

By Tuesday night, sharp winds from the west are turning the flags into billboards as Houston squares off against San Diego in the volleyball finals. Bruce Halle is standing next to the stands in a pair of shorts and sandals, a white baseball cap and a Discount Tire pullover—one of the items of clothing in the backpacks every attendee received. Employees sitting in the stands offer him a seat, but he declines.

Halle is alone here, both the center of the event and somehow outside of it. It's one of the contradictions in life that the leader of twelve thousand employees is most engaged when talking to one at a time. In a crowd, he appears more comfortable as an observer than as a participant.

He stands five feet from the bleachers, watching San Diego take an early lead with an 18-12 win, smiling as he observes others having fun. Cigar smoke wafts across the beach as Houston ties it up with an 18-8 comeback, and it looks like San Diego, home of beach volleyball, might fall from its throne. In the end, though, San Diego reclaims its crown with an 18-14 win, and it's time for Bruce Halle to hand out some trips.

The awards ceremony is particularly festive as Michael Zuieback, Halle's stepson and executive vice president of corporate strategy, introduces the drivers of Discount Tire's two race cars: drift car racer Daijiro Yoshihara and NASCAR driver Brad Keselowski. Keselowski was NASCAR's top Nationwide Series driver in 2010, despite running out of fuel in one of his races. Zuieback awards him a spare gas can as the crowd roars its approval. The Dallas region team takes a golf trophy, and San Diego receives its volleyball prize, again, but the big question is how many trips the company will give away this night.

Tony Doca, 2009 manager of the year in the Arizona region, is in the crowd, eyeing Assistant Manager Frank Alvarez. Doca has won three trips at Tahoe, but Alvarez, who no longer works with Doca, is here for the first time. Doca decides to follow the Bruce Halle model because "I've been blessed to work for the Bruce Halle family for thirty years and it was time to give back, pay it forward." So when Doca wins his fourth trip, he runs up to the stage and gives his certificate to Alvarez. Alvarez wins a trip a few minutes later and pays it forward to Raul Olivas, who then wins a trip that