



John Olfert, CPA, CGA **Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer,** **True North Sports + Entertainment**



There's not an empty seat in the waiting room at the True North Sports + Entertainment office on Graham Avenue in downtown Winnipeg. The phone is ringing off the hook, but the receptionist handles the rush expertly. People are coming and going at an alarming rate, yet each interaction is carefully measured and coordinated. Everyone has a meeting, it seems. It must be hockey season.

The glass door opens and John Olfert, CPA, CGA walks in with a smile as he cuts through the crowd. "Sorry for the wait," he says as we walk back to his office. "I was just in a meeting discussing the new organ we installed at MTS Centre this year."

Olfert is the Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer of True North Sports + Entertainment. He and his team are in charge of, among other things, making sure the entire Winnipeg Jets game day experience exceeds your expectations—from the moment you leave your house to go to the game, to the moment you return home.

Although you'd be hard pressed to know it now after seeing the organized hive of activity that is a daily occurrence at the True North offices, it wasn't always this way for Olfert.

"I graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 1991 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Without really knowing what I wanted to become, or what industry I would end up in, I did know I needed more education. Looking up to those I aspired to become like, I saw that the common denominator was a professional designation. That coupled with the influence of an older brother and father, both having accounting designations, it seemed the next logical step."

Olfert came from humble beginnings. After graduating he worked for Palliser Furniture in the warehouse before joining Investors Group where he was a Mutual Fund Accountant for two years, before working four years in the non-profit sector. Along the way he sharpened his skills in the practical competences of accounting and credits several great mentors who guided him throughout his early career.

Combining his experience to date, he moved on to a technology-focused venture capital start-up, that would become an early investor in True North.

One day the owner called him in and said, "John, when you get back from Christmas break I want you to go take a look at the Manitoba Moose because I'm looking at getting involved in building an arena." The rest, as they say, is history.

Olfert spent a week with the Moose and eventually went on to build a financial model that would become the foundation for True North's business plan—all while still working his day job.

However, it was around this time that the venture capital company was winding down. "I left venture capital work on Friday and I started working for True North on Monday. It was two years before the MTS Centre opened—just in the pre-demolition phase—so I had the privilege of being a part of demolition, construction, purchasing equipment, financing, and building our initial full-time team of 90."





By 2005, Olfert was entrenched as True North's Chief Financial Officer and he and his team were working on their first NHL models with the quiet goal of getting a National Hockey League (NHL) team back in Winnipeg.

We all know how successful those models turned out to be. Now two years into his expanded role as Chief Operating Officer, Olfert defines his current role this way: "Over simplified -- Chevy [Jets General Manager Kevin Cheveldayoff] does hockey, and I get to work with a team of people that provides leadership to all of our business activity at our venues, for our teams, and with the True North Youth Foundation."

The list of major projects Olfert and his team have worked on are well documented and widely celebrated. The opening of the MTS Centre and MTS Iceplex, the return of the Winnipeg Jets, and, more recently, the return of the Manitoba Moose and acquisition of the Burton Cummings Theatre are just a few of the things that he and his organization have turned into the successes they are today.

You never know how things will work out. "You get involved in not-for-profits, you get involved in a venture capital company, you get asked to look at a building, and you never think that one day you might be part of buying an NHL team. It's certainly been quite the experience." Olfert trails off for a second, before adding, "And who knows what's on the horizon."

As we walked back toward the busy waiting room one can't help but peer through the windows and see the giant construction project across the street that is True North Square beginning to take shape. Who knows what's on the horizon indeed.