
PEOPLE BEHIND THE PARK: ERIK JUDSON

This hire was key development

For eight years, Judson saw project through to the finish

By Bill Center
STAFF WRITER

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Erik Judson takes personal credit for nothing regarding Petco Park.

Asked about a detail that everyone else says was Judson's idea, the 36-year-old former minor league infielder says, "One of us came up with that."

And maybe Judson didn't have many of the ideas. After all, he's neither an architect nor an expert in building construction.

But those in the Padres family will tell you that Judson provided much of the glue that kept the Petco Park project moving for the past eight years.

"Erik's achievements to date are very impressive," Padres owner John Moores said. "He's clearly a keeper. We think he has an unlimited ceiling. I think he could fill any job in baseball."

Few of his future jobs, however, will carry the signature of the project he is wrapping up as the Padres' "Vice President/Development."

That development was Petco Park.

Judson was one of the first people hired by Moores and then-club President Larry Lucchino in 1996 when they determined a new ballpark was the only way a major league baseball team could survive in San Diego.

At the time, Judson was working on his MBA at San Diego State and was leading a six-student team performing a comparative analysis of the financing of sports facilities across the country.

That study led Judson to a meeting with Moores and Lucchino.

"Erik had an early star quality," Moores said. "Larry was particularly impressed by him."

In the summer of 1996, at the age of 28, Judson signed on with the Padres to help research the possibility of new ballpark in San Diego. Aside from a three-year stint as a shortstop in the Philadelphia farm system (1991-93), it was the first job for the Idyllwild native and former UC San Diego shortstop.

"There were many people more experienced than I for that job," Judson said. "I did not have any sports facility experience. But Larry and John saw something . . . and I'm forever grateful."

So, too, are San Diego's baseball fans.

Both the job and Judson grew over the years. He has worn many hats as the overseer of the Petco Park project – politician, planner, financial adviser, consultant and nit-picker, to name a few.

But the hat he's happiest with is the hard hat he wore through much of the process. During the lengthy – and once-interrupted – construction process, Judson liked to tour the entire site at least twice a day.

"In addition to being real smart and real energetic, Erik's attention to the smallest as well as the largest of details was crucial to this project," Moores said.

"There's quite a difference between building a hotel and a ballpark. In a hotel, each floor is like the room under it, every room almost like the one adjacent to it. There was a numbing number of details in this project. At one time our punch list had 25,000 items."

It was up to Judson to see that each was addressed. But his style is far from being the ramrod boss.

"I guess the thing I'm proudest of is the teamwork and personal relationships we had during this process," Judson said. "The amount of individual pride taken by everyone who worked on the project was amazing. And I mean everyone. We're all elated that we're done . . . but I'm going to miss being part of this team.

"I'm so proud just to be a part of it."

Looking back, Judson said he wonders how it happened, how he got to fill this role. Perhaps it was his background – he was the son of a contractor, he had played professional baseball, and he was getting an MBA thanks to a project focused on creating sports facilities.

"I never tried to play architect or construction boss," Judson said. "I had to test in my mind everything that was going on from the views of the fans, the players, the people of San Diego and the Padres. My job was to look at everything time and time again."

Erin, Erik's wife of seven months, recalled when her husband got the job.

"We happened to be going to a Padres game with friends the same day Erik was meeting with Moores and Lucchino. He came out into the parking lot where we were tailgating and said, 'They gave me a job.' We had been dating around six months Petco Park is like our child."

Judson proposed in a Tower Loft suite at the ballpark, and the Judsons were married last August in Moores' home in Pebble Beach. "It's the only wedding we've had at the home," Moores says proudly.

They delayed their honeymoon because of the ballpark, finally taking it this month. But even from the site of a glacier on New Zealand's South Island, Judson was in contact with the Padres through a satellite phone.

"I'm extremely proud of him," said Erin, a speech pathologist in the San Diego City Schools system. "It's been overwhelming at times. There have been tremendous highs and lows the enormity of this. I remember starting with the cardboard cutouts."

The most notable lows were the suspension of construction during the spate of lawsuits and the split between Moores and Lucchino.

"I had backing from both," he said. "I can't say enough good things about both. They were two strong people not on the same page. But Larry wanted me to stay with the project. And John wanted me to stay. The great thing was, they agreed on me."

What does Judson see when he looks at Petco Park these days?

"I see a lot of people who put their all into this. I'm proud. It's not perfect, because no ballpark will ever be That's the beauty of it, there's always a new twist you could have done. But when we step back and look at it we're proud."

Now that Petco Park is done, what's next for Judson?

"I'm not completely sure," he said. "I'd like to stay with the Padres. I think I'm well-suited for the game."

Moore agrees.

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