

THE AM LAW LITIGATION DAILY

Litigation Leaders: Melissa Tea of K&L Gates on Guiding a Global Practice Through Growth and Change

By Ross Todd

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Welcome to another edition of our Litigation Leaders series, featuring the litigation practice leaders at some of the biggest and most innovative law firms in the country—and around the world.

Meet **Melissa Tea**, the practice area leader for the global litigation and dispute resolution practice at **K&L Gates**. Tea, who is based in Pittsburgh, has been at the firm for her entire 28-plus-year legal career. In addition to her leadership of the litigation practice, she was selected as a new member of the firm's 16-person global management committee last summer.

Lit Daily: Tell us a little about yourself—perhaps even a thing or two your partners would be surprised to learn.

I am a first-generation college graduate from a large extended family of small business owners and blue-collar workers. Early on I learned the value of hard work, practical problem-solving and earning trust through consistency. These values became the foundation of my legal practice. I also am the oldest of five, with four younger brothers. Someone once said to me, "That explains a lot about you." There's some truth to that, I think.

You are a Pittsburgh native and K&L lifer—going back to the days when the firm was still Kirkpatrick & Lockhart. How do those facts inform your leadership of the litigation department at K&L

Gates? Over my nearly three decades at K&L Gates, I have witnessed the firm's remarkable transformation from a regional East Coast practice to a global institution with 45 offices across four continents. Although our geographic footprint has changed, our core values have

always remained the same. We are grounded as a firm in the work ethic and service-oriented focus of our rust-belt roots. As a litigation practice, our strategic initiatives and priority growth areas shift in response to the needs of our clients, but our firm's core values are a throughline. My leadership approach also leans heavily on my early-learned values I mentioned above—hard work, practical problem-solving and earning trust through consistency—each of which I view as critical to earning a client's trust and transforming one-off engagements into long-term, valued partnerships.

You've led the firm's litigation department since 2019 and joined the management committee this past summer. About how much time do you spend



Melissa Tea of K&L Gates.

Courtesy photo

on management versus client-facing litigation work? Time and attention tend to go where they are needed most, and that varies from day to day and week to week. As practice leader, I need to invest meaningful time in setting strategic priorities, financial planning and other practice management imperatives. I also spend a significant amount of time with our lawyers, making sure I know who they are and what they do—and not just in litigation but across all of our practice areas. The success of our litigation practice is closely tied to how well and how deeply we collaborate with the other practice areas and industry groups in the firm. That said, my focus first and foremost is on delivering exceptional service and results to our clients. I find that my continued engagement with clients on litigation work is a critical component to my ability to contribute meaningfully to my management responsibilities. My client work is an important part of how I keep my finger on the pulse of the legal market, including with respect to trending and emerging issues, and it provides me with opportunities to communicate with clients about what they are looking for in their outside counsel and how we can best support them.

How big is the firm's litigation department and where are most of your litigators concentrated geographically?

Our litigation practice is comprised of nearly 450 lawyers and other timekeepers, who support our practice, including special projects lawyers, paralegals, e-discovery technicians and clerks. Approximately 270 of those are based in the United States. We have significant concentrations of litigators in Pittsburgh, Seattle and Boston, as well as sizeable teams in London, Melbourne and Singapore. This geographic reach allows us to meet our clients' litigation needs nearly anywhere in the world.

What do you see as hallmarks of K&L Gates litigators? What makes you different?

We not only bring to the table top-tier talent and the kind of sophisticated work product expected from a global law firm, but also our rust belt heritage, which is marked by a strong work ethic and a practical approach to problem solving. We understand our clients' real-world business challenges and create solutions to their biggest

problems that are grounded in technical excellence and pragmatism. Not many firms wear a white shoe and a rust belt, but we do, and we do it well, and our clients benefit from that distinctive combination.

In what three areas of litigation do you have the deepest bench? (I know it's hard, but please just name three.) This is a difficult question to answer (as your parenthetical anticipates), not just because I think all of our litigation practice groups are as good as any other out there, but also because our practice is always adapting to evolving client needs and market trends. But if I had to pick just three areas, the first would be bread-and-butter commercial and business disputes—including breach-of-contract claims, business torts and transactional disputes. These types of claims are right in our wheelhouse and constitute the largest portion of our practice. Lately, that group has been handling a lot of deal litigation and supply agreement disputes. We also have a deep bench in the area of product liability and mass torts, a group that has evolved over time from a traditional toxic tort practice into a sophisticated emerging contaminants and consumer class action defense practice. Finally, our insurance recovery and counseling has always been a premier practice for our firm, with our litigators securing hundreds of millions of dollars each year in insurance coverage for our clients across a range of liabilities, including cyber, environmental, property damage, business interruption and personal injury claims. These three areas are supported by teams of lawyers with extensive experience and proven results.

