

Getting in the game: Down economy has sports industry grads warming bench longer

By [Bill Shea](#)



Sports industry jobs — already difficult to break into because of their popularity and the paucity of full-time positions — have been affected by the economic forces pressuring other fields in metro Detroit.

The economic sports news this year has been grim: **General Motors Co.** dropped much of its sports sponsorship, the **National Football League's** New York headquarters was trimmed by about 170 employees and pay was slashed, the **National Basketball Association** reduced its player payroll salary cap \$1 million to \$57.7 million per team, attendance is down for most baseball teams and the **Arena Football League** suspended operations entirely.

All of that trickles down in the industry, which means recent graduates with sports business degrees are finding job hunts especially difficult now — especially in management and marketing.

"It's soft. Nobody's hiring right now at the entry-level position," said Mike Dietz, president and director of **Dietz Trott Sports & Entertainment** in Farmington Hills, which has a staff of eight and handles marketing deals for teams. "It seems like the teams and universities are looking for someone who has experience, so they're hiring people from other places."

Dietz also spent 17 years in sales and



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TAKING THE FIELD

Jobs are hard to find for recent graduates with sports business degrees, especially in management and marketing. Here are a few tips:

- Seek jobs or internships within university athletic departments or teams rather than professional teams, which have fewer positions available.
- New jobs are being created in "beneficiary sponsorship" — charities and nonprofits that have relationships with leagues and teams.
- Sales is the best entry-level position, and a degree is helpful.
- Ticket sales positions typically have the most turnover for most sports teams.

marketing with Detroit-based **Ilitch Holdings Inc.**, which is part of the family of companies owned by Mike and Marian Ilitch, whose holdings include the **Detroit Tigers** and **Detroit Red Wings**. He also helped broker the recent deal in which Ilitch's **Little Caesars** chain became the new presenting sponsor of what had been college football's **Motor City Bowl** at Ford Field.

Sports industry job trends are usually based on anecdotal evidence because little tracking is done. The **U.S. Department of Labor's** Bureau of Labor Statistics lumps sports industry jobs with other segments and specifically tracks just athletes, coaches, umpires and related workers.

Most local universities offer degrees in sports, especially management and marketing but also in fields such as athletic training, broadcasting, media relations, sports journalism and even groundskeeping. Enrollment has held steady despite the economy and the tooth-and-nail scramble for such jobs even in the best of times.

It's typically easier to find a job within a university's athletic department and its many teams and internships than a pro sports team, which has fewer positions available. A strong sales ability is attractive in the college ranks, too.

"Athletics directors are always looking for people that can group-sell or single-sell tickets," said Delano Tucker, program coordinator for **Wayne State University's** sports administration program, whose alumni include former **Detroit Lions** quarterback Greg Landry and **Eastern Michigan University** athletic director Derrick Gragg.

The program has 90 to 100 students now, Tucker said. That number had dipped about five years ago but has since remained steady.

The news isn't all grim: Expect the job market to improve soon, said T. Bettina Cornwell, professor of marketing and sports management at the **University of Michigan**.

"The last year hit sponsorships sort of squarely in the stomach, but this year they've picked up," she said. "The market is recovering. I think there will be companies looking to hire in the sponsorship areas."

That's because there are new jobs being created in what she calls beneficiary sponsorship — the various charities and nonprofits that have relationships with leagues and teams.

Traditional sponsorships saw cutbacks because companies "toned down hospitality because it's highly visible" and "anything that smacked of excess," Cornwell said. So she said jobs related to beneficiary sponsorships have replaced at least some of the positions that were cut, from the collegiate level through pro sports' minimum wage minor leagues to the elite level.

"It's a new horizon, in a way. It was already happening, but the down economy sped it up

a bit," she said. She recommends sports business students get into volunteering and charity work that can show potential employers experience in that segment.

In the meantime, Detroit's local major league sports teams say they will hire as needed and the bottom line dictates.

"We feel the impact of what's going on in the local economy," said Tom Bennett, vice president of human resources for the past five years with Auburn Hills-based **Palace Sports & Entertainment**, which manages the **Detroit Pistons**, **Detroit Shock** and their shared arena.

The organization, which has about 300 full-time core employees and about 1,000 part-time staffers, has been making only what it calls critical hiring over the past 18 months and has had what he termed "non-substantial layoffs."

"We are being very conservative right now and make sure our staffing reflects the fortunes of the business. When we do fill jobs, we have made more and more use of looking at a position and deciding if it can be performed on a part-time basis," Bennett said.

Like other insiders, he said sales is the best entry-level position, and that a degree is helpful.

"It's a very marketing- and sales-driven organization," he said of Palace Sports. The **Detroit Lions**, who recently overhauled their coaching staff as the franchise attempts to recover from a winless season, also say hiring is very limited.

"Should an opening occur, we would certainly look to fill it should the position be beneficial to the productivity of our organization," said Bob Raymond, the team's vice president of business operations since coming from the Tigers last year.

The Lions have added some sales and customer-service staff in the past year, but not much other hiring. He noted that ticket sales have the most turnover, something common for most sports team.

"We believe we run a very efficient, productive business operation. As a result, our headcount has remained steady," Raymond said.

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