



What Happens in Vegas...

... stays in Vegas? This weekend, when the NBA All-Star Game comes to town, Kings owners Joe and Gavin Maloof will be everywhere, for all to see

By Ian Thomsen

The expansive swimming pool out back of the Palms hotel and casino in Las Vegas is as curved and shallow as the young women who are layered around its edges on a warm Saturday in October. One by one they swivel their heads and sit up from their chaise longues as two Armani suits stride conspicuously across their concrete plot of post-apple Eden. Even in their most relaxed moments **Joe** and **Gavin Maloof**, otherwise known as the owners of the Sacramento Kings, tend to move as if they're five minutes late for a plane. They also tend to be oblivious to their surroundings, whether they're at a Sacramento city council meeting to negotiate funds for a new arena or by a pool of nearly naked women -- against whom they stand out like incarnations of Jake and Ellwood.

"Let's get some quality over here," Gavin says, rubbing his hands together.

"We'll get us some bunnies," adds Joe, older by 11 months.

The brothers are searching not on their own behalf but -- as befits longtime leaders in the service industry -- for the benefit of an SI photographer hoping to pose two of America's most eligible billionaire bachelors among the local talent. "If the customer isn't happy, we aren't happy," insists Joe, who is interrupted by the pointing index finger of an old family friend from their hometown of Albuquerque. The friend directs everyone's attention to the neon-green, polka-dot bikini bottom squished provocatively against the balcony railing directly overhead. A hum of subdued approval escapes Joe's parted lips as he turns to stare at Gavin before looking away.

A woman sporting a black bikini and ankle tattoos, with breasts two times too large for her body, runs over as best she can in her stiletto heels. "Where's a Maloof? Where's a Maloof?" she wants to know. Without being asked twice (or even once), she leans into Gavin. "Don't cross your leg," she scolds as the camera snaps away. "You look like a fruit loop."

Another young lady dressed barely in white eagerly forms the Oreos filling between the black-clad Maloofs. The woman in the polka-dot bikini, who may be Brazilian, is invited down from her perch. More women appear until nine are gathered around the brothers. The one in black removes Gavin's suit jacket and drapes it over his shoulder. "He's pushin' in my boobs!" she shrieks while grinding her chest into Gavin's shoulder blade, before leaning aside to flash her top for the camera. All the while the Maloofs wear the same slightly stiff, high school prom smiles.

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It's an enviable life these brothers lead. How many men would love to be rich, single and owners of not only a profitable NBA franchise but also the hottest casino in Vegas? Joe, 51, and Gavin, 50, are the president and vice chairman, respectively, of the Maloof Companies, a billion-dollar family business that grew from a general store in northern New Mexico into a beer distributorship and then expanded into hotels, banking and entertainment. The family matriarch, **Colleen**, is the chairwoman of the board, while the other principals are Joe and Gavin's siblings: **Adrienne Maloof-Nassif**, 45, the company's secretary and treasurer; **George**, 42, an executive vice president who runs the Palms; and **Phil**, 39, the other executive vice president, a former New Mexico state senator who oversees the company's latest ventures, Maloof Music and Maloof Productions.

"A reporter asked Gavin on the plane one day," says Joe, "If you were going to die and come back as anybody, who would you come back as?" He said -- "

"Me!" interrupts Gavin, and both guffaw as if they hadn't told the story a hundred times before.

It's no wonder Gavin wouldn't trade his life for anybody else's. Not 13 hours earlier he was seen celebrating the opening of the country's first Playboy Club in nearly 20 years -- situated on the top floor of the Palms' newest 52-story structure, appropriately named the Fantasy Tower -- with **Julie McCullough**, a luminescent former *Playboy* centerfold. He and McCullough had danced in the casino's nightclub Moon under a retractable roof that opened to reveal the Las Vegas Strip; now Miss February 1986 is coming over to give Gavin a hug and thank-you kiss on the cheek.

