

# Calling the Plays

*Stephen Selig on the day-to-day operations of one of the nation's largest trucking companies*

**By Eric Francis & Lane Kidd**

*Contributing Writer & Executive Editor*

Stephen Selig is a fastidious dresser, preferring the classic Ivy League button-down shirt, prep style. You can see your reflection in his shoes, a product of his military training he says.

But with his easy smile, relaxed delivery and knack for storytelling, he's pretty persuasive and a natural in sales. You'd buy it without realizing you did. In fact, that's how he started out working at Maverick USA, one of the nation's largest for-hire carriers, as a sales and marketing guy.

He'll tell you being Maverick's president is the best job in trucking; surrounded by talented people and getting to work with Steve Williams, the company's chairman and CEO, regarded as one of the more progressive thinkers in the industry – a person Selig befriended years ago when they were neighbors.

All in all, things are going well for Selig. He's in his best job ever, riding the crest of a successful career. So, asked to recall his worst job, he goes way back: being a newspaper boy in Corning, Arkansas, a small farming town in the northeastern corner of the state.





“Well, that job was 365 days a year, and as I got older there were Friday night football games and the Saturday nights out with friends, and I still had to be up at 5:15 in the morning to deliver those papers,” said Selig from his office at Maverick’s headquarters just off Interstate 40 a few miles from Little Rock.

“I delivered papers on a bicycle. My brother had half the town and I had the other half,” he recalled. “In the winter it could get very cold on that bike.”

But here’s the thing about jobs you dislike, he says, particularly in a small town where jobs for teenagers aren’t plentiful – you keep them anyway, in his case for six years. Although you don’t realize it at the time, jobs like that instill in you responsibility, punctuality and time management. In short, they build character.

But Selig says his second job introduced him to the real working world. At age 16, he, like his brothers before him, started working summers at his father’s

employer: J.W. Black Lumber Co., a local sawmill that produced square stock to be made into furniture, broomsticks and such. He started out stacking lumber, and eventually moved up to scaling logs, or measuring the board feet they contain, and keeping track of the timber their contractors brought in. But he never worked on the cutting floor – too young.

He also came away with one very important lesson working at the mill. “I enjoyed working there. I loved the way a sawmill smells. It’s honorable work,” said Selig, “but I knew right there that I didn’t want to do that long-term.”

Three older brothers had all pursued the same degree in college – civil engineering. It sounded like a good plan so Selig enrolled at the University of Arkansas and initially chose engineering as his major.

“A course called statics changed my mind from civil engineering,” he said, shaking his head at the memory. “I had classmates who were at another

level when it came to math, in another league from me.” Considering his options, his interest in accounting and business led him to a degree in general business which would become his niche.

College life was much different than growing up in a small rural town. And the night life for a college student can be a job in itself, especially at the University of Arkansas. But Selig found himself haunted by his first job – throwing newspapers. He couldn’t sleep past 5:00 or so. He had become a morning person.

And being a morning person squeezed out some of the typical late night/early morning carousing on Fayetteville’s famed Dickson Street. On the plus side, and his grades benefitted.

## HEALTHY COMPETITION

“I think growing up in a big family, particularly when you have four brothers, right or wrong, you have this sense of competition about many things,” Selig said. “Unfortunately for us our



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**“THE CATCHER KIND OF SET THE TONE, WHETHER IT WAS GOING TO BE A CURVE BALL OR A FAST BALL.”**

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oldest brother set the curve. He was a National Merit Scholar finalist.”

But it wasn't just academics. “Another brother was a track star. He was four years older than me and ran track for the University of Arkansas,” he said, smiling. “He was captain of the cross country team. So the pressure was on.”

Selig took his turn running track at the University but his love was baseball. And his small hometown – maybe because there's not much to do there – produced more than its share of great baseball players. Selig played both catcher and center field in high school. When Selig played, the catcher called the pitches, not the coach.

