

Inside the Corrosive Workplace Culture of the Dallas Mavericks

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It was an hour or so before tip-off. The [Dallas Mavericks](#) were hosting a nationally televised game during the 2010–11 NBA season. And, deep inside the American Airlines Center, a recently-hired Mavericks support staff employee was eating dinner in the media dining room. As the woman sat down, the team president and CEO, Terdema Ussery, asked if he could join her. She grew nervous, not because Ussery was her boss's boss, or because he was one of the most prominent figures in the Dallas sportscape. It was because his reputation as a serial sexual harasser of women preceded him.

At this meal, with ESPN crew members seated nearby, Ussery struck up an unusual conversation. As the woman recalls the exchange, Ussery claimed that he knew what she was going to do over the coming weekend. When the woman asked, confusedly, what Ussery meant, he smiled.

"You're going to get gang-banged," he asserted, "aren't you?"

"No," the woman responded, caught off-guard. "Actually, I'm going to the movies with friends."

"No," Ussery insisted. "You're definitely getting gang-banged."

The employee was startled but not entirely surprised. When she first accepted her job with the Mavericks in 2010, she'd shared the news with her local Dallas women's running group. Instead of congrats, she recalls, she received warnings. "Watch out for the president," one friend said. "Whatever you do, don't get trapped in an elevator with him."

When the woman recounted the dining room exchange to female colleagues at the Mavs, they too were something other than shocked. One shared that Ussery had repeatedly propositioned her for sex, even offering to leave his marriage if the woman relented—an account the second woman confirmed to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED for this story. Another woman shared that Ussery's inappropriate behavior was one of the reasons she was quitting her sales job after more than a

decade. (Reached by SI, that woman declined comment, but records confirm that her employment with the Mavericks ended at a time consistent with the chronology of this account.)

"It was a real life *Animal House*," says one former organization employee who left recently after spending roughly five years with the Mavs. "And I only say 'was' because I'm not there anymore. I'm sure it's still going on."

Ussery, who left the Mavericks in 2015, was hardly alone. Interviews with more than a dozen former and current Mavericks employees in different departments, conducted during a months-long SPORTS ILLUSTRATED investigation, paint a picture of a corporate culture rife with misogyny and predatory sexual behavior: alleged public fondling by the team president; outright domestic assault by a high-profile member of the Mavs.com staff; unsupportive or even intimidating responses from superiors who heard complaints of inappropriate behavior from their employees; even an employee who openly watched pornography at his desk. Most sources did not want their names used for a variety of reasons including fear of retaliation and ostracization and limits imposed by agreements they signed with the team.

While sources referred to the Mavericks office as a "locker room culture," the team's *actual* locker room was a refuge. Says one female former senior staffer: "I dealt with players all the time. I had hundreds of interactions with players and never once had an issue...they always knew how to treat people. Then I'd go to the office and it was this zoo, this complete shitshow. My anxiety would go down dealing with players; it would go up when I got to my desk."

A half-dozen female former Mavericks or American Airlines Center employees contacted by SI claim that they left the sports sector because of a work environment and structure that left them feeling vulnerable and devalued while protecting—and continuing to employ—powerful men who misbehaved. "There was built-in protection for a lot of men," says a former male department head at American Airlines Center. "The lack of oversight and compassion within all levels of the business was alarming."

"You don't feel safe going to work and it's not long before you look for another job," says one of those women, now employed in a different sector. "And then you wonder why there aren't more women working in sports. Really?"

You'd be hard-pressed to find a more credentialed sports executive than Terdema Ussery. A Princeton graduate, he eventually served on the school's Board of Trustees. He earned a master's degree from Harvard and a law degree from Cal-Berkeley. After a few years in a white-shoe law firm, Ussery left legal practice for a career in sports and quickly arrowed to the top of the profession. He was only 32 when, in 1991, he was named commissioner of the CBA. Two years later, he was named president of Nike Sports Management, a division aimed at serving as the agents for Nike's athletes. In 1993, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED even published a flattering profile of Ussery titled, "[In a League of His Own.](#)"

By the time Ussery left Nike to become CEO of the Mavericks in 1997, his name was openly floated as a future NBA Commissioner. Which suited the incumbent, David Stern, just fine. Ussery "has done it all at the team, league and corporate level," Stern told *Black Enterprise* in September 2003. For more than a decade Ussery served as the Mavs' alternate governor with the NBA.

