

How Alabama Football Player-Turned-CEO Stan Moss Competes To Win

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Stan Moss isn't your typical CEO, which may explain why Polen Capital isn't your typical global investment management firm. Let's start with the results the firm has seen over the past decade, or the fact that Polen has been named among the best places to work by Pensions & Investments each of the last seven years. Then, there's the transformation: When Moss took over the role of CEO in 2012, after holding a variety of leadership roles since 2003, the firm managed under \$5B of AUM with a single strategy out of a regional location. Today, Polen has 250 professionals and advises more than \$65B in client assets across four continents, serving institutions, intermediaries, and individuals through multiple equity and credit strategies.

It's an exceptional growth story, but what makes Polen's history even more unique is Moss himself, who was raised in a small Alabama town, where his parents served as educators and ran their family farm. "My father was a principal and the head football coach at our high school, and my mom was a fourth-grade teacher. I grew up around people who dedicated their lives to serving others, and it had a great influence on who I am today."



POLEN CAPITAL

Polen Capital CEO Stan Moss: "My ultimate why is to inspire others to be their best selves."

Outworking the Competition

Eventually, Moss played football for the University of Alabama, and remembers the financial hardships he faced at that time: "I had a partial scholarship, but tuition was due, and I was short. I was working two manual jobs and I remember sit-

ting on the floor counting change to pay my bills, but I still didn't have enough. So, I drove home and sold the cows I had bought for our farm years earlier to cover my tuition."

It's a story Moss shared with his employees at a recent meeting, highlighting why

he does what he does: “I’ve been working since the first grade, whether it was harvesting potatoes or cutting firewood that we could use on the farm. When I got my first real job in corporate America as an accountant, I was grateful to the extreme. This job was the most important thing I had ever received, and a way out of my life of being broke. Being able to pay the bills was my first why.”

He adds this: “I’ve met a lot of smart, talented leaders, but the question is, what are you willing to sacrifice, will you put in the work? If there’s one thing I know about myself, it’s that I have put in the work throughout my career and I have sacrificed which has put me and our organization in the best position to compete and win.”

Starting With “Why” and Inspiring Others to Do the Same

Moss makes a point of sharing personal stories with his team, and he encourages others to do the same. At firmwide events, Polen employees take turns sharing lessons and examples from their own lives as a regular practice. He’s set aside time for the entire firm to develop their personal why statements, and the commitment to purpose goes beyond a team exercise: “When you come to our office, you’ll see our Why Wall that features pictures and stories of our clients. Some of our clients are public servants, policemen, firefighters, or teachers like my parents. It reminds us why we’re here and the difference we can make, whether you’re an employee, a client, or a member of our community.”

As CEO, Moss sees his role as leading the type of firm where others can define their why and realize a greater purpose for themselves: “Now, my ultimate why is

to inspire others to continuously learn and grow by creating an environment that enables their best selves.”

Reverse Engineering Performance: Focusing on People

Moss takes a reverse engineering approach to creating growth and client results: “It would be easy to focus solely on our strategies or the numbers. Of course, that’s essential, but that isn’t where we start. The better we are as people, the better we collaborate with our colleagues and the better we perform for our global clients. It’s why we provide so many ways for employees to grow and develop at Polen. Beyond training, coaching, and development, we give each employee thousands of dollars to invest in their own learning and growth as people, not just as employees. Each year, we select a book as a firm to read together, and we invite authors and experts to teach us and help us live our purpose and personal whys.”

Moss underscores the point: “I once read that when asked for a stock tip, Warren Buffet said, ‘I’ll tell you what’s much better than investing in a stock. The best investment you can make by far is investing in yourself.’ It’s easy for a company to say that their employees come first, but you have to put your money where your mouth is and walk your talk. Investing in our people is a huge priority here and I’m convinced its why we’ve had such strong outcomes for clients over the years.”

Growing Brick by Brick

Moss remembers how his father coached him during his high school football days: “After practice, we’d look at the film together and break down the tape. He’d help me see how very small changes,

over time, could make a big difference in my game.” Those lessons have stayed with Moss, who believes that putting in small changes, over time, is the difference-maker for Polen: “We refer to this as a brick-by-brick approach to growth. At Polen Capital, one way we do this is through marginal improvements. Each year, every employee identifies 3 marginal improvements for the year. If 250 employees are each making 3 improvements, that adds up. If our firm is making 750 improvements a year and this is compounding over time, that creates a large impact.”

He adds: “The brick-by-brick approach is also used with business strategy and diversification. Each brick represents a deliberate decision to expand how we serve clients. For example, we added credit to our investment offerings, we’ve grown globally, we have made important acquisitions, we’ve hired incredible talent, and made key upgrades to our internal systems and technology.”

Making the Choice to Change

As Moss looks to the future, he acknowledges that change isn’t easy, but change is necessary. “Nature teaches us that the species that are the most adaptable to change are the ones that thrive. If you want to be a CEO, get a degree in psychology, because you have to understand what truly motivates and inspires people in a deep way to help them navigate change.”

He concludes: “The days of fixed mind-set ‘command and control’ leadership are numbered. What counts is how you take care of people and help them become all that they can be. If we do that, we’ll have a high-performing team positioned to win for our clients.”

Asset figures are approximate and include discretionary as well as nondiscretionary assets.

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