This weekend the brothers will once again be the life of the party as the NBA All-Star Game, with its attendant high rollers and bacchanal, comes to Las Vegas. The Maloofs were crucial to bringing the event to Sin City (Joe and Gavin pitched commissioner **David Stern**, then George had to get every major casino in town to suspend all betting on the NBA during the weekend), and the players will stay at the Palms -- which features the \$25,000-per-night Hardwood Suite, complete with a half-court and three extralong Murphy beds, which pull out from the baseline.

"They don't pass themselves off as supersophisticated, though they've got a pretty sophisticated business understanding of most things," says Stern, who has known Joe and Gavin for half their lives, dating back to the Maloof family's ownership of the Houston Rockets. "The beauty of it was that the Maloofs were on the ground and they allowed us to communicate with all the right people in the best-natured way. They were invaluable to us being able to have the game in Las Vegas. It couldn't have happened without them."

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By Ian Thomsen

Like their father, Joe and Gavin are not merely ambitious. They work hard at remaining young and try to generate as much fun or profit from each moment as they possibly can. Why? "The Maloofs don't live a long time normally," says Gavin, "especially the males."

George Maloof Sr. was 21 when he left the University of Colorado in 1944 and returned home to Albuquerque to run the family business after his father, Joe, a Lebanese immigrant, suffered a heart attack. (Joe died in 1956 at age 54.) The Maloofs were the local Coors beer distributors, and young George worked hard to gain the franchise statewide. Over the years he would add to the family's holdings a trucking firm, hotels, a majority interest in Albuquerque's First National Bank and, in 1979, at a cost of \$9 million, the Rockets.

When George Sr. and Colleen's children were as young as 10, they were put to work in the beer distributorship, cleaning the warehouses and organizing the recyclables. Like his sons today, George was also in a hurry. "He used to take me and Gavin around with him," says Joe. "He'd say, 'Someday these two guys are going to be running my business.' He kept telling that to people, and I didn't know why. And he'd say, 'Remember, when I die you've got to stick together with your mother. You and your brothers and your sister, you've got to stick together with your mom.'"

That time would arrive unexpectedly. On Nov. 30, 1980, George Sr. suffered a massive heart attack and died at age 57. "It's Friday night, about 10:30, and my mom gave me a phone call: 'Your dad's sick, come on over to the hospital right now,'" Joe recalls. "I was

so happy that I didn't go out partying that night, so I got to spend a few hours with him before he died. He was in the hospital with my mom and -- were you there?"

"Yeah," says Gavin, "I was there."

"He died in front of us," Joe continues. "Jeez. And you know what he said before he died? He said, 'How many points did Moses have?' Moses Malone. That's a true story, right?"

"Yeah, and I'll tell you one that's even better," says Gavin, as he launches into another tale from their father's last night. "We opened up the Classic Hotel in Albuquerque, that's probably what killed him. An \$18 million hotel, that was a big risk for us back then. It had just opened, and he was in the coffee shop; he was eating and he got sick. My mother takes him outside -- he'd just had a massive heart attack -- but before he gets in the car he's reaching in his pocket to take care of the bellman. And my mom says, 'George, come on, you can worry about him later.'"

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"He was vomiting," says Joe, "and he's trying to take care of -- "

"The bellman," says Gavin. The two often finish each other's thoughts, like a married couple.

"Walter was his name."

"He was trying to find some money to tip the guy."

"He was the greatest," Joe says of his father.

The sons remember their father as brave, for continuing to live hard despite his premonition of an early death, and omniscient, for rushing to prepare them for a future without him. Indeed, upon his father's death, Gavin, just 24, was named the Rockets' president, becoming the youngest owner and operator in pro sports history. The team flourished, making the playoffs in all three years of Maloof ownership and reaching the NBA Finals in 1981, but the family sold it -- a move Colleen immediately regretted -- in '82 for \$11 million, reportedly to appease George Sr.'s two sisters. (Not satisfied, they subsequently filed a lawsuit over his estate.) Colleen spent the next decade staving off creditors in order to provide her children with the same opportunities that George had inherited from his father.

