

Once reviled, team owners soar in status with Rockies

Monfort brothers took fierce criticism for sticking with plan

James Paton, Rocky Mountain News

Published October 6, 2007 at midnight



Colorado Rockies owners Charlie and Dick Monfort five years ago dispatched their general manager to a meeting with the governor.

Over lunch at the Chop House, the Rockies' Dan O'Dowd articulated the club's business plan to the state's leader, Bill Owens.

Owens, a baseball fanatic, knew successful sports teams can boost a state's profile, as well as its economy. Every year, he wanted a status report to ensure the team had a winning strategy.

In 2001, after signing free-agent pitchers Mike Hampton and Denny Neagle to mega deals, the Rockies saw themselves as contenders.

They flopped instead, finishing 19 games out of first place. Burdened by bad investments, the Rockies plotted a new course that's only now bearing fruit.

"(O'Dowd) said, 'We have a few tough years ahead of us, but there's a light at the end of the tunnel. We can't afford to buy players like we have done unsuccessfully. We need to build from within,' " the former governor recalled this week.

"They knew they'd take some heat for it," Owens said.

The Rockies sustained six losing seasons in a row. Fans fled in droves.

Critics urged the Monforts to surrender and to sell the team to someone who knew how to win, and mocked the organization when it stuck with O'Dowd and manager Clint Hurdle.

This isn't New York, but still the scrutiny was intense, and the detractors made legitimate points. The front office had failed to put a strong product on the field.

"I used to think political criticism was tough," Owens said Wednesday while listening to the Rockies game on the radio. "But I haven't had to deal with the criticism you sometimes get in the sports pages. You know, you mess around with somebody's tax structure and they will be angry, but if you don't get it right with your sports team, that's really a fighting issue."

Charlie Monfort, the Rockies' chief executive, heard the complaints. And at times they upset him, friends said.

But Charlie and his brother endured the harsh treatment and adhered to the plan, relying on young, homegrown, inexpensive players and focusing on the farm system.

Now, after a remarkable late-season hot streak, the midmarket team with a meager payroll of \$54.4 million (less than a third of the Yankees') finds itself up 2-0 against the Philadelphia Phillies in the division playoff series.

Suddenly, no one is questioning the Monforts' acumen.

This week, Denver, not Philadelphia, is the city of brotherly love.

"Unfortunately, we see this all the time in business," said Bob Thompson, president of Fox Sports Networks, a member of the Rockies' ownership group. "The tough decisions aren't necessarily the most popular ones. They had difficult decisions to make, and they made them. They implemented the plan, which was to concentrate on improving the team through the farm system, then round it out with free agents to fill certain needs, as opposed to doing it the other way around."

Two halves of Kenny

The sons of cattle baron Ken Monfort saw what it was like to be under the microscope. Their patriarch, in addition to being a prominent businessman, served in the Colorado House and ran for a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1968. He started as a Democrat but later switched to Republican.

The family business, started by Charlie and Dick's grandfather Warren Monfort during the Great Depression expanded over the years from a feeding operation into beef packing. Monfort Colorado Inc. eventually employed several thousand people, becoming a pillar in Weld County's economy.

As a young man, Charlie had other things on his mind.

After finishing high school in 1978, Charlie left Greeley to attend the University of Utah. On campus, he quickly discovered the Greek system and happily stepped into the president's role at Kappa Sigma fraternity.

"I went to the University of Utah primarily for skiing," he said in a video shown at a Kappa Sigma conference and posted on YouTube. "Great law college. But got my first report card and decided I wasn't going to do that any more. Became a marketing major."

Charlie didn't truly consider the family's beef business until after college, in the early 1980s, said Duane Flack, a Greeley resident who worked for the company for more than three decades.

Flack, who joined the company in the mid-1960s as a veterinarian and was known as "Doc," supervised Dick and Charlie when they first went to work for the family as high school students. Flack's wife taught Charlie in Sunday school.

"He was always the kid, and he liked to have a good time. He was good-time Charlie," Flack said. "Then as time went along he developed himself into a position of importance, that being international sales, and that turned on a completely different part of him."

Charlie settled into a position as president of the family division focused on exporting beef to overseas markets, Asia in particular.

Older brother Dick had stayed closer to home, graduating from the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley in 1976 and jumping headfirst into the business. Dick, now chairman of his alma mater's board of trustees, is seen as the more serious.

"Dick is more no nonsense," said Kay Norton, University of Northern Colorado president. "Charlie is the charming brother. Some people say they are the two halves of Kenny Monfort's personality, though it's more complicated than that. Dick is known as the one who keeps the trains running on time, and I think that's still true. But over time, Dick, I think, has developed more charm, and Charlie has developed more of the nose- to-the-grindstone piece."

A \$300 million deal

ConAgra of Omaha bought the family outfit in 1987 in a stock swap valued at \$300 million. Ken Monfort stayed as president of the ConAgra red meats division until stepping down in 1989.

Dick filled his shoes, taking over the \$7 billion operation and grabbing the reins as chief executive.

Charlie, who acquired a significant interest in the Rockies' expansion team in 1992 with Jerry McMorris and Oren Benton, severed his ties to the beef industry, opting to devote his attention to the baseball team by the end of the decade.

In 1997, Dick joined Charlie and McMorris, who was CEO, and took Benton's ownership position. The Monforts, who declined to comment for this story, finally bought out McMorris' stake.

Charlie pursued other projects, too. In 2000, he and businessman David Giesen forged a joint venture to open about 100 Steak Escape restaurants in Colorado and California over a 10-year span. Charlie that year had launched his first Steak Escape, in Greeley.

