

## **On Lamar Hunt, Patrick Mahomes, Taylor Swift & the Chiefs' goal to be 'world's team'**

By Vahe Gregorian

Kansas City Star

In Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, a 12-year-old Iranian boy asked David Prunte of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce where in the United States he was from. Told Kansas City, the boy replied, "Oh, the Chiefs. Patrick Mahomes."

In Italy a few summers back, Chiefs coach Andy Reid was surprised to be recognized and recalled someone simply yelling "Mahomes" to him.

In Nigeria, where football remains in its embryonic stages, few people follow the NFL. "But they know Patrick Mahomes," native Nigerian and aspiring Chief Kehinde Hassan Oginni told me in 2022.

To say nothing of the resonance of Mahomes and the Chiefs playing in person in Mexico City and Germany over the last few years — and having it all amplified again on Sunday before a Super Bowl audience for the fourth time in five seasons.

Contrary to the motto, what happens in Vegas against the 49ers in Super Bowl LVIII won't at all stay in Vegas: A year ago, the Super Bowl was watched by hundreds of millions of people, including some 56 million globally in nearly 200 countries delivered in more than 25 languages.

Or as the Chiefs view it ... their target audience.

The two-time NFL MVP and two-time Super Bowl MVP, his teammates and the team's brain trust long ago transformed the Chiefs into a team that has transcended traditional borders. They already were the NFL's "it" team well before the advent of the Taylor Swift-Travis Kelce relationship fused together the thriving franchise with her interstellar profile to give them the makings of something more altogether.

Not merely America's Team, as the eminent broadcaster Bob Costas declared them on CNN last week.

But traction toward becoming the "world's team" — a campaign the Chiefs have been subtly but steadily embracing since 2021 after playing in a second straight Super Bowl following 50 years without.

The notion might be considered somewhere between audacious, ambitious and arrogant, and the Chiefs will tell you it's a rallying cry as much as a strategy. For that matter, they initially were a little sheepish about saying the quiet part out loud.

"The first couple of times we said 'world's team,' we kind of whispered it," Chiefs president Mark Donovan said in his office last week, smiling and adding, "Because it's like, 'Are we sure? That's a big statement.'"

### **THE SWIFT EFFECT**

So grandiose, really, it's hard to know just what it would take to gain claim to such a title.

Especially given the vaunted stature of the world's most popular soccer teams and traditionally iconic NFL and NBA teams and measures of global franchise values such as that conducted by Forbes: It still

ranks the seemingly deposed America's Team of the Dallas Cowboys No. 1 (valued at \$9 billion) and the Chiefs 35th (\$4.3 billion).

But as reflected in burgeoning merchandise sales and social media engagement, particularly internationally, the Chiefs have gained remarkable prominence and momentum on the world stage over these last few years through the coalescing of the sheer majesty of Mahomes, the charisma and Hall of Fame-destined play of Kelce and the much-revered persona of Reid.

That's all well-reinforced through the saturation advertising campaigns featuring Mahomes, the wave of Kelce-mania commercials (and his podcast with his brother) and even Reid's understated appearances with Mahomes in State Farm commercials.

And now ... the Swift Effect, which helps account for an explosion in social media followers and for why the sales of Chiefs gear surged 20% last season to fourth among all franchises per The Associated Press, according to data from Fanatics.

"There's no doubt that her being a fan has put a more intense focus on the team than we would have had otherwise and has opened up the fan base to a whole new demographic that we didn't really have," chairman and CEO Clark Hunt said Tuesday morning, smiling as he echoed a Kelce sentiment that she's "part of the team."

So a fundamentally winning, fun and likable group — except by those who have come to resent their dominance or somehow don't like the infinitely appealing Swift — not only has benefited from unprecedented time in the spotlight over the last year but also been instrumental in replenishing it.

