

Who is “TK” or Minnesota-native Tom Kelly, the General Manager of the San Francisco Zoo?



- A. A professional musician.
- B. Known as an enforcer when playing hockey.
- C. A junior championship dog handler.
- D. An enthusiastic individual who lives his work and loves what he does.
- E. All of the above.

If you answered E, you are right!

Yes, he is a professional musician. One of his jobs was “banging on the bongos” or playing the drums for Odd Records Recording Artists *Pushin’ Daisies*. The roots rock/alt country band toured around the country, stopping at college campuses, festivals, bars and other venues more than 250 times a year. And that’s when he got the nickname of TK. When band members don’t want their followers to know their names, they select a nickname to use. And Tom Kelly of Minneapolis, Minnesota, did not want his groupies to know who he really was, so TK was born.



After five years of living on/off the road, TK realized it was time to go home when he was talking to his girlfriend (and future wife) by phone and told her he was in Iowa City, and she told him that he actually was in Fargo. When he couldn’t remember where he was, TK decided it was time to get back to his true calling of leading teams in the food world! He returned to the Minneapolis area and the love of his life, Jennifer. They met when he was working at McDonald’s and she was one of his manager’s close friends. His wife recently moved to the San Francisco area to join her husband. They dated for 17 plus years, but only got married about

five years ago. TK jokingly said Jennifer knew she was dating, and then later marrying, a crazy S.O.B. (and that’s not short for shortness of breath). In their free time, he and his wife enjoy shopping where they browse around the shops with no intent to purchase.

While TK doesn’t perform on a regular basis now, he’s been known to sit and jam with the bands playing in his neighborhood bars. Not surprisingly, he loves to listen to music, but not on the radio. His favorite rock and roll band is *The Smithereens*, a New Jersey band that has played together for around 30 years. He also enjoys American folk and country music artist Mary Chapin Carpenter.

Yes, he has a reputation as an enforcer on the ice. TK started playing hockey when he was six years old. His love for the sport started when his father took him to a Minnesota North Stars game when they played the Colorado Rockies, an NHL ice hockey team from 1976 to 1982. They sat behind the glass and watched as a Colorado cheap shot against a Minnesota player hit the glass barrier, and it shattered into their laps. TK was hooked. He joined a youth hockey league and played until high school when he took a break from the game, which lasted only a few years. TK was so committed to being the best hockey player possible that he even took ballet lessons because his coach said it would help his footwork on the ice. He laughingly disclosed that going to the “barre” (a stationary handrail that is used during ballet warm-up exercises) means something different to him than most people.



TK stopped playing while he was in high school, however, he returned to the sport he loved in his 20s and ended up traveling internationally to play the sport. TK shared that one of his most valued possessions is the TEAM USA jersey he wore while playing in an exhibition tournament in Amsterdam. It still has visible blood stains on it!

TK's most inspiring quote

"When you're green, you're growing, but when you're ripe, you're rotten!"

Ray Kroc
Founder of McDonald's



His love of the sport still continues even though he has had 87 stitches and five concussions. He's also proud of the numerous awards over the years he has received for the most penalty minutes earned. TK recently joined an adult league where more than 2,000 players skate on the Sharks Ice at San Jose, the official practice facility for the NHL San Jose Sharks. The enforcer is back on the ice!

It should not be a surprise that his favorite book is the one that explains the unwritten set of rules about hockey sportsmanship. In this book, *The Code: The Unwritten Rules Of Fighting And Retaliation In The NHL*, the author interviewed past and present players and coaches to gain their insights and stories to explain why fighting is allowed, and how players police themselves on and off the ice.

Yes, he knows how to handle those dogs. While he was in high school, TK and his mother traveled most weekends, from state to state, coast to coast to dog shows. His mother is a nationally recognized Breed judge, and he was a junior dog handler. It was an opportunity where TK experienced the thrill of competition combined with joy of seeing beautiful dogs while travelling the country. Their breed was the Vizsla, the smallest of the pointer-retriever breeds and known to be loyal companions. He even competed at the famous Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show at Madison Square Garden.

Yes, he's an enthusiastic individual who lives his work and loves what he does. TK believes that hockey has taught him many major life lessons and has become the foundation on how he manages people. He said, "I'm passionate about hockey; it is the one true team sport. You hold yourself accountable or get off the team." TK shared that leaders are born not just to lead, but to inspire and challenge. "If I die, I want to know that I inspired people to be better than me," he said. He's also passionate about team building. "I like to see what you can do with employees, whether they're green or experienced. It's how to define a great culture."

As an only child, he credits his mother for instilling in him his work ethic as he juggled the demands of playing hockey with dog show responsibilities – and of course, schoolwork.

TK was quick to point out that he is a very social person. "It's the way I grew up," he said. Jokingly, his wife has asked him is there anywhere in the country that you can go that someone doesn't know you?

When TK does slow down and decompresses, he likes to park a rowboat in the middle of the lake where his mother now lives in a lakeside house. Here he does nothing except pop in a CD and enjoy the sun. As outgoing as TK is, he knows when he needs to be away from people; he needs to completely away from everyone.

His first job was NOT in the food service industry, but as an entrepreneur. He opened a lemonade stand in his front yard as well as in the neighbor's yard across the street. However, he did end up in the foodservice industry as a McDonald's manager. Next he landed a job with an airport food-service company. After several years, TK left, not sure what he was going to do. He opened the local daily newspaper and saw an ad for Concessions Manager at the Minnesota Zoo. TK remembers thinking, how hard would it be to sell hot dogs and cotton candy? He found out when on his first day attendance was over 13,000 people, including eight picnics, three weddings and a sold-out evening concert. Even with those odds, he fell in love with the leisure attraction industry. He quickly found a job with SSA. TK said that the SSA culture and its emphasis on family, team building and accountability immediately appealed to him.

Even though TK enjoys his current job, his ideal job would be a hockey coach or to run a cultural institution. He quickly added he would NOT go back on the road and tour with a rock and roll band as most of the zoo animals are much more appealing and frankly smell a hell of a lot better!