



STEPHEN CURRY AND SC30: ALIGNED PURPOSE, AMPLIFIED IMPACT

Throughout my life, I have made a point to not let anyone else write my own story. For me, this means transforming, disrupting and challenging the status quo. It means taking a stance in being unwilling to accept the world's standards as just good enough and shattering the expectations put on me by others. In other words, to Ruin the Game.

—Stephen Curry, National Basketball Association player and CEO of SC30 Inc.¹

Stephen Curry looked out appreciatively at the nearly 50 people gathered on a warm August day in a bright conference room near Napa, California. The group included leaders of major global companies and Curry's personal board of advisors, a small group of trusted family and friends. Along the edges of the wall were Post-it notes galore and mock newspaper headlines: "Currys Challenge the World: 10,000 Donate This Holiday Season," and "Curry and Obama Make Chicago Great Again."

The summit had been set up to communicate the mission and vision for SC30 Inc., Curry's newly formed company, and to identify opportunities for collaboration among SC30's ecosystem. Over the course of one day, teams huddled around boards and Post-it notes in the room to ideate potential pilot projects. The teams aimed for projects that could create value and impact aligned with SC30's mission—and that could occur during key events over the coming year. At the end of the day, teams presented their ideas to Curry and the wider group.

One of the best-received ideas was the creation of an SC30 fellowship program that would enable under-represented college students to work at SC30 partner companies. Partners that could participate would include start-ups, such as Guild Education and SnapTravel, as well as large brands like Under Armour and J.P. Morgan Chase.

¹ SC30 Homepage, <https://sc30.com/> (December 9, 2019).

Blake Kavanaugh (MBA '19); Stanford GSB General Atlantic Professor of Marketing Jennifer Aaker; Lecturer Naomi Bagdonas (MBA '15); and Lecturer Tom Bedecarré prepared this case as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

If you're wondering why Stephen Curry, a superstar basketball player, was partnering with a major international bank to offer fellowships to minority youth... we have to rewind to the very beginning.

FROM BEING UNDERRATED TO RUINING THE GAME

In his early teenage years, Stephen grew up playing basketball one-on-one against his brother on the practice courts of the Toronto Raptors, a professional National Basketball Association (NBA) team. When the two heard the crowd roar, they would rush through the tunnel to a spot overlooking the court and watch their father, Dell Curry, playing for the Raptors.² After his father retired from the NBA, Stephen and his family returned to North Carolina, where Stephen had grown up, and joined the high school basketball team at Charlotte Christian School. Stephen Curry was named to the all-conference and all-state teams, and led his team to three conference titles and three North Carolina state playoff appearances.

Despite his accolades, scouts for top-tier college basketball teams shunned Curry, including those from his father's alma mater, Virginia Tech. Curry recalled, "Part of the problem was just how skinny I was. I was so, so, so skinny."³ Curry decided to attend Davidson College, a small liberal arts college in North Carolina and, defying his doubters, he quickly excelled. During his three years playing at Davidson, Curry led the Southern Conference in scoring each year and led his team to the NCAA tournament twice, including a 2008 appearance in the Elite Eight round. At the peak of his collegiate athletic career, Curry led the nation in scoring, and he entered the 2009 NBA draft.

NBA scouts were apprehensive of Curry's abilities because of his small physique and warned coaches that they should "not rely on him to run your team."⁴ Five teams passed over Curry before the Golden State Warriors selected him with the seventh pick in the 2009 NBA draft. Again, Curry swiftly proved his detractors had underrated him, as he was unanimously named to the NBA All-Rookie First Team and became runner-up NBA Rookie of the Year. Within a few years, Curry was selected as the Most Valuable Player in the NBA and led the Golden State Warriors to win the 2015 championship, the team's first NBA title in 40 years.

Soon after Curry became the first player to be unanimously voted as the NBA's Most Valuable Player in 2016, former Warriors coach and NBA commentator Mark Jackson complained that Curry had ruined the game.⁵ Jackson, along with other NBA analysts, pointed out that Curry had disrupted the status quo in which teams tended to be led by tall, muscular, domineering players. Instead, the Warriors were winning because of Curry's precise shots and because of how his shooting prowess preoccupied the opposing team's defense.

² Marcus Thompson, *Golden: The Miraculous Rise of Steph Curry* (New York: Atria Books, 2017). p. 9.

³ Stephen Curry, "Underrated," *The Players Tribune*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/stephen-curry-underrated> (December 9, 2019).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Anthony Slater, Twitter post, March 3, 2019, 12:06 p.m., <https://twitter.com/anthonyVslater/status/1102072694412111878> (December 9, 2019).