Ussery was polished, well-connected and, colleagues say, a marketing whiz who could sell with evangelical conviction. But those same colleagues say that Ussery routinely transgressed workplace boundaries. In the summer of 1998, the Mavericks conducted an internal investigation of Ussery after several female employees made complaints of inappropriate workplace behavior.

Ussery was retained, but shortly thereafter the entire Mavericks workforce received revamped employee handbooks that included a new sexual harassment policy. Buddy Pittman, a new head of H.R., was hired by the Mavs that summer as well, no coincidence according to multiple team sources. "They basically brought [Pittman] in to save T from himself," says one former employee, referring to Ussery by his nickname. She noted as well that Pittman's cubicle—he did not have a private workspace—was within earshot of Ussery's office.

When asked at the time about his alleged misconduct by the local media, Ussery deflected and responded tersely: "It's been addressed. I really don't want to elaborate any further. What we're focused on is building a great organization. That was and is our focus."

This investigation hardly curtailed Ussery's career momentum. In February 1999, he received a three-year contract extension. When Mark Cuban purchased the Mavericks in 2000, Ussery remained the team president.

It seems the investigation also hardly curtailed Ussery's inappropriate office behavior. Two women claimed to SI that Ussery harassed them for years. These incidents ranged from inappropriate remarks to requests for sex to touching women's calves and thighs during meetings. One of the women says she made Pittman aware—"countless times... I 'leaned in' so much I fell over"—of Ussery's behavior; the other chose not to, frustrated by what she deemed to be Pittman's unhelpful response to an unrelated complaint she had raised. "I felt trapped, frozen, scared," says one of the women. "This was the CEO of the organization....and it was clear he wasn't going to get fired."

"I am deeply disappointed that anonymous sources have made such outright false and inflammatory accusations against me," Ussery said in a statement to SI on Tuesday. "During my career with the Mavericks, I have strived to conduct myself with character, integrity and empathy for others.

"During my nearly 20 year tenure with the Mavericks, I am not aware of any sexual harassment complaints about me or any findings by the organization that I engaged in inappropriate conduct. In fact, on multiple occasions I and other senior executives at the organization raised concerns—both in person and in emails—about other Mavericks employees who had engaged in highly inappropriate—and in some cases, threatening—sexual conduct. The organization refused to address these concerns, and I believe these misleading claims about me are part of an attempt to shift blame for the failure to remove employees who created an uncomfortable and hostile work environment within the Mavericks organization."

When discussing the office culture to SI, former Mavericks employees—male and female—cited the team's HR office as part of the problem. Pittman has been known to take strong positions on social and political issues such as abortion and immigration, sending charged email messages to select staffers and friends that leave little doubt where he stands. (SI obtained a 2013 email that Pittman forwarded to friends and colleagues titled, "The best response to gay marriage I've seen"; the email bristled at the widespread acceptance of NBA player Jason Collins's announcement that he is gay.) Pittman's overt social and religious leanings have a chilling effect on the willingness to approach him with sensitive workplace issues, say some former Mavericks employees, both male and female.

And so, instead of making formal complaints to HR, at least two women began taking contemporaneous notes on their unpleasant exchanges with Ussery and other male colleagues. They shared their written accounts with *SI*. A sampling of their entries:

- August/September 2007: *Terdema stops me near where the main door ... is and says to me "seriously ... just one time."*
- Jan. 17, 2008: *Terdema asks me if in another life would I marry him? I respond if it was another life I would be a millionaire and own this team and he couldn't handle working for me.*
- August 12, 2013: One woman recorded that she complained to her boss, Paul Monroe, then the Mavericks' VP of marketing, about a culture unfriendly to women—citing Ussery's behavior specifically. According to her notes, Monroe said he'd drive her to a meeting. Once they were settled in his car, Monroe threatened to fire her if she "didn't shut up and do [your] job," telling her to "just take" the abuse from Ussery, adding "he's the boss." Wrote the woman, *I felt threatened not only for my safety but he was threatening my position within the company.*

"I don't recall this conversation nor the context," Monroe said when contacted by *SI*. "The company culture was intense, you were expected to perform at a high level. Terdema Ussery was an assertive leader that was very direct when challenging his management team and staff.

"During my tenure with the Mavs no employee ever reported to me that they were a victim of inappropriate behavior. I left the Mavs organization in 2014 on my own accord and in good standing to pursue other opportunities."

