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Apollo's Mission

The partners in a boutique law firm have found a niche in sports and entertainment and have lofty goals to grow their business.

DURING THE MID-1990S, soon after Lauri Eberhart became general counsel at racetrack owner Speedway Motorsports, she attended a North Carolina Bar Association conference for sports and entertainment lawyers in Pinehurst.

Eberhart noticed that one of the speakers on entertainment issues was “a young blonde woman lawyer, about my age” making a presentation on film and music copyright law. The attorney was Melinda Morris Zanoni and, at first, Eberhart took note because of the novelty of seeing someone like herself at an industry event.

“We found each other because we were kind of the last two women standing,” Zanoni said, laughing.

Over the ensuing years, Eberhart and Zanoni became acquaintances and got to know each other by reputation as they crossed paths many times at other industry conferences. In the spring of 2015, at the behest of a mutual friend, they met up for drinks in Charlotte, where they both were practicing law. Their conversation

naturally turned to sports and entertainment, and Eberhart and Zanoni wondered aloud why they had never worked together.

Later that year, they formed a partnership, renaming Zanoni’s firm after the Greek god of archery and music as well as one of the Twelve Olympians, a combination of sports and entertainment symbolizing the firm’s focus. Thus, the birth of Apollo Sports & Entertainment Law Group.

“We didn’t want to be ‘Zanoni & Eberhart,’” Eberhart said. “That’s just not our brand. The name symbolized that we would be practicing law a different way. And it would be more inclusive: It’s not just about me and Melinda.”

Besides, she said, her other candidate for a name was Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility and wine, but she thought better of that: “We don’t want to do that; we’re not going to sit around drinking wine all day.”

The Apollo partners each brought clients to their combined practice. Eberhart had been in motorsports throughout her career; while Zanoni had dabbled in sports while focusing on entertainment. They saw Charlotte’s growing sports industry as an opportunity — especially with the uniqueness

Melinda Morris Zanoni (left) and Lauri Eberhart launched their Charlotte-based firm in 2015.

of a women-owned firm boasting extensive experience in deals with Fortune 500

sponsors, major media companies and the nuances of rights agreements, licensing, copyright and content protection, and more.

“We thought this was very, very niche and nobody was doing it,” Eberhart said.

Their goal now: To push into becoming a regional player and then a national one.



During a recent joint interview on a restaurant patio near their midtown Charlotte offices, Eberhart and Zanoni talked about their backgrounds, their firm and their ambitions.

For starters, the pair share Midwestern values.

Zanoni is from Chicago and has always been a huge sports fan. She earned undergraduate degrees in business and economics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and then a law degree at U of I’s College of Law. When asked about her education, Zanoni leads by saying, “I didn’t miss a football or basketball game.”

She had dabbled in sports while learning the business of media and entertainment as a lawyer and, later, as a talent agent beginning in 2005. During earlier stints at Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough in Charlotte and Chicago firm Fagel Haber (now Thompson Coburn), she practiced corporate law and worked in commercial finance as well as mergers and acquisitions. During that time, she represented satellite TV providers, radio stations and other media clients.

Zanoni said she appreciates those years because, to this day, she uses the skills learned in corporate law for many of her clients at Apollo. She mentioned the mechanics of purchasing a sports team and raising capital for a virtual entertainment company as recent examples.

Zanoni and her husband, Jim, moved to Charlotte in the mid-90s from Chicago, looking for a city with a strong business upside. She launched her firm in 2008 and has long divided her time between Charlotte and Los Angeles. The firm’s entertainment projects include managing the estates of

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BY ERIK SPANBERG

Apollo Sports & Entertainment Law Group



actress Ava Gardner and Latino Grammy winner Juan Gabriel, a singer who sold more than 100 million records.

Eberhart grew up in Jackson, Mich., about 80 miles west of Detroit. Her mother was the controller at Michigan International Speedway when Roger Penske owned the track. On race weekends, Eberhart helped distribute media credentials. After undergraduate work at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pa., and earning her law degree from Wake Forest in 1993, she went to work at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

"Roger Penske called me and said, 'I got somebody you need to hire,'" recalled Humpty Wheeler, former Charlotte Motor Speedway president and general manager. "He said, 'I would hire her in a minute, but her mother is my accountant at Michigan Speedway.'"

