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SPORTS BUSINESS

MAKING BIG PLAYS

All that winning for KC and the Chiefs — Super Bowl, NFL Draft, World Cup — keeps team President Mark Donovan's playbook pretty full. He discusses all the balls he has in the air.

Mark Donovan is the president of the Kansas City Chiefs.

ADAM VOGLER | KCBJ



By [James Dornbrook](#) – Staff Writer, Kansas City Business Journal
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After hosting five straight AFC Conference Championship games at GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium, going to three Super Bowls and winning two Lombardi trophies, it's not surprising to see Kansas City Chiefs President Mark Donovan smiling these days.

Donovan, who joined the Chiefs in 2009 as COO and became president in 2011, has spent his time with the team preparing the business side to be ready for success. Now that success has arrived, Donovan finds himself busier than ever. He's trying to take full advantage of all the new opportunities coming the Chiefs' way to help grow the fan base and build strong partnerships with the business community.

Donovan spent time with the Kansas City Business Journal's James Dornbrook, sharing his thoughts on a wide variety of topics, including the NFL Draft, the 2026 World Cup, playing in Germany, sports wagering and the future of Arrowhead Stadium.



Mark Donovan addresses the crowd gathered at Union Station for the rally celebrating the Chiefs' Super Bowl victory. Donovan said of the experience: "It's humbling. ... It's really powerful."

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Congratulations on another Super Bowl win. How was this one different from 2019?

The first one was overwhelming. Everything was huge and big and exciting, and you feel like you finally accomplished something. The second one is different. It's just as big, just as exciting, just as satisfying – all those things. But for me, four or five days into the celebration, things started slowing down. You really do get even more perspective as to just how special this is. Winning two in a short period of time is a pretty big separator from other organizations. The fact that we get the opportunity to go win some more, hopefully, just gives you a real sense of gratitude for where we are and how the hard work is paying off.

What was it like seeing hundreds of thousands of people at the Super Bowl parade?

It was an amazing event, truly a celebration of all our fans together with us. ... We're very focused on data, but one of the things that comes very clear, very quickly when you're in the parade is that those are real fans celebrating. In a lot of cases, it's people who don't get to go to many games but are just as passionate. So for them to be able to celebrate with us is just really special. It's humbling. You sit there and see the passion. You see young families and older families, and it's all in real time right in front of you. It's really powerful.



Crowds pack Grand Boulevard to see the parade.

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With the team's recent success, has the game plan for business partnerships changed?