During those hard times the Maloofs established two covenants that remain in place today: No major decisions would be made unless the family unanimously agreed, and the children would invest their energies in businesses that inspired them. George Jr. launched a small, highly successful hotel and casino, aimed at locals, on the northern outskirts of Las Vegas; he would cash out in 2000 in order to build the 703-room Palms, which the family opened a year later (and which does not take bets on NBA games). The resort, which was the headquarters for MTV's *Real World: Las Vegas*, has made George a fixture in gossip columns: In 2003 he was linked to a post-**Justin**, pre-**K-Fed****Britney Spears**. Phil spent seven years in the state senate before a failed run for Congress in 2000. He then turned his attention to the family's music and TV-film production arms; for opening night of the Playboy Club his date was **Gabrielle Tuite**, a blonde Barker's Beauty from *The Price Is Right*. Adrienne, the only sibling to be married, lives in Beverly Hills with her husband, Paul, a plastic surgeon who was featured last season on the E! show *Dr. 90210*, and their three children. She plays a significant role in mapping out the company's marketing and promotional strategies and does philanthropic work.

Wanting to return to sports, the family purchased the Birmingham Fire of the World League of American Football in 1990 but sold it two years later. In '97 Joe and Gavin tried to get the Maloofs back into the big leagues, negotiating to buy the Tampa Bay Lightning. The move was vetoed by George -- thankfully, it turned out -- because of the NHL's bleak financial prospects. Instead, on Jan. 15, 1999, the Maloofs agreed to spend \$247 million on the moribund Kings, who hadn't finished above .500 since moving to California from Kansas City in 1985, and Arco Arena. The team welcomed its new owners by going 27-23 in the lockout-shortened '98-99 season, and it has not had a losing season since.

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Imagine the first impression Joe and Gavin made on the Sacramento community. With their thick shoulders (both played college football, Joe at New Mexico and Gavin at Division III Trinity in San Antonio), hoarse, loud voices and a shared accent that cannot be traced back to any known people or society, they come across like a couple of auto mechanics wiping their blackened hands on dirty rags as they try to explain in plain English what they're doing to your car. (They sound eerily like their father, says Colleen.) The brothers take pride in their everyman comportment, maintaining an eclectic group of friends and hangers-on. Joe and Gavin's personal guest list for the Playboy Club's opening weekend included childhood buddies from Albuquerque named **Chucky**, **Phil** and **Billy**; **Mike** from California, who helped Joe quit smoking; a New Yorker named **Carlton**, who befriended the Maloofs -- while also becoming their stockbroker -- after cold-calling Joe several years ago to try to interest him in an investment; and the driver they use when they visit New York, a nervous, heavily tattooed guy named Joey. "He's the only limo driver I've ever been around who could drop you off at the busiest street in

Manhattan, never knowing how long you're going to be up at the meeting, and when you come down, he's always in front," says Joe. "You don't have to walk a block with this guy."

The Maloofs are comfortable in any environment. Last summer they visited their mercurial star forward, **Ron Artest**, at his annual basketball tournament in Queens. "I was showing them the neighborhood, and they had to go to the bathroom," recalls Artest. "So they went [down] one of those ghetto hallways -- all pissy smelling, you know -- [and knocked on a door], and when they were done they told the people, 'Thank you for letting us use your bathroom.'" Joe and Gavin served as honorary coaches for the tournament's all-star game, during which a couple of bottles of a potent homemade cocktail known as a nutcracker were tossed to them from the stands. "I thought it was pineapple juice," Joe says. "Everybody was laughing, and I think that's when we won the crowd over, when we were drinking the nutcrackers."

Kings fans who approach the Maloofs have been known to receive a team jersey in the mail a week or two later, and \$100 tips are not infrequent for waitresses and bellmen. In 2002 Joe struck up a conversation with the bathroom attendant in a Los Angeles restaurant. "The next thing I know," says Gavin, "the bathroom attendant is on the plane with us going to a game." Given their outgoing natures, Colleen admittedly worries about charlatans taking advantage of her sons. "But it hasn't hurt them so far," she says.

