

SKIN IN THE GAME

Paul LeBlanc built his portfolio of possibilities one calculated gamble at a time. He still does

BY ALEC BRUCE

ONCE, FROM THE SPRINGBOARD OF HIS YOUTH, Paul LeBlanc gleefully described himself as a serial entrepreneur, gamely plunging from one opportunity into another. The Halifax-based enterpriser is now nudging 50, but he remains as frisky as a teenager learning the high dive.

If anything, since he earned an *Atlantic Business Magazine* Top 50 CEO Hall of Fame membership in 2007, his trademark bravura has increased, not diminished. “I haven’t switched off,” he laughs loudly. “I guess I can’t help myself.”

Sitting in his company’s digs minutes before a lunch meeting during the normally peaceful break between Christmas and New Year, the CEO and chairman of Charlottetown Metal Products (CMP) discusses one of his latest, and most startling, acquisitions: A sprawling piece of body art that starts at the wrist of his right hand and travels all the way up to the apex of his bicep. It’s a tableau, of sorts, of the people, places and principles that, he says, have become important to him during his nearly half-century of life and work. “You don’t normally see many corporate guys running around with sleeve tattoos,” he laughs again.

No, you don’t. And, again, you have to wonder: Maybe he couldn’t help himself. After all, a certain derring-do has characterized his career since at least 1990.

That was when, at the tender age of 20 and on little more than a wink, he started Halifax’s Coastal Communications, a cellular and telecommunications service firm. Six years later, he sold it for a tidy sum.

Without missing a beat, in 1997 he launched Halifax’s Extreme Group, an advertising and marketing agency. Having later expanded into Toronto, he changed the name to Arrivals + Departures. Today, it counts Kraft, Proctor & Gamble, Bell Aliant, Diageo (beverage company) and Grand & Toy in its blue-chip client roster.

In 2011, he founded Karma Gaming and built it into a global supplier of digital lottery products before selling it two years ago. In 2013, he and others took over a Toronto beverage company now called Iconic Breweries, which is, he says, “a multifaceted, multi-million-dollar” enterprise. He unpacked his stake in 2016.

LeBlanc’s latest calculated gamble is an ownership position in Charlotte-town Metal Products, a food processing equipment manufacturer on P.E.I. which had fallen on hard times. “It was a distressed asset,” he says. “But we have successfully turned it around from annual revenues of about \$10 million when we first took over the company in 2017 to now closer to \$20.5 million.”

The secret to all of this, he says, is a heady mixture of faith and something like forensic futurism: Find (or found) a company that’s basically sound, uncover its hidden possibilities, and peg its growth to emerging, disruption-resistant market trends. At CMP, after two years of record growth, that means joining forces with FPS (Food Processing Solutions) of Richmond, B.C. “It’s a good deal for everyone and an exciting new chapter for a P.E.I. business,” says LeBlanc about the February sale.

His interest in business opportunities is not waning, of course. In fact, he’s looking at a new one right now. But, oddly enough, his newly illustrated arm (a project he began three years ago) keeps him grounded.

“I have one tattoo of a sleeping tiger, which is a goof I played with my kids,” he smiles. “Another one is of a statue of a self-made man. On my bicep is a picture of a big lighthouse.”

There must be room for more. After all, this erstwhile entrepreneur has plenty of skin left in the game of life and work.



Top: Paul and wife April (centre) with their daughters (l-r), Rowan, Eliza, and Campbell. Bottom: Paul (far right) trekking the Swiss Alps with his sister Pam and brother Rob. (Submitted photos)

FIVE FUN FACTS

1 Paul started his sleeve tattoo after consulting with his wife, April, in 2015. Now, after many—many—hours under the needle, he’s looking forward to the few finishing touches left. As for the pain, he says: “Yeah... I’m not a big fan.”

2 Paul and his brother, Rob, and his sister, Pam, are the sort of siblings that compendiums about well-adjusted families feature; that is to say, they are rare birds. A hike through the Swiss Alps? Sure, they’ve flocked there together.

3 Throughout his career, LeBlanc has relied on the support of his family: his late father, mother, brother, sister and, most of all, perhaps, his wife April and their three daughters, Eliza, Campbell and Rowan. Long beach walks at their home in Fort Lauderdale (they have others in Dartmouth and P.E.I.) have become a family tradition.

4 What does a man who makes time to build a successful career and a thorough and balanced home life do with his precious few hours of down time? Karaoke anyone? Paul and friends appreciate all opportunities for full-throated fancy dress warbling.

5 Once, Paul, his brother Rob and their father staged a promotional photo shoot in which the three portrayed themselves as mobsters hiding a body. Friend and Halifax entrepreneur Mickey MacDonald, who supplied the car and the backyard setting for the deed, was amused.