Wheeler hired Eberhart for summer intern-

ships while she finished up her degree, telling Eberhart that, once she graduated, he would "find something for her to do. I wasn't sure what." He lived up to that promise and, within two years of Eberhart's arrival, she had passed the bar exam and been promoted to general counsel.

Soon afterward, Speedway Motorsports founder Bruton Smith took the parent company public. Eberhart became Wheeler's lieutenant at investor road shows and as part of a company that went from owning two tracks to seven through acquisitions and new construction in a span of five years.

The road shows gave Eberhart a crash course in deal-making and Wall Street. "I studied really hard," she said. "I

Apollo has found its sweet spot representing smaller sports properties such as the AHL's Charlotte Checkers.

learned the sports industry from the top down, I learned revenue models, I learned how to present, how to meet different types of people I've always been the kind of person not to let my fears stop me."

Eberhart also navigated fallout from a 1999 IndyCar race at Charlotte Motor Speedway in which a car tire and debris flew into the grandstand, killing three people and injuring eight. The following year, a pedestrian bridge at the track collapsed, injuring 100 fans after the NASCAR All-Star race. On another occasion, bomb threats made against the speedway's lead sponsor required the attention of federal agents.

Those in-the-moment tests instill confidence, Eberhart believes. "Having that experience — you've been through it before, so you're not scared of it. And it's one of the things you can counsel people on."

Eberhart left in 2008, later working in marketing and promotional roles at Richmond Raceway and the NASCAR Hall of Fame before returning to practice law with Moretz & Skufca.

"Lauri is fearless in the best sense of the word," said Cathy Bessant, chief operations and technology officer at Bank of America, who, like Eberhart, grew up in Jackson, Mich. "She is creative and can turn every challenge into an opportunity."

Bessant's and Eberhart's families have known each other for years. Bessant's father was Eberhart's civics teacher, and Bessant's mom was her Girl Scouts leader. Bessant, named the most powerful woman in banking by American Banker for the past three years, pointed to Eberhart rising to the executive ranks of motorsports at a time when that was — and, in many ways, remains — rare.

Eberhart and Zanoni's boutique firm now consists of five people, including the co-founders. A sixth attorney will be hired this fall, followed soon after by a paralegal. Apollo is all female, with the exception of attorney Lance White, who is Polynesian. "So yes, a white male would be a

diversity hire," Eberhart said.

Eberhart and Zanoni are committed to hiring the best people while emphasizing diversity as much as possible. They want to be the female mentors they would have liked to have had earlier in their own careers.



Since starting their firm, Eberhart and Zanoni have intentionally blurred the lines between sports and entertainment so they can hand off projects to one another and, in other cases, share the workload.

Because they have worked in facets of sports and entertainment beyond law, Eberhart and Zanoni believe their counsel brings a broader perspective. Public relations, operations and marketing are all aspects of business that they naturally factor into legal maneuvers and options.

They agreed that sports would account for a large part of their business growth because of the presence of NBA and NFL franchises in Charlotte and possible opportunities afforded by the influx of athletes and sponsors, NASCAR's de facto hub in the Charlotte region, and more.

Zanoni also made inroads with entertainers and influencers in the area. A prime example: the Grier family. Apollo represents Carolina Panthers backup quarterback Will Grier for his playing contract and marketing work as well as his brother Nash, who became a social media star through his posts on Instagram, YouTube and Vine and parlayed that attention into endorsements, acting roles and a clothing line. A third brother, Hayes Grier, also has a popular social media presence and is represented by the firm. Another local client is Reneé Rapp, a Charlotte-born actress who last year debuted on Broadway in the role of Regina George, the withering clique queen played by Rachel McAdams in the movie version of "Mean Girls."

The partners are quick to say what they don't do: tax, criminal law, bonds, large-scale transactions such as franchise sales, family law, estate planning,



Other clients include social media celebrity **Nash Grier** (right) and his brothers **Will**, a Carolina Panthers quarterback, and **Hayes**, who is also popular on social media.

or litigation. They represent teams, leagues, athletes, social media personalities and brands, playing matchmaker with an ethos of tough but fair — and business-minded — conciliation.