In fact, Curry's teammates averaged 12 more points in games where Curry played than in games where he did not.⁶ Klay Thompson, Curry's backcourt teammate, recalled that "When Stephen has confidence in you, it means a lot. It gives you a sense of urgency to go out there and play your game."⁷

Curry dismantled basketball norms, which he referred to as an ability to 'Ruin the Game'—coopting the phrase previously used to disparage him. Inspired to excellence by Curry's power to *Ruin the Game*, the Golden State Warriors won back-to-back NBA championships in 2017 and 2018. Even after winning three NBA championship rings, Curry still had a burning desire to shatter expectations. Curry reflected:

People assume that, once you've started to have a certain amount of success, the feeling of being underrated goes away but mine has never diminished. Instead, what started off as a feeling the world imposed on me, I've figured out how to harness. Now feeling underrated is something I can impose on the world.⁸

PUTTING HIS MONEY WHERE HIS VALUES ARE

Starting in 2015, Curry and Bryant Barr, Curry's close friend and Davidson College teammate, began discussing Curry's impact beyond basketball. By 2017, Curry had become the highest-paid NBA player after signing a five-year contract with the Warriors worth \$201 million, while earning millions more from various corporate sponsorships. According to Barr, the duo wanted to "think about Stephen's off-court business in a much more long-term, sustainable, and diversified perspective."⁹

Barr was impressed by the business teams supporting LeBron James and Kobe Bryant, two NBA legends who had set up companies that managed numerous endorsement contracts, entertainment deals, venture investments, and philanthropic activities. Barr spent a lot of time with these two former players' respective business teams to better understand what they created and how it worked for them, and encouraged Curry to form a similar organization to expand Curry's brand beyond basketball. Curry had carved out his own unique lane on the basketball court and decided that he could evolve the superstar enterprise in a way more geared toward his goal: changing lives, inspiring people, and creating impact.

Curry named his new organization SC30 Inc. The name combined Stephen Curry's initials and his jersey number; the same number his father had worn decades prior. Curry hoped this new organization would enable his impact to extend beyond the basketball court—to the beliefs that his family had instilled in Curry from an early age:

⁶ Ben Cohen, "Stephen Curry Changed the Game by Changing Every Game," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/stephen-curry-changed-the-game-by-changing-every-game-11559140592> (December 9, 2019).

⁷ Connor Letourneau, "Warriors' 'Splash Brothers' embrace their nickname," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/warriors/article/Warriors-Splash-Brothers-embrace-their-12361117.php> (December 9, 2019).

⁸ Curry, loc. cit.

⁹ Interview with Bryant Barr, September 12, 2019. Subsequent quotations are from the author's interview unless otherwise noted.

1. God Comes First
2. Prioritize and Protect Your Family
3. Complete What You Start
4. Give 100% to Whatever You Do
5. Always Treat Others with Respect, No Matter What
6. Lift Others Up

Curry leaned on his personal board of advisors to ensure he would translate his closely held beliefs into core values for his new company. The group included his parents, godparents, a close family friend, wealth manager, and agent. As Curry's advisors had encouraged and guided him throughout his career, he knew they would be instrumental in the success of SC30 as well.

SPEAKING THROUGH AUTHENTIC AND VALUES-ALIGNED PARTNERSHIPS

After SC30 Inc. was formed in 2018, Barr initially evaluated bringing Curry's brand partnerships together under the SC30 Inc. umbrella. Barr recalled:

When I looked at the last six TV commercials in which Stephen was featured, they all just showed him dribbling the basketball. We knew we wanted more purpose-driven partnerships that, instead of just letting the brand tell their story through Stephen, told Stephen's story through the brand.

The duo thought about what sort of voice would be authentic to Curry's story and realized it would need to be rooted in ensuring partners shared Curry's values and were broadly aligned around his focus areas. Areas Curry was already actively involved in supporting included his local community, promoting families, and encouraging children to play sports. Additionally, it became clear to Curry and Barr that, like the Warriors, SC30's success would depend on teamwork. As a leader for the Warriors, Curry had learned that, "You win when everybody touches the ball and has an opportunity to feel involved."¹⁰ By applying a similar perspective to partnerships off the court, Curry could enable others to feel like *valued members of a winning team on an inspired mission*, dramatically amplifying his potential impact (see **Exhibit 1**).

Barr communicated SC30's ambitions first with Curry's brand partners. According to Kristen Gambetta, who led sports and entertainment partnerships for Rakuten, "The new contract had much more detail than I've ever seen but it made us better and pushed us to be more thoughtful as a brand."¹¹ Barr realized that Curry could also bring his unique voice to other partners, such as entrepreneurs and nonprofits, and amplify his voice by creating media content. The SC30 duo sat down and laid out a matrix describing how Curry's tools of voice, time, and ecosystem would be a different way he could *Ruin the Game*. As in basketball, where Curry continued to *Ruin the Game* with his shooting excellence, he planned to upend the status quo of what it meant to partner with a superstar athlete.

