, the Philadelphia Eagles are worth \$1.054 billion.

"I don't think either of us had a clue what it meant to own a team," Christina recently told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "This city is so intense about their teams, all teams — but especially, I think, football."

The couple has certainly endured some missteps and controversies (*i.e.*, Michael Vick). Almost immediately, they upset some fans by changing the team's color from kelly to midnight green. Christina had majored in theater and architecture at Yale and if she brought anything to the Eagles it was a strong sense of aesthetics.

The Philadelphia Eagles ascend to higher purpose and win both on and off the field.

In fact, both she and Jeffrey brought so much more than that: They brought a sense of higher purpose, beyond what happens on the football field itself.

From the beginning, the Luries have seen the opportunity not only to win games and build a billion-dollar sports franchise, but also to do so within the context of the community. They saw the Philadelphia Eagles as something more than just another major-league team; they saw a brand and a platform that could effect social change not only within their community, but also lead a worldwide community by setting an example. They saw themselves as stewards of the Eagles franchise, on behalf of the fans and the city of Philadelphia.

They recognized that the intensity fans felt for their team could be applied to other, higher, purposes. They also understood that combining their personal and professional philosophies — to lead by

Solar Football

The Philadelphia Eagles — whose “primary color is green” — are turning their stadium into a model of self-sufficiency.

“This is an opportunity to not be the stereotypical sports franchise that is not on the cutting edge,” says Jeffrey Lurie, the Eagles’ owner. “We’ve read a lot that excellent environmental practices are too expensive or not wise for a company. We challenged that.”

Jeffrey and his wife, Christina, actually have been challenging it with various green initiatives since 2003. Their latest drive is easily their biggest — and most visible.

The plan is to install “about 2,500 solar panels, 80 20-foot-high wind turbines and a generator that runs on natural gas and biodiesel” at Lincoln Financial Field, where the Eagles play.

What this means is that the stadium will be the first that is “capable of generating all of its electricity.”

The work will be done by Solar Blue, which “will spend more than \$30 million” to complete the installation; the Eagles will then buy the energy from Solar Blue at a fixed price.

In addition to saving money, the panels and turbines will be visible to spectators, sending a message about sustainability.

The Eagles also “use nontoxic cleaning supplies... environmentally friendly cups and dinnerware” and recycle “32 percent of their waste... The team now composts 25 tons of organic waste” and recycled “10,000 gallons of grease and used kitchen oil last year.”

[SOURCE: Ken Belson, *The New York Times*, 11/18/10]

example — was good for business. It’s impossible to separate the team’s success on the field, and the extreme loyalty of its fans, from its role in the community off the field.

I spoke with Don Smolenski, the chief operating officer for the Eagles, who put it this way: “We have this unique opportunity to be involved with something that unites so many people in so many ways — whether that’s 70,000 people in the stadium on a game day or six million fans in the marketplace who follow us.”

That’s certainly true of those wind turbines and solar panels at Lincoln Financial Field, which will send a clear message both to the fans in the stands and the millions more watching the game on television (*see sidebar*). But unlike so many other “green-marketing” initiatives, this one is not just window dressing.

The stadium will be the first in the United States that can generate all of its own electricity. That may sound purely altruistic, but it isn’t: The installation not only promises to reduce and stabilize the team’s energy costs, but it could also potentially generate revenue since the team can sell whatever energy it doesn’t consume. The Eagles have already made more money in the form of new sponsorship deals with companies that

want to be associated with its “green” image, as well.

The plan is also expected to create hundreds of jobs, directly and indirectly, in the Philadelphia area. As Don Smolenski told me: “We thought that from a business standpoint it made economic sense. But we also thought this was an opportunity to move the bar higher. We thought we could use the Philadelphia Eagles brand and our stadium to make an iconic statement that something could be done about alternative energy. And hopefully that we would trigger others to do the same, or do it even better.”

Don says he’s already received calls from other NFL teams as well as one from a large real estate investment trust in Philadelphia that is interested in bringing similar technology to office buildings. “The ripple effect wasn’t just in the field of sports,” says Don. “It was also outside the field of sports.”