“The catcher kind of set the tone, whether it was going to be a curve ball or a fast ball,” he said. “I liked catcher better, but as I got older I was relatively small to be a catcher,” he said. “I just didn't have the arm when I got up to American Legion ball.”

“I played until I was 19. I always regret not going out for the baseball team as a walk-on for the University of Arkansas. When I was there, they didn't have the baseball program they have today. There were probably only a couple of scholarship players. It was much different than it is today.”

Selig adds that his two sons played baseball growing up, too. And both of them ended up as center fielders.

Graduating in 1972 with his ROTC commission as a second lieutenant in hand, as well as the business degree (he lacked just eight hours for an accounting degree but, he noted, “after five years I needed a degree and a job!”), Selig entered active duty in the U.S.

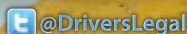
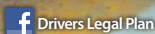


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Army. However, with the government already in the process of bringing people back from Vietnam, he wound up serving stateside in the Transportation Corps.

His service would be brief – the military, itself, was encouraging newly minted soldiers to enter the Army Reserves, but Selig found even they didn't have a need for more officers – but the leadership lessons learned stuck with him.

“Some of the basics really helped me, things like delegating for example,” he said. “A lot of people use that term but in the military you need to be able to do what you ask your troops to do. It's a little different in trucking in that we have so many people who specialize in things – vice president of maintenance, vice president of safety – but understanding means being able to do what they're doing.

“It's like a coach; a lot of successful coaches were really good football players,” he said. “They've been there and made the same sacrifices they expect

their players to make. So they can relate to that.”

Which leads to a natural question: Has Selig ever driven the kinds of trucks his drivers do? Well, yes and no. “I never did and regret that I didn't,” he's quick to acknowledge. “If drivers ask me if I ever drove—and that's a common question—my answer some of the time is that I drove a log truck at the sawmill, moving logs around, but my father wouldn't let me drive it on the highway.”

### FAST FRIENDS

Out of college and the Army, in 1973 Selig moved to Little Rock to work for Ward Supply, a metal fabricator supplying aluminum and steel primarily to the manufactured housing industry; it would later be bought out by National Aluminum. He started in customer service, moved into purchasing after a year, and then became a regional salesman. All in all, things were going pretty darn well.

Selig and his family were living on

a west Little Rock cul de sac in 1982 when a new neighbor moved in, a fellow by the name of Steve Williams. He and Selig became friends and jogging buddies, running 5Ks and 10Ks together.

About a year later, Williams approached Selig with an idea – join him at his trucking company. There was a little déjà vu in the offer. A few years before, Selig had passed on an opportunity to join a fledgling new company as one of its first employees – a new business called Federal Express.

Selig couldn't help but wonder if he said no, would he be passing on another future success story? Plus, his employer wanted him to either move to Los Angeles or near their closest manufacturing facility in Newton, Kansas. On the other hand, Maverick was a relatively small company, operating about 50 trucks, and almost all of them were owner-operators. Maverick was housed at the time in a concrete block building, next to Fisher's Steak House on East



# At A Glance — Stephen Selig

**FAMILY** I've been married to Linda (Long) Selig for 37 years. We met on a blind date in 1970; our next date was almost a year later and we were married in 1975. She would probably tell you we went dove hunting on our honeymoon; I would remind her that we went to the Red Apple Inn for two nights first.

I have two sons, Drew and Matt, both of whom graduated from the University of Arkansas, live in Little Rock, and work for Maverick and a daughter, Clare, who is a University of Arkansas grad with a master's degree from the University of Texas at Dallas. She lives in Dallas where she is a speech pathologist.

**FAITH** We attend Christ the King Catholic Church. I've gone on three mission trips to Honduras, primarily to help an orphanage outside of Trujillo. There's generally 90 people from our church that go and it's probably the most rewarding work I've ever done. Going out to a third world country and spending a week with the people, you really bond with them. Ironically, the first two times I went I was on a construction team, and my wife would tell you the things I did down there I would pay someone to do at home because I'm not really that handy. But I learned a lot.

