

CALIFORNIA PULSE

DLA Piper Chair: From Student Athlete To Sports Strategist

By Tracey Read | 2023-11-03 16:34:47 -0400 · [Listen to article](#)

Frank Ryan likes to joke that while at Syracuse University, he was an athlete-student with wrestling as his undergraduate pursuit, followed by his finance degree.

The four-year varsity letter winner went on to graduate from Syracuse University College of Law, Order of the Coif and magna cum laude.

He's now known as a go-to strategist and litigator for high-profile clients including Disney, ABC, TomTom, the Pac-12, Nike, ESPN, beIN Media Group, Al Jazeera, Medtronic and ConMed, and handled significant matters related to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Ryan, who has been **chair** of DLA Piper Americas since 2021, said sports remains a huge part of his life.

Besides handling numerous jury trials and domestic and international



Frank Ryan

arbitrations, Ryan created the firm's Legal Elite Athlete Pipeline Scholarship Program. LEAP was designed to help new lawyers be successful, improve diversity in the legal profession, and give opportunities to students who might otherwise not have considered a career in law.

He also sits on the board of directors for Beat the Streets NYC, an organization that mentors New York City student wrestlers.

Ryan and his wife, Melissa, a former attorney, have three sons. The couple's oldest son, Zach, played soccer at Stanford University and is a professional soccer player now in the Washington, D.C., area. The middle son, Sean, is a soccer player at [Ohio State University](#), where Ryan's brother, Tom, is head wrestling coach. Ryan's youngest son, Will, is a sophomore at Syracuse.

On Wednesday, the firm announced Ryan had been elected to a second four-year term as Americas chair. The new term will begin Jan. 1, 2025.

Ryan joined the firm in 2010 as a partner, U.S. co-chair of the intellectual property and technology practice, and deputy chair of the media, sport and entertainment sector. Before that, he was a partner and chair of [Nixon Peabody LLP's](#) litigation practice.

Ryan talked to Law360 Pulse recently about what he still hopes to accomplish as chair and where the firm is headed. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What are your goals for the next term?

It's been a really strong three-year performance so far, and much of it was due to executing a strategic plan that was started in 2019. We want to stick to that plan.

When **DLA was founded** [in 2005], the motto of the firm was "everything

matters." And that makes sense because when you're putting a variety of organizations together, you need an umbrella that would cover everyone. We've evolved immensely since then. We have some of the top talent in the world at this firm.

And using that talent, commercializing it and externalizing it was really important for us. So what we did is, we restructured the firm around two business verticals: a transactions vertical and disputes. So all of our transactions-based lawyers work together in one practice group, and all the disputes lawyers are in another vertical. These practice groups, instead of doing their own thing, which they were doing before, now they have to work together: argue with each other, communicate and disagree, respectfully. That was the single biggest change we made planningwise.

And then it was executing our 5-3-2 strategy: five main geographies — New York, Chicago, California, Texas, D.C.; three primary sectors — technology, life sciences and health care; and the two verticals. This has resulted in incredible positioning for the firm.

How do you attract young talent?

I think part of it is getting your story out there. One of the reasons we've been better able to tell DLA's stories is because of [Chief Communications Officer Lauren Mistretta]. We didn't have a chief communications officer [until July 2021]. We were not telling the DLA story, and what happens when you don't tell your story? Your competitors tell the story about you. They say, "You're dumb, you're slow, you're stupid, you're disconnected," whatever they think. And lawyers can be pretty effective in framing issues, and we did not own our story. That was a mistake. And so we've corrected that.

And I think the other story is DLA grew up with a very entrepreneurial culture. No one should come to DLA wanting to do here exactly what they did at their prior organization, it doesn't make any sense. You come here to build your

business, to help people grow their clients, to help you grow your clients. That collaborative culture has been a cornerstone to what we have been able to do over the last few years. And that's getting out there to younger lawyers too.

Under your leadership, the firm has launched artificial intelligence, health care policy consulting and space exploration practices. How have the new practices been faring for you?

AI is the biggest — by far — success. This year, it's been very much technology heavy, given AI and the space devoted to this, and regulatory — bringing in Sen. [Richard] Burr and his team of experts to the regulatory and government affairs practice group. [The former senator from North Carolina leads the health policy strategic consulting practice.]

We have gotten an incredible response from our clients on these practice areas. AI continues to explode. And now we're seeing more and more on the health care regulatory area with **Sen. Burr**. We're seeing more and more clients seeking assistance in health care, or help from a health care regulatory perspective. Health care regulation isn't getting easier. It's not getting more streamlined. It's more complicated. This is a very significant business and we're seeing great uptick.

Space exploration is a multitrillion-dollar industry. We have telecommunications clients. We have clients that are very involved in satellite business, and in media.

National security is our most recent initiative, and I think you'll see that continue to grow.

Why is pro bono so important to you?

Giving back to the firm has been a big part of DLA's DNA for a long time. Human trafficking, food bank, food safety and access to justice programs

have been the core of what we've done, which are kind of consistent also with who we are as a firm. Our global pro bono projects are unmatched. I think if you look at law firms who engage in really impactful pro bono, you'd put DLA at the top.

The New Perimeter [global pro bono] program was incredibly involved in helping Afghan women judges get out of Afghanistan when Afghanistan fell. They would have been killed. We were involved in getting four or five out of there, and there are 14 or 15 still waiting to be processed.

Pro bono is a great way to remind the legal profession that taking on complex, difficult issues is what we're supposed to be doing as lawyers. There's another element to this and that's the use of technology — AI. There's an opportunity to deliver pro bono services through technology, so we're looking at that also. How can we deploy AI better, to help more people, more effectively get the legal services that they need?

You're known as a major player in the media and sports worlds. What do you like about this kind of work?

No firm has more deals than we have in buying and selling sports franchises. No one's done more deals than we have in financing major facilities around the world. We represent some of the top clubs, leagues and media companies.

Sports work proceeds to be a major asset class for investment purposes. The intersection of sports and technology and media now is something that's moving at a pace that is the quickest I've ever seen.

An example of this is the [Netflix](#) program called "Formula 1: Drive to Survive," about F1. It's a great example of how media and sports can intersect and what that could do. They follow the F1 race every week. It's a cool scene. A lot of people partying, and having fun. Within each episode is a story about the top

two or three racers, but you get interested in everyone in the field. In other sports, it's who's at the top — everyone else is forgotten. I think it's a great example of how you can bring sports and media together.

In college sports, name, image and likeness is also big. LSU gymnast **Olivia Dunne** is making \$3 million a year for her name, image and likeness. That's the intersection of sports and media. There's a lot happening right now. It's a very exciting and very quickly changing field.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.

For a reprint of this article, please contact reprints@law360.com.