- April/May 2014: *Terdema sits next to me in the two chairs in front of his desk and as he is talking to me, he puts his hand on my left thigh, about halfway up the thigh.*

Earl K. Sneed was a few months removed from graduating from the University of Oklahoma with a journalism degree, and he was eager to work in the NBA. In a moment right out of *Shark Tank*, Sneed wrote an email directly to Mark Cuban in 2009, telling the Mavs owner, "I [am] somebody that could do something for you like nobody else is doing."

Cuban didn't respond directly, but Sneed was offered a job freelancing for the team's website. After working with the Mavs for roughly a year, Sneed wrote Cuban again. He wanted to remain with the Mavericks but was entertaining other full-time job offers. Cuban pressed Sneed for a salary figure. Sneed responded. The two negotiated and Sneed became the team's fulltime beat writer for Mavs.com in 2010-11.

Midway through that season, Sneed was involved in a domestic dispute with a girlfriend. According to a Dallas police report, Sneed "sat on top of her and slapped her on the face and chest." At one point he told the woman, "I'm going to f----- kick your ass. Today is gonna be the worst day of your life." Sneed, according to the report, "fled before the reporting officer arrived." The woman, according to the report, suffered a fractured right wrist and bruises on her arms and chest in the altercation.

Two months later, Sneed was arrested at the Mavericks facility and charged with assault, a class A misdemeanor. On June 28, 2012, he pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges of family violence assault and interference with emergency request. He was sentenced to a \$750 fine, supervised community service, and enrollment in an anger management program. Upon completion of his sentence the charges were dismissed. (Contacted by SI, Sneed declined comment.)

Sneed's legal troubles had a measurable impact on his job: According to the Mavericks his assault record prevented him from gaining admission to Canada, meaning he was unable to accompany the team when it played in Toronto. This did not end Sneed's employment with the Mavericks. It also didn't end his acts of domestic violence. After his plea, Sneed dated a Mavericks colleague, a relationship the two made public in keeping with the team's fraternization policies. Multiple sources tell SI that in 2014 the couple had a dispute and Sneed turned violent, hitting the woman.

Her face swollen, she went to work but within days reported the incident to her immediate supervisor and to Pittman. The woman recalls Pittman being professional and supportive; she also recalls Pittman informing her of Sneed's prior arrest. In retrospect, she wonders how Sneed could have stayed employed. "He shouldn't have a job there," she says.

Sneed continued with the Mavericks. He co-hosted Fox Sports Southwest's "Mavs Insider" weekly television show until August of 2017 and remained the beat writer for Mavs.com. Asked why the team would continue employing Sneed when, already having pled guilty to criminal charges for violence against one woman, he allegedly physically assaulted another woman—who was also a team employee—Pittman declined comment. After being asked for comment on the Sneed situation on Monday, Cuban told SI that he had just fired Pittman and suspended Sneed. "I felt sick to my stomach," the owner said. The next day, Sneed was fired, a move the Mavs alluded to in [a statement released late Tuesday evening.](#)

As for the woman, she decided the Mavericks were an unsafe work environment for her and quit her job. She signed a standard severance agreement, receiving two weeks of pay. Within days she moved back to her hometown in another state and began looking for a new position in sports. After applying for more than 250 jobs over an eight-month period, she finally landed another position in the industry, and now works for another professional team.

About Mark Cuban. Does he have a role in—or knowledge of—this hostile work environment? It's such a glaring question that more than a half-dozen sources, unprompted and independently, volunteered their thoughts. To a person, they make clear that, to their knowledge, Cuban was never a perpetrator, never involved in sexual harassment himself. Yet, most also find it hard to imagine that Cuban is unaware of the corrosive culture in some corners of his organization. "Trust me, Mark knows everything that goes on," says one longtime former Mavericks employee. "Of course Mark knew [about the instances of harassment and assault]. Everyone knew."

The very model of a modern hands-on owner, Cuban prides himself on the extent to which he is involved in team affairs. (SI obtained an interoffice email Cuban sent in 2010 complaining about production value of Mavs' telecasts. "Who exactly calls for the replays?" Cuban wrote. "You tell that person they are about to lose their job if they don't figure it out.") In the forthcoming book, *The Soul of Basketball*, author Ian Thomsen asks Cuban how he is different from other owners. Cuban's response: "The big difference is, being that I'm so close to everything that's going around, you can't bullshit me."