Consider that their season opener against the Lions was the most-watched television show since Super Bowl LVII, their victory over the Eagles a half-year before. The game in Germany against the Dolphins was the most-watched NFL Network international game ever, and the Wild Card game against the Dolphins earned the largest streaming audience ever for a U.S. event.

Then the game at Buffalo was the most-watched divisional game in NFL history (average audience of 50.4 million). A week later in Baltimore, they played in the most-watched AFC Championship Game with an average audience of 55.4 million.

### **'SUPERSTARS BECOMING TRUE INTERNATIONAL SUPERSTARS'**

This emergence didn't just start in 2021 when the Chiefs first articulated the approach. Or in 2020 when they won their first Super Bowl in 50 years. Or even in 2017 when Mahomes was drafted.

It goes back to honoring the vision of Lamar Hunt, which we'll come back to, but also reflects the savvy of Donovan — who was hired in 2009 with a background including leadership roles in sales and marketing with the NHL and NFL.

The Chiefs were ready to meet this moment because even after a 2-14 season in 2008 they had the imagination and resolve to ponder not just how to create better days ahead but what to do when they came to pass — as they started to upon the hiring of Reid after the 2012 season.

"Something Mark preached early in his tenure with us was, 'Be prepared for success,'" Hunt recalled. "And we didn't start off having a lot. But all along he was preparing our business staff (for what's happened since)."

What's happening now, of course, would have been unforeseeable even then in terms of all the vehicles for audience reach — including the explosion of social media and the NFL's recent emphasis on an international audience.

By way of examples, the NFL says the Chiefs and Patriots are the most popular teams in Germany now. In Mexico, the Chiefs recently supplanted the Dallas Cowboys for the top dedicated Instagram following (70,000 as of Tuesday to 57,100).

And the Chiefs also recently ascended to the NFL's top perch for YouTube subscribers with more than 500,000 and counting.

Five years ago, Donovan said, the Chiefs weren't even in the top 10 or 15 of that measure.

"It's opportunity. It's the world shrinking. It's content being consumed in different ways by different people all over the world," Donovan said. "It's superstars becoming true international superstars. ...

"I think it's important to note the Taylor effect is real. But we started this in '21. And the point is we put the pieces in place so that when this thing comes out of the blue, which we never had any strategy around, that attaches to what we have already in place and that's how it explodes."

Also: It's uncanny, really, to have all these multiplying effects converge at once with Swift being the most improbable component of all.

"The fact that she brings a young female audience is the most difficult audience right now to create an attraction with and relevance with," Donovan said. "And she brings it."

He added, "And now they know the NFL. But they (most) know the Kansas City Chiefs."

### **'THIS MAHOMES KID'**

What the Chiefs are most known for is the pivotal element that enabled this brave new world. Donovan well remembers the dynamics bubbling in the weeks before the 2017 NFL Draft — a time during which then co-director of player personnel Brett Veach obsessively was wearing out Reid over a Texas Tech quarterback named Patrick Mahomes.

Finally persuaded by Veach that Mahomes was worth trading up for, Reid called Donovan — a rarity on a personnel matter — and asked him to his office.

When Donovan arrived, he recalled, Reid asked, "Has Veach hit you up on this Mahomes kid?" To that point, Donovan only knew Veach "had a guy" but not his name.

Reid showed Donovan a highlight of Mahomes running left and sidearming the ball some 60 yards into the end zone. With wide eyes, as Donovan described it, Reid said, "You can't coach that."

Much as he agreed, Donovan wondered why he was there.

"Well, in order to get this kid, we're probably going to have to go up a little bit more than (Clark Hunt) is thinking; I might need your help," he remembered Reid telling him. "Because he's going to hear us, and then he's going to call you."

As it happened, Donovan said it played out exactly as Reid had reckoned. And Donovan added his testimony to the cause.

“The rest is history, right?” Donovan said, smiling.

### **“HOW WOULD LAMAR LOOK AT THIS?”**

It was the Chiefs’ own history, though, that helped perpetuate this next dimension of it in 2021 when the NFL expanded its international schedule and began awarding international marketing rights.

