Joseph M. Cohen

Co-Founder, President, Chairman and CEO
USA Network, The Switch Sports Group and West Ridge Associates

By **Stuart Miller**

Joe Cohen's business accomplishments over the past half-century are groundbreaking and undeniably impressive, but he mostly prefers talking about people and relationships to contracts and deals.

"I wander through life with all these wonderful people and experiences," Cohen said. "I was fortunate to be involved with cable in its golden period."

Some might argue he helped make that period golden. "He was a pioneer," said Bob Graziano, president of the Los Angeles Dodgers from 1998 through 2004, who has known Cohen for nearly 40 years. "He has experience in so many different areas and has reinvented himself many times."

Cable, Sports Trailblazer

Cohen became president of Madison Square Garden Sports Network in 1977, then co-founded USA Network with Bob Rosencrans and Kay Koplovitz, helping transform the U.S. entertainment landscape. He negotiated the first national cable rights contracts with the National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball and the National Hockey League, helping establish the centralized, league-wide TV rights model.

Later, as CEO of Hughes Television Network, he implemented backhaul signal scrambling, so leagues could create out-of-market pay TV packages. He also headed the Los Angeles-based premium cable network Z Channel, adding sports to its content mix.

"When Joe was at Z Channel, there was significant concern about the impact of broadcasting home games on attendance, but Joe was at the forefront of pushing ahead with that," Graziano said. "He's always willing to take calculated risks."

Cohen also served as chairman and co-owner of the Los Angeles Kings. His companies also helped launch New England Sports Network (NESN), Altitude Sports and MLB Network, among others. He was also a top executive at Madison Square Garden in three different eras, overseeing regional sports channel MSG Network's cutting-edge and influential use of HDTV, closed captioning and secondary audio.

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> **Bob Graziano, Former President, Los Angeles Dodgers**

These days, he's chairman and CEO of the sports and media consulting group West Ridge Associates; president of The Switch Sports, a broadcast transmission facilities provider that transmits all professional games for ESPN; and on the board of MSG Sports, the holding company for the New York Knicks and Rangers.

Cohen has lived in Los Angeles for decades, but still travels to New York about 100 days a year, for business and to watch the Knicks and Rangers. "And I wear my Big Apple pin every day so I don't forget where I came from," he said before showing off another piece of jewelry: his Knicks championship ring from 1970, the year he started working at the Garden.

The conversation veers briefly to those old Knicks — Cohen noted he had been sitting with two of the team's greats, former Sen. Bill Bradley and Earl "The Pearl" Monroe, during this season's magical championship run. He also hired another Knicks icon, Walt "Clyde" Frazier, as a broadcaster.

As Cohen was getting to know those Knicks in his job as assistant to the VP of operations, he had a particularly memorable assignment: the first Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight in 1971. Garden officials felt that if Ali went out in public on fight day, it would cause a ruckus, so he was put up in an apartment in the building. Cohen was assigned to get Ali food or anything else he needed. "He was confident that he was going to win," Cohen recalled. (Ali lost on points.)

But while Cohen has stories about friends like *Family Ties* creator Gary David Goldberg, hockey legend Wayne Gretzky, former New York Jets owner Sonny Werblin and baseball manager Joe Torre, the person who comes up most in conversation is his mother.

Brooklyn Beginnings

Cohen grew up in Brooklyn and Queens in the 1950s and his father died when Cohen was eight. To ensure Cohen didn't lose focus at school, his mother insisted on a yeshiva education in Brooklyn, even though it required a long commute for a young child. "She said if I did it, I could attend any college I could get into and she kept her word," Cohen recalled.

He earned two degrees from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and found his career path there. He was struggling to find a topic for his marketing thesis when an adviser told him to choose something he was passionate about. Cohen, who had aspired to be a pro hockey goalie, was passionate about sports, so he wrote about the Philadelphia 76ers and Flyers. "That impacted my life and launched my career, because I followed that same advice when I started interviewing for jobs," he said.

Sportscaster Kenny Albert, who first met Cohen at the Garden while keeping stats for his father Marv, agreed. He described Cohen as "the ultimate connector between people," but said that's secondary to his other traits.

"If you look up gentleman in the dictionary, there's a photo of Joe," said Albert, now the voice of the Rangers, who also calls games for TNT and Fox. "He's very generous and a great husband, father and grandfather." ●