As soon as their purchase of the Kings was approved, the Maloofs set out to apply the lessons of their father. Within a month they had a \$9 million plan to build a practice facility that would liberate the players from various local gyms. They painted and refurbished Arco Arena, installed brighter lights to make the concession areas more inviting and built 20 additional bars to shorten the beer lines. But the biggest changes they made were in customer service.

"We had just bought the team, and we're touring the arena with a bunch of bankers one day," Joe says. "Well, it's kind of confusing: Section 101's over here, and 201's over there -- "

"It's a round building," notes Gavin.

"So Gavin asked a security guard, 'Where's Section 101, Seat 32?' And the security guard goes, 'Well, go this way and then turn left.... ' A few minutes later Gavin goes, 'Goddammit!'"

"Because we had walked around the building three times and we couldn't find it! Nobody was helping us!"

"So we went back to the security guard, and Gavin said, 'Listen. We just bought the team, and you're not going to treat customers like that. We don't care that you treated us that

way -- what we're afraid of is, you'll treat our customers like that. Take the customer to the seat. Say, "Thank you for coming, we appreciate your business." Show him, don't just point over there."

"So [the guard] learned quick," says Gavin.

"The bankers were like, 'What did we do getting involved with these guys? These guys are explosive,'" says Joe. "But [Gavin] had to make the point about customer service."

"When you go into a business establishment, there are just certain signs that things aren't right," adds Gavin. "I went in the bathroom when we first got there. It had one-ply toilet paper. I said, 'No, c'mon, can we get two-ply?' I mean, this was like sandpaper. That spoke volumes about the entire operation. I didn't need to see about the team, I didn't need to see about the product, I didn't need to see about the arena. The toilet paper said it all."

Much as **Mark Cuban** would later do with the Dallas Mavericks, the Maloofs transformed the Kings into one of the NBA's model franchises, with eight straight playoff appearances and a league-leading 340 straight sellouts. "I don't think they miss anything - they're very industrious, bright, they know exactly what they're doing, and they always have a game plan," says longtime Phoenix Suns chairman and CEO **Jerry Colangelo**. "There's been a wave of new young entrepreneurs in their 40s coming into our game, which has been very positive to the league. New young blood brings a different look."

Which is why the Maloofs are confounded by the opposition to their request for public funds for a new, \$470 million building that would replace Arco, at 19 the third-oldest arena in the league. The campaign against a proposed quarter-percent hike in the Sacramento County sales tax, which would've helped raise \$600 million over 15 years, turned into a referendum on the Maloofs' lifestyle. In October a national TV ad for the Hardees and Carl's Jr. chains rolled out in which all four Maloofs, with **Dean Martin's** *Ain't That a Kick in the Head* as background music, are seen entering the Palms with a horde of beautiful women, then dining on burgers, fries and a 24-year-old Bordeaux -- the \$6,000 Combo Meal. Two weeks later a group of local civic leaders staged a protest in downtown Sacramento by eating the same Six Dollar Burger at a press event to mock the playboy brothers' requests for public assistance. **Katherine Maestas**, a political consultant in the state capital, referred to the ad as "a slap in the face to our community."

Having lost the Nov. 7 vote on the financing plan, the Maloofs have asked Stern to intervene in their continuing negotiations with city officials. They are also beginning to consider a move to another city. This will surely lead to speculation that the team will wind up in Las Vegas, though the brothers have denied that they are entertaining that thought. "The way we look at it, we can't afford to make a bad deal in Sacramento with this arena," Joe says. "The newness of the arena is going to wear off in about three years. What happens in Year 26? Did we make a deal good enough that in 26 years it's going to be a financially viable franchise still? If you give your parking revenue away, if you give

your naming rights away, you're going to be at a big disadvantage competitively with the other teams."

There's no doubt the Maloofs want to keep winning. That's part of the reason they acquired Artest from the Indiana Pacers for popular forward **Peja Stojakovic** in January 2006, when the team was 18-24. While Artest's history of kaleidoscopically unpredictable behavior scared away most of their peers, the Maloofs were intrigued because they'd already reaped the benefits of a similar trade: Shortly before they bought the franchise, it had been transformed by a deal for **Chris Webber**, another MVP-caliber talent whose reputation was in ruins. A week after Artest's arrival the Kings began a 14-4 run that helped keep alive their playoff streak.