As impressive as that is, it’s not as impressive as the way the Eagles have spread their wings out into the local community. In fact, its environmental initiatives began with a relatively modest program known as “Go Green,” which Christina started in 2003. This included a number of energy-saving and recycling efforts within the Eagles organization itself, as well as throughout the community at-large.

Don tells a great story about taking a phone call from a resident of South Philadelphia, asking whether it would be okay to bring recyclables to the stadium. South Philly didn't have its own recycling program and so Don thought, why not? Once word got out that residents could bring their recyclables to the stadium, Don says he was a little worried that they wouldn't be able to handle the volume. But that hasn't been a problem, and it's been rewarding to see how the team's efforts have affected fan culture in general. "When you see fans in the stadium take their recyclable bottle of water, and instead of throwing it in the trash they throw it in the recycling containers, that's huge," he says.

It's huge and it's getting bigger—but, in fact, Go Green arguably is not the best example of how the Luries lead by example. Shortly after they bought the team in 1995, they set up the Eagles Youth Partnership (EYP), to bring health and educational services to more than 50,000 low-income children in the Greater Philadelphia area.

EYP's main focus is on the connection between vision and literacy. It sends the Eagles Eye Mobile and the Eagles Book Mobile to schools and neighborhoods, bringing eye exams, eyeglasses and books to needy kids. They've given out tens of thousands of free glasses—because if you can't see, you can't read.

Each year, EYP also builds a playground. The entire Eagles organization—Christina, Jeffrey and the players included—pitch in for a full day. They not only build the playground, but also clean up the school and paint the entire school exterior in a mural designed by the children.

The program recently earned the Eagles a spot as a finalist for the Sports Team of the World Award, bestowed by a global organization known as Beyond Sport that's dedicated to promoting sports as a platform to support positive social change around the world.

The significance of this was not lost on NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who commented: "The NFL clearly understands the strength and power of sports to change the world for the better ... We are particularly pleased to note that, thanks to the Eagles, the NFL has the only US sports team shortlisted in any category."

The Eagles have another important program called Eagles Tackling Breast Cancer, a partnership with a local hospital to raise awareness and money for breast cancer research. It's also worth noting that the "wall of heroes" at the NovaCare Complex, the team's corporate headquarters and training facility, doesn't feature football greats. Instead, there are giant posters of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks and Dr. Jonas

Salk. It's a reminder that, while football players are often looked up to as heroes, heroism carries a much broader set of responsibilities in our society.

None of this would be happening if the Luries hadn't created a company culture premised on achieving higher purpose. Christina, Jeffrey and the entire Eagles organization represent an amazing manifestation of the principles of "me, we, higher purpose," a concept I introduced a year ago in the *Hub* ("The We Decade," Jan/Feb 2010). This is the ability of an organization to have a competitive advantage by understanding what matters to their consumers (me); how to apply that understanding to create collective power (we); and ultimately make a difference in our lives (higher purpose).

Me: The Eagles, more than any other team, feeds our sense of identity. We want to be part of something bigger than ourselves, and in doing that it makes our personal world more robust.

We: The natural competitive nature of sports allows us all to be winners and feel success. We all wear our team jerseys as badges. When our team wins we don't say, "The Eagles won!"... we say, "We won!"

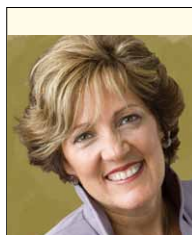
Higher Purpose: Christina says it best, when she talks about "the universal attraction of sports to make the world a better place."

Any sports team—as a brand—starts with a huge advantage in the form of a fanatical consumer base. As with any "product," the thing consumers care about most is whether it works (for the Eagles, that would be whether the team wins).

But if that's not enough for the Eagles, it's certainly not enough for brands that don't start with much in the way of consumer enthusiasm, let alone fanaticism. Being a part of the community and making a difference—that's what really matters. And it all starts with the company culture itself.

Jeffrey Lurie sums it up this way: "Social justice is an integral part of who we are and we believe it makes us a better organization."

As the Eagles fly, so should we all. ■



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