

# SWIMMING WITH A SHARK

He's tall. He's bald. He admittedly talks like a truck driver. He's a single dad. He's a self-made man. He made his bones in a mountain lodge in Plumas County, California. And he's taught his daughter to do the same at the SAP Center at San Jose. He's Bruce Ross, the Director of Suite Sales & Service for the San Jose Sharks.

By Jared Frank, Editorial Director, ALSD

"I am who I am" is one of the first things off of Bruce Ross' tongue after we press palms and offer salutations inside the entrance to the SAP Center on the corner of Autumn and Santa Clara, an intersection located on the shoulder of downtown San Jose.

I'm a younger man than Bruce, but not so young to not know that when a man makes a statement such as that one, he's either as honest as a newborn child, or he just wants to appear nakedly honest. I hate to deflate the suspense, but cutting to the end of this story, Bruce Ross is the kind of man that will tell you straight up if he chops down a cherry tree; George Washington would be proud of this one. Sure the guy has two first names (something I can identify with), but I haven't meant many others in our association whose word I trust more.

It's refreshing in a world inhabited more and more by people lusting after reality-TV attention and not the heart of the matter to meet a man like Bruce. No frills, no BS. Just results. He's a first-round pick in any dude draft. He's kind of like Jeff Lebowski, only he's employed, not an alcoholic, and doesn't have hair. OK, I guess he shares little with The Big Lebowski, but he is a dude in the best way possible.

Greeting me in the atrium of the home arena of the San Jose Sharks is a wildebeest of a man in a dapper black pinstripe suit with a pink paisley pocket square peeking out. His pressed shirt is checked as tightly as his side burns below his clean-shaven head. His visage is that of a Heisenberg stuntman, but his manner is more like Walter White before he broke bad.



The 21-year-old SAP Center has a unique design, with its 66 suites laid out like shapes of a Picasso painting. On the concourse level, there are 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 20-person suites. Moving up to the penthouse level, the configurations only get slightly more consistent with 12, 14, and 20-person options. Ross admits that due to the age of the building, it lacks the variety and scale of premium spaces, club options, and midlevel offerings found in newer facilities. But the success of its suite inventory is a feather in its cap.

**What are some of the things you can point to as reasons why your suite sales programs are so successful?**

For us, we have the right amount of suites to maintain a sold-out status year after year and renew at an 80-plus-percent clip year after year. We're holding our own in a crowded marketplace, but it's more and more competitive. We've got two brand new venues just up the street. The Niners definitely had an impact on the marketplace. I don't know if that effect is even going to be felt for another couple of years, as contracts in the other venues begin to expire. Will they choose [the 49ers], or will they find a way to carve out something for us too?

We were one of the first to blaze trail and forge the path to fractional suite ownership. We knew that cases existed with multiple partners buying suites. And tech as a whole was still a young industry that was still emerging, evolving, and learning how to manage their P&Ls.

In the early 2000's, I knew that we were going to be challenged to

fill suites after a dot-com bust, and it became evident that we had to be able to cut these suites in half and have two different contracts. There were mistakes that we needed to learn from, but it was the right thing to do, and it continues to be a key component of keeping these suites sold out in full.

**And what about service? What conversations involving customer service are you leading right now?**

I want to get to the point where we're providing more of a butler type of service with more personal attention. I never want to sacrifice service. I'm a big advocate of increasing levels



**Shark Attack:** Bruce entertains family and friends before a game earlier this season.

of service.

We all also need to be aware of the growing need for safety and security in the industry. An example here is we live in a place where the ground could start shaking at any given moment. If people need help getting out in that one situation, that's going to be worth the extra \$5,000 to \$10,000 bucks I incur over the course of a year to have a few extra bodies here when we need hands on deck.

### **What are a few of the pillars you impress upon your staff? How do you advise them; how do you lead them?**

My people work with me, not for me. I believe in a servant leadership mentality. So we all have to have the integrity and the passion to leave someone with an impression every chance we have the opportunity to do so. I think a lot of those things are common sense. If you treat others as you want to be treated, and you do right by other people, it'll come back to you. It's not more complicated than that.

It's also important to have the ability to recognize when you make a mistake and feel comfortable asking for forgiveness, rather than trying to lie about it.



