

## Les Perry: The Most Interesting Partner in the World —

He doesn't always drink beer, but when he does, he prefers something other than Dos Equis. Nevertheless, he's the most interesting partner in the world.

- As a young lad herding cattle, the bulls stopped and asked him for directions.
- When forming a softball team, Barry Bonds asked if he could play on the team.
- Today, Supreme Court Justices call him, requesting citations.

He's the most interesting partner in the world.

Softball was his life sport, but while other young men were playing softball for fun, he was shrewdly picking out future leaders. The nucleus of the present Perry Law Firm (the legal equivalent of a great rhythm & blues band), comes from a bunch of young lawyers learning teamwork on the playing field, playing softball for years for The Nutty Irishman in Santa Rosa.

While others were talking about building a firm, he went out and did it, his way. The three original partners, Les, Mike Miller and John Johnson proudly tell the tale to anyone who will listen, and some who won't, about the firm being formed late one night at The Nutty Irishman, after one or two too many beers.

Les was born July 24, 1948, and grew up in rural California. His formative years were shaped by living on an isolated cattle ranching operation near Oroville, and the early influences of his parents, Felicia Harris Perry and Donald Perry. "Isolated" does not really do it justice. With no one within miles to play with, Les learned to kick a football straight up into the air, and then catch it. To our lasting benefit, it turned out not to be a marketable skill.

But he was more—a future astrological Leo in every sense. He drove a D-8 Caterpillar long before he was old enough to have a driver's license, and somehow the determination and might of that 80,000 pound monster seeped into his veins. He can be a rock when necessary.

He had graduated from Las Plumas High School in Oroville in 1966 with a solid academic record. But he only achieved a 1.8 GPA his first year in the School of Mining at the University of Nevada (including a "D" in Bowling), after which he and his father came to loggerheads. Mining

was a course selected by his dad, not the lad.

It is said that events make the man, and what happened next was all-defining. His father cut him off from any further financial assistance whatsoever, and let him "sink or swim." Some would regard that as harsh. But one year later, and entirely on his own, Les had applied to, then transferred to, the University of California at Davis. With no scholarships or family money, the former Cat Skinner proceeded to put himself through college and law school at UC Davis. He worked in hard, menial jobs, sometimes 12 hours a day, 7 days a week during the hot valley summers, in such inglorious pursuits as mucking peach pits off the floors of a valley fruit picking operation.

Today, he heads one of the largest law firms on the North Coast. His father would be proud.

His legal career reflects that same stubborn determination to succeed his own way that he exhibited as he made his exit out of Nevada and through the University of California at Davis. Although he had an excellent mind and record at both Davis (BS in Economics, 1971) and Davis Law School

(JD, 1974), he chose, instead, to ignore the established large law firm climb to success. He and two fellows he met playing softball at Davis (there is a theme here), a guy named Pat Emery and another, John McCarthy, chose the road less well-traveled, and it has made all the difference.

The three moved to Santa Rosa, a locale to which none had any prior ties. They started by knocking on doors, getting clerking jobs and waiting for the Bar results. In 1974, passing the Bar successfully on the first try, he and his co-rookies, not intimidated by the fear of survival, purchased their own office building on 4th street, sanded the floors, put on a coat of paint and opened a firm, all with a pittance of a down payment and a lot of grit.

The three started down paths that became the successes of today. Two of the three are still here, at the helms of two excellent Sonoma County-based law firms. With Pat Emery being a COD Recipient in 2013 and Les a COD Recipient in 2014, they have been honored back-to-back by their profession.

It is reported that one of Les' earliest executive decisions marked the future of all law firms with which he became



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associated. In their first summer of practice, the three had only \$25 in the bank. That was not the time to get risky. Yet, with that rare perspective that marks him today as the most interesting partner in the world, he cut a check to himself, to Pat and to John for \$7 apiece, and they all went to the Fair to gamble on the horses, leaving \$4 with which to operate a firm.

This bold step assumed a lot, of course, but years later the investment has clearly paid off. Les has since served on the Fair Board and become friends with and representative to some of the most prominent people in Sonoma County. His participation with organizations in this county is a legend. More than fifteen local organizations can claim Les Perry as a past board member, chairman, or appointed representative of the people. He currently serves on the Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital Board of Trustees, the Sonoma County Harvest Fair, North Bay Leadership Council and the Sonoma County Fair Foundation. Les says that he probably had the most fun serving on the Volunteer Center Board and the County Fair Board and is proudest of his service on the Sonoma County Planning Commission where he had a role in completing the 1989 General Plan, which, by the way, has guided Sonoma County into a balanced appreciation of the environment and the needs of modernity.

The die was cast. He was someone who knew how to play hard and to work hard, with the best and the least of us, and that has helped transform his career into one of the finest ever to emerge from Sonoma County. From the less economically advantaged to the millionaires in this community, he has come to be known as a man with solid character, intellectual honesty, perspective and a rare talent of measuring situations and people.

Les still values as his clients Brother Toby and Starcross, who he has represented, pro bono, for decades. He also has represented numerous developers of world-class projects here, such as Auberge in Kenwood and Saggio Hills in Healdsburg. His client list reads like a Who's Who of Sonoma County.