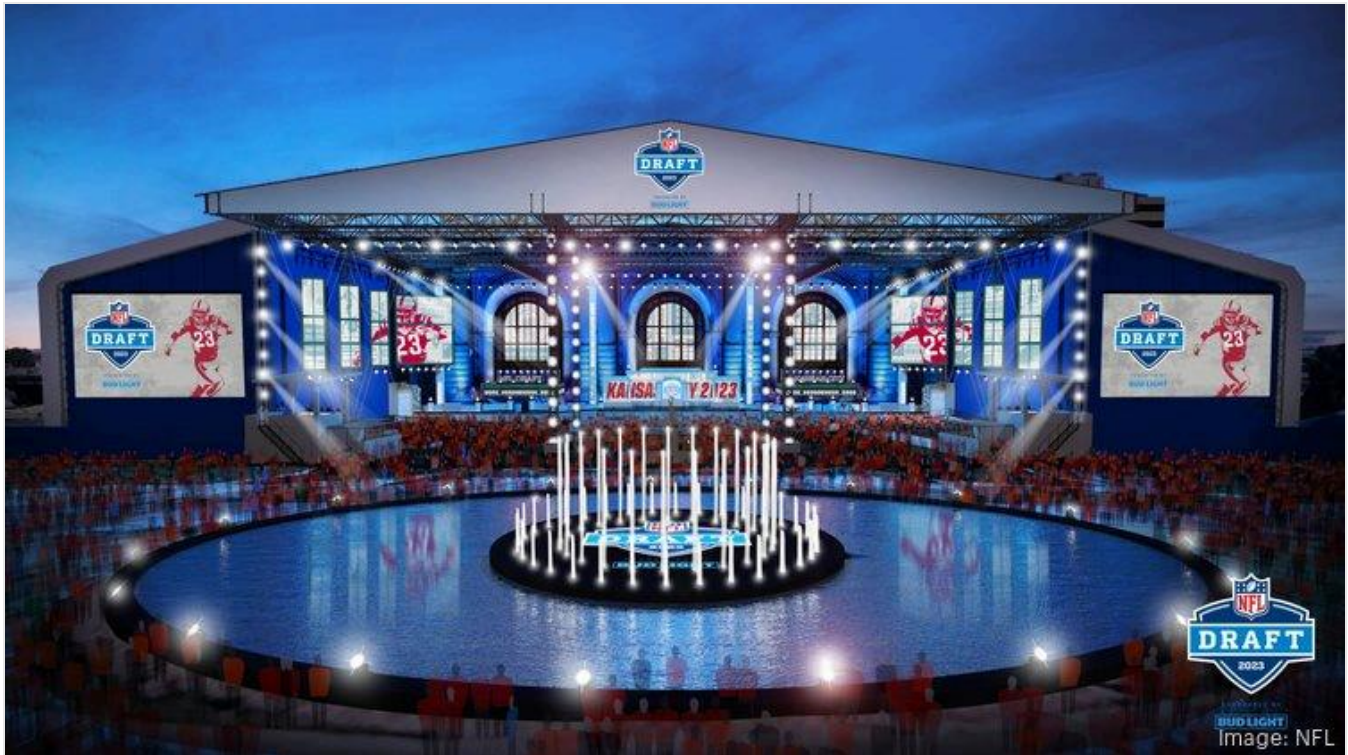
I think of our partners at McDonald's and at KU Health System, who came on board when we were 2-14 and 4-12, who bought into a vision, made a commitment and trusted us. To be sitting here today, both of them are still partners and have benefited significantly from the partnership. It's inspiring to be able to sit in front of them and say we've both really won. Those are the stories we tell potential partners when we go out now. It's become a world of opportunity as more and more companies across the globe are aware of the Kansas City Chiefs.

The Chiefs are headed to Germany to play a game next season. How have you been activating on that opportunity?

We really wanted to be a part of the first game played in Germany last season and were disappointed that we didn't get it. But it's actually kind of perfect to be the second game. The NFL has been in Germany for a year now and developed more relationships, so now we get that payoff for our game. We announced our first-ever multiyear partnership in

Germany with a company called Englebert Strauss. We'll have two or three more partnerships announced in the next 30 to 60 days that are German-based partnerships. We're looking forward to activating and promoting around the game next November.

We already did a promotion where a German Chiefs fan won a trip to the NFL Draft in Kansas City and will actually get to announce a late-round draft pick. That was a really unique opportunity and a cool way to celebrate our German fans.



The Draft Theater, where all the action happens for the 2023 NFL Draft, will be set up in front of Union Station in Kansas City.

NFL

What does having the NFL Draft in Kansas City this year mean for the Chiefs?

We look at it as another enormous platform. It's obviously an NFL event, and it will be run as the NFL Draft, not the Chiefs draft. However, we're leveraging and maximizing every single opportunity. We'll do some things on site for our fans to really highlight our role in the NFL and the fact that we're bringing one of the biggest events in the league to this town. We're going to position our brand differently than any other team in the NFL because this is our hometown.

The Missouri General Assembly is considering a sports wagering bill. Do the Chiefs support that?

We have been working on getting legislation passed in the state of Missouri for legalizing sports betting for over five years now. We have been committed since day one because we think it's really good for the state and really good for our fans. The reality of it is we are almost surrounded now by states that have legalized sports betting. Those states are benefiting from the revenue generated by this.

Shout out to (St. Louis Cardinals Chairman) Bill DeWitt, who has sort of led that initiative for us. He's done a great job of maneuvering through sometimes frustrating politics that come into play with things like this.

What could legal sports betting mean for the Chiefs?