If there's anyone who understands the value of an honest day's work, it's Bruce, as it was bred into him by birthright. He was born in San Jose, but his parents soon moved the family up to Plumas County, north of Lake Tahoe. After living the small-town life through his high school graduation, he moved back to the city, targeting Cabrillo College in the Aptos-Santa Cruz area, a school with a reputation for the culinary arts and its hospitality management program. His initial game plan was to earn a degree from Cabrillo while trying to play a little football, and then transfer to the University of Nevada-Las Vegas to pursue a career in casinos, gaming, and hospitality.

But during the first month of school, at the recommendation of one of his first culinary teachers, Bruce was hired as a pasta cook for Aramark at the Sharks' home arena, then named San Jose Arena. His first Sharks game was on Halloween 1995, and he's been treating the arena to his services ever since.

Rising through the ranks of Aramark, Bruce went from pasta cook to sandwich carver at \$8 an hour. It was during this time of slicing roast beef that Bruce developed a friendly reputation for customer service amongst his action station regulars and received some unexpected news.

### **Did you view the Aramark gig as just a part-time job? When did you start to think it could be more of a career for you?**

In my second year of college, I decided not to play football because I got the news that summer that I was going to be a father. So I knew there wasn't any more time to mess around with a football dream. I needed to pursue the education and the career path. I talked to the chef and asked for however many hours I could get. Soon after, he took me under his wing, and I started working in the restaurant.

He wanted me to stay on in the restaurant, but I just didn't feel like that was the culinary dream to pursue. I didn't have that burning desire to be a chef. But I was very intrigued in suites catering. I started off there as a beverage runner, so I learned the business starting at the lowest rung of the ladder, which was in line with how I was raised in a family business.

### **What was the family business?**

Our family owns a resort in Plumas County. By the second grade, I was mowing lawns and picking up trash. I earned my way into being a dishwasher, working the cold bar, then learning how to cook. Then after learning all of the back-of-the-house stuff, I got to be a busboy, server, then bartender. All of it came very naturally to me.

The family business really prepared me to be a man, accept responsibility, and understand how the ladder works, that you have to start at the bottom and work to the top.

Knowing how I was raised and how I was taught, I relished the opportunity with the catering department to start on the bottom as a beverage runner.

### **What was it about the suite level that intrigued you and influenced you to leave the restaurant?**

Getting to the suite level provided me the chance to network, make contacts, and see what was out there for me. If I wasn't going to have a career with Aramark, maybe I'd have

## “My people work with me, not for me. I believe in a servant leadership mentality.”

a career with one of these people who own one of these suites.

So I pushed the cart, filled the refrigerators, and after three months, our beverage lead left, and they asked me to be the new beverage lead, basically a de facto beverage manager at a very low rate.

By the fourth year, I was the suite catering supervisor at 21 years old, overseeing a \$2 million a year food component, managing people who were older than me and certainly much wiser than me.



Bruce moved from the food and beverage side to the team side, hired as the suites hospitality manager for the Sharks on September 24, 1999 (he recalls the exact date like it was yesterday). He worked for Jay O’Sullivan, “a brother from another mother” as Bruce describes him and all of his close friends. O’Sullivan left the organization in 2004 to pursue other professional interests, and Bruce was next in line to lead the department, becoming the youngest director in the history of the company at 26 years old.

### **Were you scared at all, taking over an entire department at such a young age?**

I felt like I was in the right place with my hospitality background, with my service background, and with the ability to sell. I’m not necessarily the hunter that’s out there trying to kill everything. I’m largely a farmer here, but I also need to know how to shoot a gun and make that kill shot. I felt like I had that unique skill set with sales and service.

### **Were you involved with ALSD yet at this time? When was your first conference?**

My first was Miami in 2000.

### **We were about 200 strong back then?**

Probably less.



Bruce’s personal life, to which Bruce just chuckles. I should point out that I’ve spent time with Bruce previous to today, a few cocktails deep at a few ALSD Conferences. I know a few fun facts about this great white shark, some which will have to stay in the tank.