¹⁰ John Battelle, "Steph Curry: You Win When Everyone Touches the Ball," NewCo Shift, March 1, 2017, <https://medium.com/newco/steph-curry-you-win-when-everyone-touches-the-ball-1be6fc88c9a9> (December 9, 2019).

¹¹ Interview with Kristen Gambetta, September 30, 2019. Subsequent quotations are from the author's interview unless otherwise noted.

ACTIVATING PARTNERSHIPS TO CREATE MASSIVE MOMENTS

Curry and Barr's first test of their new vision came by surprise on November 26, 2018. A letter from nine-year-old Riley Morrison to Curry had gone viral across the Internet. Morrison had written to Curry after finding that Curry 5 basketball shoes, Curry's footwear line with Under Armour, were only listed under the boys' section of the Under Armour website. She explained, "It seemed unfair that the shoes are not also in the girls' section. I wanted to help make things equal for all girls, because girls play basketball too."¹² When Curry and Barr thought about how best to respond, they decided against just requesting that Under Armour fix the issue online. Instead, they resolved to transform the moment into something more impactful.

Curry and the SC30 team realized that Morrison's letter could be an opportunity to turn attention to a topic important to Curry, gender equality. As Morrison mentioned in her letter, Curry had recently hosted an all-girl basketball camp. Curry had earlier expressed the hope that, "Now when someone sees an NBA player is hosting a camp, they won't assume it is just for boys. Eventually we will get to a place where the women's game is not called *women's basketball*, just *basketball*. I want [my daughters] to grow up believing they can dream big, and strive for careers where they will be treated fairly and paid equally."¹³ The team quickly began conversations with partners in the SC30 ecosystem while Curry composed his response to Morrison on the Warriors' team bus traveling to play in Toronto.

On November 29th, Curry wrote back to Morrison, "We are correcting this now! I want to make sure you can wear my kicks proudly."¹⁴ He then promised to send Morrison a pair of his current shoes and a pair of the latest design of his shoes once they were released the following month. Curry also invited Morrison to celebrate International Women's Day at a Warrior's game, alluding that "We have something special in the works."¹⁵ The SC30 team worked with Under Armour to design an International Women's Day edition of Curry's signature basketball shoes, which would ultimately feature an inner sock liner custom designed by Morrison. Curry leveraged his charitable foundation to help funnel proceeds from sales of the special edition shoe to fund an annual \$30,000 college scholarship for a STEM-focused, female high school student. The SC30 team also partnered with Unanimous Media, another member of the SC30 ecosystem, to further amplify the moment's impact. Curry, Morrison, and Olympic gold medalist Katie Ledecky recorded an episode of *5 Minutes from Home*, Curry's award-winning web series, that brought additional attention to female athletes. Involving multiple parts of the SC30 ecosystem enabled a massive additional amount of media coverage of International Woman's Day in March 2019 and exposed millions to the importance of gender equality. In addition, by repeatedly

¹² Mekita Rivas, "This 9-Year-Old Basketball Player Is Asking Steph Curry Why His Sneakers Are Only Made for Boys," *Teen Vogue*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/9-year-old-basketball-player-letter-steph-curry-under-armour-boys-sizes> (January 22, 2020).

¹³ Stephen Curry, "This is Personal," *The Players Tribune*, August 26, 2018, <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/stephen-curry-womens-equality> (January 22, 2020).

¹⁴ Stephen Curry, Twitter post, November 29, 2018, 6:33 a.m., <https://twitter.com/StephenCurry30/status/1068151047460409345> (December 9, 2019).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

providing Morrison a platform, Curry showed that “you’re never too small or too young for your voice to be heard.”¹⁶

It was through this initial, spontaneous event that Curry and Barr learned about the power of massive moments. According to Barr, “In this instance we were very reactionary. This moment with Riley was a catalyst for us to think about how moments can turn the SC30 ecosystem into a flywheel where every member reinforces one another and creates wins across multiple stakeholders.” The team began to think about how they could proactively create massive moments, leveraging Curry’s toolkit of voice, time, and ecosystem with multiple partners, to amplify their total impact on the world. One of the earliest planned massive moments stemmed from Curry’s background—being underrated.

Many high school basketball camps already existed for top-tier athletes, but Curry wanted to create “a camp for kids who love to hoop, and are looking for the chance to show scouts that their perceived weaknesses might actually be their secret strengths.”¹⁷ The SC30 team discussed the idea with Rakuten. Gambetta recalled feeling during the conversation that “the ethos of the Underrated Tour fits with us. Rakuten is a challenger brand in America. So, what the Underrated Tour is about, trying to prove yourself, is what we are really about as well.”