Reached by SI on Monday, Cuban expressed embarrassment and horror at the accusations—but insisted he had no knowledge of the corrosive culture in his offices. “This is all new to me,” he said. “The only awareness I have is because I heard you guys were looking into some things.... Based off of what I’ve read here, we just fired our HR person. I don’t have any tolerance for what I’ve read.”

Cuban continued in an emotional response: “It’s wrong. It’s abhorrent. It’s not a situation we condone. I can’t tell you how many times, particularly since all this [#MeToo] stuff has been coming out recently I asked our HR director, ‘Do we have a problem? Do we have any issues I have to be aware of?’ And the answer was no.”

Pressed on how it is that a proudly hyperattentive owner could be so oblivious, Cuban said, “I deferred to the CEO, who at the time was Terdema, and to HR.... I was involved in basketball operations, but other than getting the financials and reports, I was not involved in the day to day [of the business side] at all. That’s why I just deferred. I let people do their jobs. And if there were anything like this at all I was supposed to be made aware, obviously I was not.”

One of the women alleging harassment has another theory: Cuban turned a blind eye as long as revenue came in. Which it did. By all accounts, under Ussery the Mavericks’ finances improved dramatically. He was instrumental in securing \$240 million in public funding for the American Airlines Center, which opened in 2001. Ussery also has been credited with bringing the 2010 NBA All-Star Game to Dallas, where it was played out before 108,713 fans at AT&T Stadium. In a glowing 2011 profile in *Dallas Magazine*, Ussery was referred to as: “Right-hand man to Mark Cuban. Friend to NBA Commissioner David Stern. And one of the most powerful African-American executives in a league dominated by black players.”

The same year, the Mavericks won the NBA title. A few weeks later a female employee was organizing championship memorabilia for a team function. According to the woman’s notes, when Ussery sensed that the woman was under stress, he offered a solution. “You would be better if I kissed you.”

In the summer of 2015, Ussery left the Mavericks after 18 years with the franchise. According to Cuban, the departure had nothing to do with harassment allegations. As Ussery left, he was profuse in expressing gratitude. “[I] especially thank Mark Cuban,” Ussery said in a farewell statement emailed employees and posted on Mavs’ website. “Working alongside him these past 15

years has been nothing short of amazing." In a line that struck some of the Mavs' female employees—and some former co-workers who left the profession on account of his sexual harassment—as bitterly ironic, Ussery added: "I want to express my gratitude to the fans, our sponsors and most importantly, the incredible staff I've had the privilege of working with in Dallas."

Ussery transitioned to another high-profile, high-power job as Under Armour's new president for global sports. A press release dated July 16, 2015, introduced Ussery and stated that he would start work that September 14. Ussery was to play a "major role" with the company "spearheading category management across all key brand and business units around the world to drive authenticity and connectivity with consumers."

Multiple sources tell SI that early in his tenure with Under Armour, Ussery rode in an elevator with a female co-worker, far lower in rank. During the elevator ride, he behaved in a sexually inappropriate manner. The employee complained to Human Resources. In early November, after less than two months on the job, Ussery abruptly resigned from Under Armour in what was called an "organizational reshuffle." (Says a spokeswoman for Under Armour: "While we cannot disclose specific personnel matters, Under Armour takes these matters very seriously.")

Currently, Ussery is listed as the principal of 1 Blakely Consulting, which is registered in Texas and, on its web site, boasts the slogan: *The cowards never started. The weak died along the way. That leaves us.*

He remains a board member of Chicago-based TreeHouse Foods. Public records indicated that he exercised more than \$800,000 in the company's stock in 2017. Another online bio states that "Ussery is currently on sabbatical."

Meanwhile, Cuban is just starting to deal with the fallout from the behavior of his former CEO and others. Within hours of being contacted by SI, in addition to firing Pittman and initially suspending Sneed (whom he later fired), Cuban said that the Mavs were establishing a hotline for counseling and support services for past and current team employees. He is mandating sensitivity training for all employees, himself included.

"I want to deal with this issue," Cuban told SI. "I mean, this is, obviously there's a problem in the Mavericks organization and we've got to fix it. That's it. And we're going to take every step. It's not something we tolerate. I don't want it. It's not

something that's acceptable. I'm embarrassed, to be honest with you, that it happened under my ownership, and it needs to be fixed. Period. End of story."