This year, more than two decades after handling a fierce custody case in which he got a father custody of his young daughter, the daughter invited Les to her wedding, believing that the wedding would not be complete without the man who fought so hard so that she could have her father in her life.

Les was part of the early environmental community and values his relationships with the early activists who were part of the avant-garde and fighting the good fight. He is

proud, and justly so, that in all his work over the years, he has tried to instill respect for nature and the environment, and does not consider his work for developers as the least bit inconsistent with that.

In his first year as an attorney, he was thrust unexpectedly and suddenly into being the lead trial attorney challenging the sufficiency of the EIS on Warm Springs Dam. His efforts caused the might of the United States Army Corps of Engineers to halt in its tracks, and go back and redesign that dam up to adequate earthquake standards, standards which, by the way, make us all a bit safer.

To this day he helps preserve the environment, in all he does, whether for a developer or a neighborhood group. He counts as his contributions the Warm Springs Dam litigation, helping form the Bouverie Preserve (he formed a close friendship with David Bouverie), first prevailing and then negotiating a mutually beneficial settlement in the Geysers' Wastewater Pipeline through Alexander Valley and ironically, today, he stands in another battlefield, advocating respect for the environment in the struggle between the City of Petaluma and the landowners on the Lafferty Ranch dispute.

One of our proudest moments as partners came this year when the *Petaluma Argus-Courier* printed a seemingly disparaging cartoon, lambasting Les for his work on the Lafferty Ranch, as if he was not "environmental" enough. The original of that cartoonists' drawing is now framed on the wall of his office. It's there along with a host of government and nonprofit recognitions, personal thanks, and a movie appreciation credit in the Les Craven movie, *Scream* (in which Les is named in the movie credits for his sensible and solid work). His then secretary took to referring to him as "...the chainsaw attorney: cuts everything but his fees."

When asked what might stand as his greatest legal accomplishment, he is most proud of *Sundstrom v. County of Mendocino* (1988) 202 Cal.App.3d 296[248 Cal. Rptr. 352]. It's a case that is now a landmark in CEQA litigation, the client being a decent man who was being unfairly treated by the regulators. Les helped guide the law to the correct result. It is one of the most cited CEQA cases.

Naturally, the most interesting partner is married to an equally interesting and gracious woman, Lani Perry, and has a happy family life and a small vineyard from which they and their friends make some pretty good wine.

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When he became a single parent early in his legal career, he unquestionably made the right choice and sacrificed money and power to give time to raise two incredible daughters, Alexis and Tessa. Today, Alexis Young has an MBA from the University of Chicago and lives in San Francisco, working for Accenture Consulting. Alexis and her husband, Kurt, are proud parents of a one year old, Corbin Perry Young. Tessa Perry has a Master's Degree from the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University and is now working for a home builder in Washington, D.C.

Those two young women have the foundational gift of a father who loved them, served them and taught them the principles of life contained on the sporting field. While seated with Tessa at a nothing Warriors game a few years back, (with the Warriors already badly beaten starting the 4th quarter) Les suggested to her that it was ok if she wanted to leave early to get back to her place in the City, to which Tessa tersely replied, "We weren't raised that way."

Today he is the lead partner in a partnership of ten lawyers, with another 12 lawyers in the group. The partnership is equal in every sense. While we all like to say we are governed by consensus, the truth is we have a leader who constantly shapes that consensus.

His long-time friends and office managers, Luke Elwood and Pam Kruse say it all. Luke describes it as an uncanny sense of "measure." The lawyers in PJAMM are not always easy-going. Yet they somehow step into line and play as a team under this man. He waits, measures more than what is actually being discussed, and then suggests the result.

It's in the Tao, "...all leadership is service..." and somehow Les Perry has mastered that.

Pam points out he meshes his talents at assessing situations and people with his humor, and most of all, his humility. She says he's the last one to take credit for how he keeps us together, insisting that our management style is more "chewing gum and bailing wire." Humility, humor and grace under pressure are what she sees as the essential ingredients, and we all agree.

Those who have ever had the experience of being in a tough football game or in a highly contested soccer match, playing under a field general who lifts the team, understand. His leadership is respected, not because of his position but because of his quality. Quarterbacks who have displayed that in recent times include the two great "Joes," Montana and Theisman. Another with whom we have played is Les Perry.

We now honor persons selected as having a "Career of Distinction." In Les Perry, you also honor all that the legal profession can be. One of his earliest professional influences was a fine attorney up in Butte County, Bob Blade, whom Les described as displaying a total attention to detail, belief in his clients, and an indomitable will not to quit—all qualities which describe Les Perry.

There are many thanks given on a night like this, but I think we include Les' ability to act with resolve and confidence in the face of adversity, especially early in his academic career, allowing so many to benefit from his character, his humor and his humility. We thank Lani Perry for all she brings to Les and to us. We thank Les' clients for their trust in him, and most of all we thank each other and Les for the privilege of being partners with the greatest partner in the world. ☸

*By Malcolm Manwell, with contributions by the Partners at Perry Johnson Anderson Miller & Moskowitz LLP*