Typically, basketball camps had a single headlining sponsor but, seeking to *Ruin the Game*, SC30 worked with Rakuten to find an additional teammate. Barr introduced SC30’s partners at both Rakuten and Under Armour, as both were underdogs in their respective industries. According to Gambetta, the two companies collaborated to “elevate the experience in a way that made it much more meaningful and impactful for the kids involved.” Importantly, the additional partnership expanded the exposure of the camp, further maximizing the Underrated Tour’s potential influence on both the athletes involved and those that learned about the tour.

REDEFINING SUCCESS: AMPLIFYING THEN MEASURING IMPACT

In reflecting upon how to measure success, the team again borrowed from the successful playbook of the Golden State Warriors. According to Curry, the team was one of the few in the NBA that focused on total passes. Curry recalled that, after games, his teammates not only commended star performers but also lauded team players by saying things like, “Way to go—350 passes and 30 assists!”¹⁸ The SC30 team would similarly measure, on a quarterly basis:

- How many partners participated in massive moments?
- How much partners felt valued, belonging, and that they were impactful?
- What was the impact in time and collective voice?

It was important to Curry and Barr that these measures were not an end unto themselves. When the two played at Davidson, an after-practice routine instituted by their coach instilled in them a

¹⁶ Joel Anderson, “Steph Curry’s latest sneaker, co-designed by 9-year-old Riley Morrison, releases on International Women’s Day,” *ESPN*, March 7, 2019, https://www.espn.com/espnw/culture/story/_/id/26178047/steph-curry-latest-sneaker-co-designed-9-year-old-riley-morrison-releases-international-women-day (January 20, 2020).

¹⁷ Curry, loc. cit.

¹⁸ Battelle, loc. cit.

journey-oriented mindset.¹⁹ Barr recalled, “If the entire team had a good practice, everyone would get a penny to drop into a jar in the locker room and, inevitably, at the end of a successful season the jar would be full.” To Curry and Barr, dropping pennies in the jar symbolized how success was a culmination of small bits of shared growth. The duo applied this learning to SC30 by working to build a tight community that steadily made collective progress toward their inspired mission. Barr explained:

Anything that is worth changing doesn’t happen in a moment, it happens over time. We know we won’t change the world in one activation. It takes a collection of moments over time to drive massive impact or even to create a better version of yourself.

CONCLUSION

After the final group presented in that Napa conference center, Curry sat in awe of the experience. He gradually stood and told the SC30 teammates gathered:

It’s incredible to have folks with common values across diverse backgrounds sharing in the impact we want to make and the way we want to do business. I am coming out of today clear that it is important that I keep getting better—I haven’t reached my ceiling yet on how well I can shoot the basketball. I know that if everyone on this team excels at their roles, together we can create monumental moments that have a massive impact.²⁰

Lastly, you don’t need to be leading a championship basketball team as one of the best players in history to have “massive impact”—you only need to *lead with purpose*. This study of Stephen Curry’s journey models the steps needed for you to *Ruin the Game* in your own life:

1. **Find Your Purpose:** Along Curry’s journey from *being underrated to ruining the game*, he stayed focused on his goal of winning games by being the best basketball player and team leader he could be.
2. **Know Your Values:** SC30 was started because Curry had always *put his money and time where his values were* and had a personal board of advisors to guide him along the way.
3. **Know Your Voice:** Curry uniquely applied his mindset in basketball, focusing on teamwork, to *speak through authentic and values-aligned partnerships* at SC30.
4. **Activate with Levity:** The SC30 team lived out their purpose by *activating partnerships to create massive moments* across the tools they had available (Curry’s voice, time, and ecosystem).
5. **Measure Your Impact:** For SC30 to eventually change the world takes *amplifying then measuring impact* as no individual or moment could accomplish their goal—instead, it will take a collection of monumental moments to have massive impact.

¹⁹ Recent research on the “journey mindset” shows that those viewed an attained goal as a journey (vs. a destination) were more likely to continue the positive behaviors that enabled them to attain their goal. See, for instance: <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/redefining-success-adopt-journey-mindset-move-forward> (January 22, 2020).

²⁰ Stephen Curry, Speech presented at SC30 Partner Summit, August 15, 2019.

Exhibit 1
How Stephen Curry Designed for PACE

| | Stephen: the Basketball Player | Stephen: the Businessperson |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| <u>Purpose</u> | Stephen has an inspired mission to play in the NBA like his father | Stephen has the inspired mission to use his fame and money to amplify his impact |
| <u>Autonomy</u> | Despite his small physique, Stephen's unique style of play allows him to excel | Establishes a team, SC30, to manage initiatives that align to his values |
| <u>Collaboration</u> | Stephen empowers his teammates to achieve their best and leverage their unique skills | Stephen empowers entrepreneurs, brand partners, family, and friends through his tools of voice, time, and ecosystem |
| <u>Excellence</u> | Team wins three championships and Stephen wins two MVPs | The SC30 team inspires families through massive moments |

Source: Case authors.