I'm active with the Men of Faith. We've met every Friday morning at 6 for almost three years now. It's something that's meant a lot to me, to be able to associate with other men of the same beliefs.

**DUCK HUNTING** My father grew up in Stuttgart and my mother grew up in Slovak, so I just grew up around the sport. When dad brought the ducks home from a hunt I thought they were just so beautiful, particularly the mallards. Of course, with seven kids we ate every duck he killed.

Once you go on a good duck hunt, you're hooked. A duck hunt's not all about killing ducks; it's the companionship, the friends you make, the things you experience with the weather.

I really love the rush and anticipation when mallards are lighting in my decoys and the camaraderie with my two sons and hunting companions. We have a lot of fun at our Duck Club.

My wife is the daughter of a former University of Arkansas quarterback and still loves football, which is kind of a plus. If you like to duck hunt and deer hunt and you're gone on weekends, having a wife that really likes football is not a bad thing.

**OTHER HOBBIES** I like to snow ski, and fortunately so does Steve Williams. I started skiing in 1985 and guess I've gone every year since then. We have what we call a little Maverick ski team.

I like to go to Colorado in the summertime and hike. The best time to go to Colorado when you're an Arkansan is August, and really enjoy life.

Also important, for both me and my wife, is exercise. We go to the Little Rock Athletic Club most mornings; she probably goes more

than I do. I have to admit, some people joke that Stephen talks and Linda walks. I am known to socialize a little bit at the gym.

**FAVORITE CAR** A Chevy Tahoe. It goes back to what I do and what I like to do. Duck hunters have a lot of gear. Then when you have a Labrador retriever and you're taking it back and forth to the duck woods, or pulling a boat, the Tahoe has just enough storage to get you and all your gear. It's probably the best vehicle for me.

**FAVORITE MUSIC** I'm old. I prefer the music you can understand the lyrics and sing along—Credence Clearwater Revival, the Beatles, I think it would surprise a lot of people that I like Janis Joplin. It's been kind of entertaining in the last 10 years or so—you're with your adult children and they have new music, and it's a song that was from the '70s and you know all the words and they say, "This song just came out!"

**A GOOD READ** Joel Rosenberg, who writes a lot about the Middle East. *The Last Jihad* was his first book, it was actually released right before 9/11. It was scary that a lot of what he wrote about was what actually happened, even though it was fiction. *I Heard You Paint Houses* by Charles Brandt, which is about the person who claims he killed Jimmy Hoffa. *Get Carter*, which is Bill Carter telling his story—he grew up in Rector and became a Secret Service agent, was with Kennedy when he was killed, and then ended up managing the Rolling Stones and several other musicians.

**FUNNY STORY** My daughter came home from Fayetteville one weekend and told me she got stopped for speeding after she passed a truck. She told the police officer that her dad, who was in the trucking business, had told her that when she passed a truck not to get caught in the blind spot, just blow by them as fast as possible even if that meant speeding. So she was going 85 and he did give her a ticket in spite of my good advice. I paid the fine.

**IF YOU WEREN'T DOING THIS FOR A LIVING?** It would have to involve people, being around people. It would have to be some kind of sales—one of the things I really still miss is that I'm not as active in sales as I used to be. I enjoy going on sales calls with my two sons, both of whom have some sales responsibilities.

I'd have some interest in wildlife management, or a little bit of farming. We manage some of our property where we hunt; I like to dove hunt, so we grow sunflowers every year to dove hunt over. I have plenty of farmer friends I can call for advice.

**OTHER THOUGHTS** One thing Steve and I always agreed on was the necessity to differentiate Maverick from our peers. We never wanted to be treated like a "commodity," therefore we continue to find ways to differentiate our services from others. We take pride in the services we provide and the relationships we have built with major shippers in the last 32 years.

Broadway in North Little Rock.