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At a time when many companies are reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic, the business implications

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clients

- Charlotte Checkers (AHL team)
- American Cornhole League (including media rights with ESPN and NBC Sports Group)
- Will Grier (Carolina Panthers quarterback)
- Nash Grier (social media entrepreneur)
- Christy Martin (former boxing champion)
- Reneé Rapp (Broadway actress, "Mean Girls")
- American Ultimate Disc League
- DC Shadow (Premier Ultimate League women's Ultimate Frisbee team)
- Team Rossi Motorsports
- Ron and Amy Shirley of "Lizard Lick Towing" (truTV reality show 2011-14)
- Sugarlands Distilling Co. (negotiated NASCAR sponsorship to become the sport's official moonshine)
- The Motor Enclave (Tampa-based company scheduled to open three private garage and driving course centers next year for car collectors and enthusiasts. Founder is Brad Oleshansky, who developed similar project M1 Concourse in Detroit and sold it in 2019)

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have put Apollo more in demand than ever. In fact, revenue is up 50% year to date over 2019.

A typical example: A motorsports media company that is an Apollo client provides over-the-top streaming services for smaller race tracks and, at a time when crowd capacity is severely limited in many parts of the country, interest has soared for those streaming services. To meet that demand, the company needs contracts and agreements for production, broadcasts, marketing and content licenses, Eberhart said.

Another client, the American Cornhole League, was among the earliest to get back to competition. ESPN and ESPN2 aired the ACL's return with a pair of tournaments on May 9. That, in turn, sparked talks and negotiations as the league sought to capitalize on heightened attention and fan engagement.

For Zanoni, many sports and entertainment clients need advising on increased social media presence and digital ventures, protecting intellectual property and assets at a time when online activity is just about the only game in town.

Eberhart, drawing on her extensive involvement in racing-related contracts, offered a few hypotheticals on the minds of clients in recent months.

If a driver's not driving — while a league is in hiatus, or for other pandemic-related reasons — does that driver still get paid? If so, how much?

For a sponsor, when events are canceled or postponed, does the contract automatically roll over?

If so, at what cost, if any? Posing perhaps the most-invoked business question of the year, Eberhart asked, what does the force majeure clause say?

"There's all different iterations and people are relying on those clauses and how they're interpreted," she said. "But also, we're finding it's not just, 'Let's enforce the contract.' It's more, 'We're partners and we've got a deal there and everything's just really bad, so how do we work out a solution so we can suspend our obligations or delay or defer so that when we come out the other side, we're still friends and we're going to go forward?'"

The latter scenario hews to Apollo's creed: Find profitable middle ground whenever possible, reach a beneficial deal and over-deliver in value. Over-deliver, in their words, means being available to clients on weekends, nights and holidays; avoid nickel-and-diming with billing practices; and build through word-of-mouth referrals.



At Apollo, Eberhart and Zanoni have been forward-thinking in their pursuit of up-and-coming niche sports as clients. In addition to the American Cornhole League, other examples include the men's American Ultimate Disc League and the DC Shadow of the women's disc golf Premiere Ultimate League.

The partners blend pragmatism and idealism when they size up future opportunities for a women-owned sports and entertainment firm. Zanoni first asserts

that Apollo brings the right credentials while "checking all the boxes" for meeting diversity thresholds.

So far, they say, #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have put gender, racial and ethnic diversity issues under a brighter spotlight, but converting that focus into leadership and business changes is a more difficult and elusive proposition.

Eberhart pointed to recent perspective shared by LPGA Commissioner Michael Whan as part of SBJ's "The Road Ahead" series as powerful. Whan noted that with so many companies pledging inclusion, those companies should be held to account when it comes to what they spend their money on — Whan's example was the disconnect between a corporation committing to diversity and then spending 99% of its sports sponsorship money on men's teams and leagues.

Apollo's founders say they want a chance to do some projects for the local major league teams — the Carolina Panthers, Charlotte Hornets and the new Charlotte FC MLS club — while also building regionally and nationally.

"I think they have a tremendous opportunity," said Tera Black, chief operating officer of the Charlotte Checkers, an American Hockey League club that Apollo has represented for the past two years on intellectual property and content-creation matters. "They are very, very good at what they do. I would, any day of the week, give them an opportunity." ✖

Erik Spanberg writes for the Charlotte Business Journal, an affiliated publication.

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