Apparently the idea of selling Philly cheese steaks to the masses hasn't gone as planned. Steak Escape did not return calls seeking information, but Charlie told the *Greeley Tribune* in 2005 that his hometown eatery failed and that he would turn it into an Italian restaurant, Panico's. Today, there's no listing for such a place. He said at the time he owned 30 Steak Escapes.

Dick, meanwhile, gobbled up large ownership stakes in the Hyatt Grand Champions Hotel in Palm Springs, Calif., and the Hilltop Steak House in Boston. He also helped open a Brett Favre Steak House in Wisconsin.

The Monforts always have been aware of their privileged status in life but have refused to coast on that alone, family friends said.

Ken Monfort liked to say: "It's amazing what you can do with hard work - and the right father," Flack said.

The children have used their positions in various ways. Charlie, 47, sits on the boards of trustees at Mesa State College and a number of other groups. Dick, 53, is a trustee at the University of Colorado Hospital at the Anschutz Medical Campus, among other organizations.

The Monfort Family Foundation has made a significant contribution to fund a "human performance laboratory" at Mesa State, similar to one the U.S. Olympic team uses for athletic training, said Mike Feeley, who sits on the college's board.

The family has given money to a number of causes. In 2004, the foundation wrote a \$10 million check to Children's Hospital to help finance the new hospital. The Monforts also have donated millions to the University of Northern Colorado and Colorado State University.

A history of scrutiny

The Monforts are not strangers to adversity.

The company enjoyed plenty of banner years, but also confronted some difficult periods, teetering on the brink of bankruptcy in the late 1970s and reeling from a slumping cattle market and a tornado that hit a plant in Nebraska. At times, the Monforts also clashed with unionized workers.

"I've often said, 'After the meat business nothing is hard,' " said Norton, the college president who worked as an attorney for the Monforts early in her career.

The children also grew up knowing "their name meant something and that people would have opinions about them," she said.

Loyalty and an ability to deal with pressure are part of "their DNA," she said.

"When I see the criticism about their management decisions and the retention of people, I'm reminded of the fact that the Monforts, both father and sons, were always respectful of loyalty," she said, alluding to the contract extensions for O'Dowd and Hurdle.

A Web site soon surfaced, MonfortsMustSell.com, that went after the brothers and joined in the scathing attack.

Charlie frequently was quoted as saying he liked the Rockies' chances to win the West, an optimism that drew snide remarks.

Even supporters were caught off guard by some of their decisions. Fox's Thompson said sticking with O'Dowd and Hurdle surprised him. "We weren't consulted, and it's not our place," he said. "Turns out these guys were going to do what they thought was best for the franchise."

Ken Monfort developed a thick skin, said Flack, who's 73 and still lives in Greeley.

"There were tough times," Flack said. "But Kenny was very sure of himself and he knew what he wanted to do. Now, those boys, they are used to digging in and sticking to what they believe in when the going gets tough."

Charlie has faced difficult personal headlines as well.

In 1999, he issued a public apology after he was arrested in Greeley on drunken-driving charges. His blood-alcohol level was 0.209, more than double the legal limit, police said.

"I have in the past tried, and will in future endeavor, to be responsible in my personal behavior," he said.

Even his failed marriage made news when private investigators hired by ex-wife Victoria Monfort sued her, claiming she refused to pay for a probe of Charlie's finances, according to news reports. He later remarried.

Charlie told a *USA Today* reporter last year that after a long run of partying and 18 months' probation for driving while impaired he became a Christian, apparently rediscovering religion.

The story said the Rockies embraced "a Christian-based code of conduct." The club's players and front office officials said the article exaggerated the extent to which religion played a role.

Although Charlie has grown accustomed to the spotlight, he's not unfazed by it. Amid a chorus of complaints about the Rockies, he sometimes grew frustrated, said Feeley, a Denver attorney.

Monfort, Feeley and a few others fly to Grand Junction every so often to attend Mesa State meetings. The topic of baseball comes up frequently.

"He recognizes it comes with the territory, but he's been hurt by it because he's doing the best he can and he pours his heart and soul into it," Feeley said earlier this week. "He's a big boy, and he knows criticism is part of the deal. But it makes him wince."

As governor, Owens said he often pulled Charlie and Dick aside to talk about the way their plan was being received by the public.

"How have they taken it?" Owens said. "Publicly well. Privately it hurt."

The Monforts have told reporters what really stings is the perception that they were content to remain mediocre and concerned more about the bottom line than the box scores.

The Rockies' plan, like any business model, will have to be judged on a long-term basis, not after one visit to the playoffs. Figuring out how to pay and hold on to the stars it has created will be a test. But the Monforts already have won over a lot of the critics.

Even the Web site telling the Monforts to give up has backed off, though it stressed it still questions the future direction. "I am going to give the Monforts a break and let them enjoy their baseball team while they are in the playoffs," the latest post read.

Fox's Thompson had a beer with Charlie a week ago, after the Rockies' 11-1 win over Arizona, and exchanged text messages with the Rockies' CEO after the team's victory the following day.

"He was having a ball," Thompson said. "This is why you do it. It makes you forget about the tough years. Winning cures a lot of ills."

Meet the Monforts

CHARLES MONFORT

- **Title:** Rockies CEO
- **Born:** Oct. 30, 1959
- **History:** With Jerry McMorris, acquired the expansion team's controlling interests in 1992. Left family beef business in the late '90s to focus on the Rockies.
- **Other roles include:** Mesa State, Special Olympics, Kempe Center boards of trustees

RICHARD MONFORT

- **Title:** Rockies vice chairman

- **Born:** April 27, 1954

- **History:** Joined brother in 1997, named Rockies vice chairman. Retired from ConAgra, the company that bought the family company, in 1995. He had served as president of Monfort of Colorado Inc., then CEO of ConAgra Red Meats.

- **Other roles include:** Chairman of the University of Northern Colorado's board of trustees.

patonj@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-2544