Among the reasons the Chiefs seized the opportunity, ultimately acquiring those rights in Germany, Austria and Switzerland along with Mexico (where they played in 2019), was the enduring spirit of Lamar Hunt — the genius who founded the franchise and the AFL and was a vital force in the emergence of soccer in the U.S. and an early proponent of growing the NFL internationally.

“When (international play) wasn’t real, he was going to Tokyo to play preseason games,” said Donovan, noting that another of those four international preseason games was the first NFL game of any sort in Germany in 1990 not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

As the late Hunt’s dreams were shaping into a reality and with Clark Hunt serving as chairman of the NFL’s international committee, there was a sense of duty to fulfill that legacy when opportunity arose.

“How would Lamar look at this?” Donovan recalled thinking in 2021.

Out of that came what he called a challenge to his front-office staff to find “a true north” on the international front.

Presto, “become the world’s team” was born.

The idea also was fashioned in part by Donovan wearying of the suggestion that the Chiefs had become “America’s Team.”

The more he thought about it, the more he thought, “I don’t think we should strive to be America’s Team. We should be bigger. How do we strive for something even bigger than that?”

One of the ways was recognizing they had a story to tell.

One that began long before the revolutionary talent of Mahomes and even the arrival in 2013 of the golden guiding hand of Reid.

It was an arc beginning with Lamar Hunt and the AFL ... and his pioneering role in opportunities for Black athletes ... and the merger with the NFL ... and Hank Stram’s innovative influence on the modern game.

It was in the distinct game-day experience, including the tailgating and world’s loudest outdoor stadium title conferred by the Guinness Book of World Records.

And now in a narrative that revels in the quarterback sensation who is the winsome face of the NFL and what might reasonably be called the most famous contemporary couple in the world.

THE CHIEFS AS THE WORLD’S TEAM

When the term “world’s team” first emerged in a small meeting in the summer of 2021, Donovan recalled skeptical looks around the room.

As he elaborated on it, a key selling point was the responsibility to recognize the moment.

If 10 years from now, he said, the Chiefs have won multiple Super Bowls with a Hall of Fame coach, quarterback and tight end and hadn’t sought to maximize it, they’d be guilty of negligence.

As he continued to speak, he recalled, he felt the room turn from nervousness to excitement. Much like he felt when he began to say it more directly and loudly in public than his initial whispers.

“From that point on, it was like, ‘All right, let’s go,’” he said. “It was almost empowering.”

The powerful strides they’ve made, including moving from 10th overall in NFL social media following in 2022 to fifth now, didn’t happen merely by speaking it into existence.

For starters, the Chiefs made commitments in personnel resources. And they spent about \$3 million on international marketing in the last few years, including approximately \$1 million to set the stage for the game in Frankfurt with such initiatives as the so-called “ChampionShip” yacht that became the central gathering spot for Chiefs fans.

“To call yourself world champs, you’ve got to win all over the world,” Kelvin Haynes, who flew to the game from Kansas City, said by the yacht in Frankfurt. “And I think this is a really good opportunity to showcase everything and the greatness that Kansas City is.”

The effort there even included what Donovan called “being open to brand strategy from other places.”

Recognizing that they aren’t experts on doing business in Germany, Donovan said the Chiefs convened an advisory board of German CEO-level executives toward the cause. The ask:

“We want you to sit with us and educate us on how to do business and where to do business and where to be and where not to be, how to be. All of that was in place. That’s the commitment you’ve got to make to make it work.

“It’s paid off for us.”

A simultaneous effect of this time like no other is that the Chiefs have gone from the overlooked cuddly underdog on the rise to an ever-present dynastic force. Accordingly, Donovan has seen the images of U.S. maps showing most of the country rooting against the Chiefs now.

After so many agonizing years, he said, smiling, “I welcome being on this side of that.”

A side that has the Chiefs gazing beyond traditional borders in about every way.