“But you could tell,” said Selig. “If you’d met Steve, if you would’ve known Steve then... I could just tell that the company had a lot of potential.”

“He came to work for me in a sales capacity and he was the sales department, if you will,” said Williams.

“Stephen was a friend to start off with, so I knew who he was, I knew the man he was. That’s what intrigued me about him coming to work for us.”

Both Selig’s sales acumen and his experience in the building materials industry proved to be a potent combination. “We used to make a lot of sales calls together, whether Chicago or Cleveland or Pittsburgh, predominately in the steel-shipping community for the major integrated steel mills,” said Williams. “Some of my fondest memories were the tag-team approach we took together on sales calls when we probably had 100 trucks, but we acted like we had 500.

“It’s a cool experience when you have that kind of chemistry with each other,” he said. “We could still do it, blindfolded.”

“His word means a lot and it goes both ways,” said Williams. “He expects people to deal with him the way he does with others and that is honestly and truthfully. And people, whether they are customers or just people within the company, can trust he is going to be there for them.”

## EXPANDING ROLES

In 2001, Williams decided to delegate the day-to-day operations of the company to someone else so he could work on developing some long-term strategic initiatives. He asked Selig to become president.

“Stephen had proven himself,” said Williams. “When it came time for me to try to do some other things and I had to find someone to be the president of the company, he was the logical choice because of our very similar competitive styles.”

But it was also their differences that made this a smart move, he added.

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For example, Selig had a natural strength for administrative responsibility and maintaining the carefully developed management infrastructure of the company.

“Stephen excels at that,” explained Williams. “I on the other hand, by the nature of the name ‘maverick’ that is something I struggle with.”

Selig recalled that Williams set the bar pretty high. “Steve was the first one to arrive in the morning and the last one to get home. He worked a lot of Saturdays. So I had a lot of respect for him as an individual even though, at first, I didn’t know much about his business or what he was doing.”

He was a fast learner though. In a 2001 *Arkansas Trucking Report* article on Maverick, Selig, newly named as president, projected that the company could double its growth in just five years. He was right on the money, as Maverick grew from \$97 million in revenue in 2000 to \$200 million in 2005.

The company has grown steadily, generating \$240 million in revenue last year. Today, Maverick operates about 1,350 trucks – all Freightliners, all company-owned and all maroon. Its growth over the years has been steady but deliberately so, and that’s one reason Selig believes the company has weathered two major recessions.

Creating a stable driver workforce is every trucking company’s dream. To that end Selig says Maverick rigidly screens applicants to try and improve retention of drivers. But he thinks linking the “combination of R&R – recruiting and retention” are the obvious keys to success. The challenge is in knowing how to do both well.

And the company is experiencing a new phenomenon. New drivers who’ve had no previous experience are actually

staying longer than the veterans who tend to turn to another ‘better deal’ all the time. Cultivating a new driver culture could be the key.

Selig believes his ability to create the sale has obviously benefitted the company. But the art of selling takes time “to develop relationships with customers.” He also thinks it’s much easier to promise than to deliver on those promises. “If we make a promise to a customer or a commitment to a customer, then we’re going to do what we say.”

There’s no one secret to a company’s success. He feels that Maverick has developed a culture that incorporates several attributes – ethics, morals, principles and values.

“I enjoy coming to work,” he said. “We have some really talented young people in our organization and that’s one of the things that really excites me when I come to work every day now.” He’s proud that his two sons, Drew and Matt, have joined Maverick.

So you could say that for Stephen Selig, getting to run the day-to-day operations of a big trucking company as its president is a really enjoyable job.

But it would be much more fun to bring this all back around to a baseball analogy, where Williams is the high-profile owner, iconoclastic and beloved, but with duties that keep him from spending his time directing the guys from the dugout. Hence he taps Selig to be his man on the ground, the one with the best view of the field, who’s directing the team, setting the tone and calling the plays.

In other words, Selig is finally getting to play catcher again. And he’s enjoying the view of the field from behind the plate.