My eye catches a watercolor painting reminiscent of a Venetian canal hanging on Bruce’s busy office wall. “It’s called ‘Vacation for Bruce,’” he explains. “A friend of mine’s wife painted me that watercolor. She thinks I need more time for me and a vacation.”

Next to the virtual gondola ride is a photograph of a very special little girl who offers Bruce some valuable perspective any time he stresses about being overdue for a vacation. The little girl is the daughter of a suite administrator that Bruce has worked with for many years. Her name is Robin, and Robin has a terminal disease that won’t allow her to live past her

early 20’s. “I have what I call my hero list,” says Bruce. “These are people who truly inspire me. And she’s definitely on that list. She has an amazing awareness and appreciation for the life she’s living and the challenges she’s overcoming.”

Next we get to some photos of another special young lady.

### **Who is that?**

That’s Mikala. I’ve been able to raise an amazing daughter. She’s what I’m most proud of in my entire life. Hopefully, you’ll get to meet her tonight. She’s trying to get her homework done so she can get down here and go to the game.

She has grown up here. She doesn’t know anything else. For me, it’s rewarding to think about how acutely aware I am of where I came from and how I was raised by my family, growing up at that lodge at that resort. [This arena] is her version of the lodge. It’s the op-

### **So you’ve seen the association grow and evolve over the years. What in your estimation is the biggest change you’ve seen in the association member since that time?**

Overall, the association is a reflection of the industry’s growth and evolution. When we first started, it was new, and still is somewhat. It’s grown out of its teenage years into its 20’s. Now it’s just so much more robust. You’ve got all the different tracks now – your food and beverage track, sales track, and state-of-the-art vendors who are showcasing new technology.

In terms of the [conference] attendees, obviously there are a lot more of them. And everybody is more engaged, more involved in a specific area of expertise.



At this point, I blow the whistle on all this “shop talk” to ask a few questions about

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**Like Father, Like Daughter:** Bruce teaches his daughter Mikala the value of seizing the good life through hard work: "I had to earn it. And I continue to have to earn it. Knowing that [my daughter] has been able to observe that from her earliest memories is pretty special for me."

portunity that I've seized. It didn't come from being given anything. I had to earn it. And I continue to have to earn it. Knowing that she's been able to observe that from her earliest memories is pretty special for me.

As a single dad, I have no business paying for her to go to private school or to play volleyball, but it's what I want to do for her so she can get the most out of life and pursue her passions.

**If you're not at work, or you're not at a volleyball match, what are some of your other interests when you go home and take the suit and tie off?**

There's not a lot of free time in a life like this. I truly value the quality over quantity theory. I love wine. I love to cook. I love to eat out.

I take a lot of pride in being healthy. I like to run trail. Growing up in the mountains, I enjoy the mountains. We live in a beautiful place.

You can't get too caught up in the material things or any of the things around you. Technology is a blessing and a curse. We have a harder time nowadays getting away because of the device. I try not to take the laptop home at night. I can get on a call or send a text message if I need to, but if I don't have to work on that document or that project, I'm not going to do it. I have a great little house with a patio and a garden. So I want to enjoy that and enjoy my daughter.



As it worked out, I also got to enjoy some time with Mikala who finished her homework and was able to come to the SAP Center that evening when the Sharks took on the Washington Capitals. She and her dad will be visiting Gonzaga University in the next week, as the all-important decision on where she'll be living and going to college for the next four years draws near. It's not the canals of Venice, but it is as close to a vacation as Bruce gets these days. I think he'll be OK with it. There will be mountains; there will be Mikala.

For tonight, Bruce sets us up in a penthouse level suite with a group of his sisters and brothers from other mothers, including his friend who nearly died before receiving a lung transplant, another inspiration from Bruce's hero list.

Never a self-promoter, allergic to social media, credit is unimportant to Bruce compared to results. Fortunately his friends give credit to him where credit is due. "He has a golden heart," Bruce's friend, a former suite holder, Diane tells me.

Bruce Ross takes care of his own and does right by everyone, whether it's a friend, a customer, or a magazine editor. And many times, those categories cross over. As authentic as they come and with a process of professionalism, he is who he is – the bald dude with the golden heart.

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Want to network with Bruce?

Here Is His Business Card:

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A CELEBRATION  
OF 25 YEARS**