

In his own words: "A hardworking, ready-for-anything kind of guy who has played out his love of hockey and university education to achieve happiness in his work."

As a Junior B hockey player from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, little did Frank Provenzano dream of making it to the National Hockey League. But these days, the guy who remembers himself as "a good little player who basically just ran into people" is rubbing shoulders with childhood heroes such as Bobby Orr and coming unbelievably close to that precious Stanley Cup.

Over the past few years, Frank has carved out a career that neatly braids together his particular love of hockey, a passion for all sports and a keen business sense. The result is his current position as Assistant General Manager for the Washington Capitals, a fast-paced job involving contract negotiation, salary arbitration and player scouting. The hours can be brutal, but his success in the job bears out his belief that "if you

really love what you're doing, then doors open for you."

Frank knew he loved hockey when he first arrived at Queen's, signing on for a degree in Life Sciences. "If you come from an Italian family, you're usually presented with three career choices: doctor, lawyer or engineer.

My dad was a lawyer; I picked doctor. But I soon realized that, deep down, I had no interest in medical school. After a summer job in a hospital pharmacy I

knew for sure I didn't want to work in a hospital."

It was 1994 — the year the Vancouver Canucks went to the Stanley Cup finals — and Frank suddenly had a brainstorm. "I just called the Canucks office one day to find out where I could send a résumé. The next thing I knew I was talking to George McPhee, who was then the director of Hockey Operations. I offered to volunteer with the organization and he invited me in for an interview."

He switched to the Physical Education program, drawn by intriguing courses in exercise physiology and

sports mechanics, and by the smaller, more intimate classes. "I enjoyed every minute of the Phys. Ed. program, from the classes of five or ten people to the knowledge I picked up about sports and the body." In addition to his studies, he played varsity hockey during his first year and ran for the varsity track team during his final two years at Queen's.

When he graduated, Frank had “no idea” what he would do with his degree, although his short list of potential career fields included business, chiropractic and physiotherapy. His first priority, however, was to travel for a year. To pay his ticket, he taught a semester of physiology and anatomy courses in the nursing program at Humber College; he also worked at a health club and taught English as Second Language. With enough money in his pocket, he set out in January 1992 on a tour of New Zealand, Australia, Asia and Europe.

But he had the foresight to ensure a smooth touchdown when he returned to Canada. Before heading overseas, he applied to the Master of Business Administration program at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, British Columbia. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was toying with the idea of combining his undergraduate sport and science background with solid business skills. He received his SFU acceptance easily but deferred for a year while he was travelling.

Returning home with a newfound love of travelling — he still travels as much as possible these days, especially anywhere he can scuba dive — Frank took up residence in British Columbia. The unending rain, he recalls, was depressing but it was offset by the excellent ski conditions, a definite factor in his choice of SFU. The MBA program itself suited him just fine.

“The MBA was perfect for me as it had an preparatory semester that let me catch up on some basic business courses, and then the Executive Program, which was highly acclaimed. I also spent an awesome semester on exchange to the

Manchester Business School. I was in a class full of international students, including some from the big business programs in the U.S. I started out a bit intimidated, but I soon realized that all the business schools basically teach the same stuff. What changes from school to school are the networking opportunities.”



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Back at SFU, with just his final project to complete, Frank began attending job fairs, at first checking out traditional MBA fields such as banking and investment. “Even as I was searching in those areas I knew I really wanted to combine everything important to me — the love of sports, and the science, Physical Education and business studies. I was thinking about working in the business side of sports, but I had no real idea how to do that. It seemed like a pipe dream.”

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Initially, Frank’s tenure with the Canucks was slated to be a four-month, nine-to-five volunteer position that would let him work on player contracts and scouting with McPhee. By January 1995, he had been hired full-time. His pipe dream had come true. When he followed McPhee to the Washington Capitals in 1997, he came close to having his name engraved on the Stanley Cup. “We went to the Cup finals in my first year with the Capitals, but we lost to Detroit in four straight. I would love to do that again, but next time I would savour the moment more.”

Frank easily logs up to five hours on the telephone every day. His job, he says, demands that he always “be on call.” He makes it clear that in his line of work, which is essentially about managing people, communication skills can make or break a big deal. That thought is always foremost in his mind when he hires interns for his organization.

“I can’t tell you how often I see application letters with spelling or grammar mistakes, and I interview people who can’t string two sentences together. I figure that if I’m taking the time to read your résumé, you should take the time to make sure everything is spelled correctly. In interviews, it’s great to hear people expressing

themselves clearly — and not following someone else’s script.”

Despite long hours and little job security — hockey management can change faster than a slapshot — Frank has no immediate plans to quit the high-stakes business side of professional hockey. His job is rare — there are only 30 such positions in the NHL — and so the competition keeps him hustling. “I don’t necessarily want to be doing this when I’m 50,” he admits, “but I really do want to be part of a team that wins the Stanley Cup.” ❖