If you look at the number of fans who attend a game at Arrowhead, then you expand the number of fans who watch a game on television or listen on the radio, then expand that to fans who play fantasy football, then expand to the number of fans who bet on games, those are all touch points for us. We just reviewed some specific brand-measurement data in the past 24 hours that showed our fan base is growing exponentially and the biggest portion of growth is from fans outside of the Kansas City market. Those fans are interacting with our team through fantasy football, through social media content and through sports wagering. It tells you that group of people is growing. There are revenue opportunities for every sports team in the state based on partnerships you can create around that. But if you look at the numbers in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and other states where sports betting is coming online, it's generating some real financial support for those states, as well. It helps governments support programs that are beneficial to the citizens of those states. So we think this bill should be passed as soon as possible.



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GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium could see changes for its function as an NFL facility and will need modifications to host 2026 World Cup games.

ICON SPORTSWIRE

Are the Chiefs working on any notable improvement projects at GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium?

It's still a bit early to get into specifics, but in general, our fans can expect even more technology to make the fan experience better. We are going to implement more technology at the gate to get people in quicker and more efficiently and safer. I think you'll see new technology within various levels of the stadium, as well.

Kansas City will host 2026 World Cup games at Arrowhead Stadium, and it requires some modifications to make the field wider. What's the status?

We have a really good plan with how we're going to roll out all the construction needs that will be done over the next four seasons. When you think about some of the infrastructure things we need to do and some of the seating things we need to do, there's a lot more going into that than people realize. It's going to take multiple years of work, and it's going to have to be done around playing games. Matt Kenny (Chiefs executive vice president of Arrowhead operations and events) and Brandon Hamilton (Chiefs vice president of stadium operations and facilities) put a good plan together, working with

our vendors and partners to make sure it makes sense. We've also been in constant contact with Kathy Nelson and her team at the Greater Kansas City Sports Commission and FIFA to make sure the plan is sound.

The overall goal of everyone involved is to not only make the event amazing, but to create a legacy here in Kansas City that really benefits this community for decades to come because that really is the opportunity here.

Does the need for construction to accommodate the World Cup affect the Chiefs' long-term thoughts on its stadium needs?

We've done a really good job compartmentalizing those two things. I think we have to. When we started bidding on the World Cup and putting a plan together for the World Cup, the focus was just on how to make the World Cup as good as it can possibly be. That's still the focus.

But as it relates to our plans post-World Cup in 2026, our lease runs out in 2031. So we've got some time there. We're still in the evaluation process as to what makes the most sense for us going forward. We have a lot of due diligence to still do. We've said from the beginning, and I'll say it again: What we do next with our stadium is a decision that will impact this franchise for the next 50 years. So we have got to get this right, and we're taking this very seriously.

With the Kansas City Royals exploring options to build a downtown stadium, does that create more opportunities for the Chiefs, given there would be more space at the current location?

When you look at all the hypothetical options based on what actually ends up happening with the Royals, if you have more space, you obviously have more opportunities. We've looked at that. But we're still a long way out. I don't think anyone can accurately predict the value of developing in Independence, Missouri, four, five or six years from now. But I think there is some really strong evidence that it's valuable to develop around a sports facility. NFL teams have done a great job of it. So we want to look at that and see what our benefits are. That's where you get into the balance between does it make sense to stay where we are, or does it make sense to go somewhere else? But a big factor in all of

that is the specialness of GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium, which is something people around the world know. They come here for the human experience. Could you replicate that somewhere else? Could you make it better? Or are there better opportunities to renovate where we are and add some things to it? We're going to look at all the options, and we're going to make the best decision, but we're not there yet.



Mark Donovan

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Mark Donovan

President, Kansas City Chiefs

Donovan has been president since 2011 and handles all of the team's business aspects. Born in 1966 in Pittsburgh, Donovan earned offers to play college football: tight end at Ohio State University, wide receiver at the University of Virginia and quarterback at Brown University, which he accepted.

Donovan signed with the New York Giants as an undrafted free agent. He was the fifth-ranked QB, running drills in training camp, but retired after four weeks, before he got

cut, to take a job with a consulting firm. The move eventually led to becoming senior director of marketing and sales for the National Hockey League.

After four years at the NHL, Donovan spent six years as senior vice president of operations for the Philadelphia Eagles. He joined the Chiefs as COO in 2009 before becoming the team's fifth president.