Artest hopes playing for the Maloofs will help bring newfound stability to his career. "I never knew my owners before like I know them," says Artest, who like point guard **Mike Bibby** and other Sacramento players routinely calls the Maloof brothers to chat. "Without them I wouldn't have this chance I have now. They've taken a lot of weight off my shoulders -- not just basketball-wise but in every aspect of my daily life. I've got a little more room here to correct my mistakes, and breathe a little bit too."

But the Kings still have to deliver. Their win total has dropped in each of the last four years, from a high of 61 in 2001-02 to 44 last season, so last summer the Maloofs made their boldest move: replacing **Rick Adelman**, whom they inherited when they bought the team and who is one of only two coaches to reach the playoffs in the last eight years, with **Eric Musselman**, an aggressive leader who is more in line with the owners' straightforward approach. "Whoever was going to be the coach, [president of basketball operations **Geoff**] **Petrie** said, 'You guys have got to get along with him,'" says Joe, in reference to the disputes he and Gavin had in the past with Adelman, primarily concerning the team's lack of defensive focus. It was the Maloofs, not Petrie, a two-time NBA Executive of the Year, who picked Musselman. "Their instincts over the years have proved to be pretty good, and I think you need to trust that," says Petrie, who gave them a short list to work from. "I was just the tour guide, and I told them what I thought. But it had to be somebody they could relate to and somebody they wanted to coach their team. In the end they took a family vote, and I wasn't part of the vote."

After a long run as the most aesthetically pleasing team in basketball, Sacramento is seeking to launch a new era reflective of the Maloofs themselves -- less urbane and nuanced, more assertive and blunt. "For once we've got the word *defense* in our vocabulary," says Gavin. "In the past you'd scream, 'Defense! Defense!' but Kings teams have never played defense. But now the whole focus is on the defensive side of the ball."

As discouraged as they are by the team's 22-27 record, the brothers aren't ready to give up on Musselman. Even his October arrest and recent no-contest plea for DUI (he was fined and has to perform 48 hours of community service and enter a first-offender program; the NBA also suspended him without pay for two games) hasn't soured the Maloofs on their coach. "It's a new system, and the positive about Eric is nobody's going to outwork the

guy," says Joe. "We're behind him, we want him to succeed. We picked him, and we expect him to be with us for a long time."

A few hours before the grand opening, Joe and Gavin led their visiting friends around the plush red and black decor of the Playboy Club as if giving a tour of their family home. "You've got to see the men's room," said Gavin, holding open the door to show walls covered with nude pinups and centerfolds. Over the next two nights the club would be filled with celebrities -- actors **Jamie Foxx** and **Kate Hudson**, porn star **Jenna Jameson**, dozens of Playmates and **Hugh Hefner** himself, who traveled everywhere with the three blondes from his reality show *The Girls Next Door* and their entourage of camera operators, soundmen and lighting crews.

Joe and Gavin often wonder what their father would say about the life they've made over the last 27 years. As proud as he would be of their business successes, he would be just as frustrated by their failures to wed. The closest the brothers have come to a marriage recently is their merger of the Palms to Hefner's Playboy Club. "That's the disappointing part of our lives," admits Joe. "I mean, that's the part that's missing from my life."

In the starkest contrast of all with their father, neither Joe nor Gavin has any children of his own to teach and pass on the family's wisdom. "It's sad, and it bothers me a lot," says Colleen. "I kept nagging so much about marrying and being married that they'd see me and run. My sons were running away from me, so I said I'm just not going to say anything anymore."

As she steps off the elevator onto the raised balcony that looks out across the crowded floor of the Playboy Club and its Grand Canyon-like vista of bare shoulders and cleavage, Colleen Maloof cannot help but realize that her sons' lifestyle is growing ever more extravagant. But she knows better than anybody that there is no fighting with success. A few minutes later she is standing shoulder to shoulder with her boys around a card table, watching **Paris Hilton** lose at blackjack.