What were two or three of the firm's biggest in-court wins in the past year, and can you cite tactics that exemplify your firm's approach?

We had a number of very significant arbitration wins this year about which I would love to brag, but they are subject to confidentiality restrictions that prevent me from disclosing the details. I am able to share that, in one of those matters, partners **John Sylvester** and **Doug Simmons** and associate **Nick Chan** secured a unanimous, nine-figure award in a confidential arbitration proceeding in favor of our client, a large agricultural sciences company, granting insurance recovery to our client regarding more than 1,300 personal injury claims. This award

came after a lengthy discovery period and six hearing days split between April 2024 and February 2025, and is only the latest victory in a string of successful outcomes John Sylvester has achieved for his clients over the course of his 40-plus year career.

Partners **Tom Birsic** and **Jackie Celender**, along with associates **Wesley Prichard** (recently promoted to partner) and **Mick Pence**, secured a favorable ruling from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, which affirmed the district court's dismissal of 800 claims against firm client Arkema Inc. This team has been defending Arkema in various state and federal court actions arising from fires at Arkema's chemical manufacturing facility in Crosby, Texas, caused by Hurricane Harvey's floodwater. After settling the injunctive class the district court certified, class counsel filed 800 individual damages claims in Texas state court. Our team successfully had those claims dismissed as untimely, which the plaintiffs appealed. After briefing and oral argument, the Fifth Circuit held that the claims were untimely because the pendency of the federal class action did not toll the Texas state limitations period that applied to plaintiffs' claims (i.e., that Texas would not recognize cross-jurisdictional class-action tolling).

Finally, a K&L Gates team led by **Brent Hockaday**, along with a team led by co-counsel **Jeff Lowenstein** and his firm, helped Dundon Capital Partners and executives Tom Dundon and John Zutter defeat a claim for \$184 million in damages stemming from the collapse of the Alliance of American Football. In a 199-page decision, U.S. Chief Bankruptcy Judge Craig Gargotta in San Antonio entered a complete defense judgment in favor of DCP and Zutter for all claims, and a complete defense verdict for all but one claim against Dundon, which was an isolated breach of fiduciary duty claim that lacked any «causally related harm» and resulted in a nominal damages award of \$1. All contract, fraud, promissory estoppel and remaining fiduciary duty claims asserted against the defendant parties were denied.

These wins, and many others our litigators achieved in 2025, are the result of our rigorous but pragmatic approach to litigation. We dig in and do the hard work, developing smart and effective litigation strategies that successfully resolve our clients' biggest problems.

What are your leadership priorities for the coming year? Our firm has always been at the forefront of legal technology innovation, and in 2026 we will be focused on taking our adoption and integration of AI litigation tools to the next level. Every client wants to know how we are using AI to deliver more efficient service to them, and thanks to our innovative, forward-looking team, we have a lot to tell them. Among other things, I expect the coming year to see a significant expansion in use cases for AI tools along with the continued development of sophisticated and creative fee arrangements to create measurable value for our clients. We also will be continuing our efforts to deeply integrate litigators into our firm's industry teams, especially in the technology, manufacturing, and consumer goods and services sectors, where we have particular strength. These collaborations foster cross-disciplinary expertise, enabling us to deliver tailored solutions to our client's complex challenges and drive better outcomes. Finally, some of the best and brightest young litigators in the world walk our hallways, and they are the future of our practice. We will continue our focus on their training and development, not just with respect to practice area expertise and technical skills, but also professional skills such as client relationship building and developing a market identity.

What does the firm's coming trial docket look like?

We will have a lot of litigators in courtrooms in 2026, trying high-stakes breach of contract, representation and warranty, and fraud claims; emerging contaminant claims; insurance coverage claims; and patent infringement claims, among others. We have always had an active trial docket, which is a testament to the deep bench of talented courtroom advocates in our practice.