Our 2017 special report features an elite group of lawyers and law firms that posted hard-fought wins at the U.S. Supreme Court or in federal circuit courts. How do they do it? Luckily, these appellate aces offer great advice: listen to colleagues, answer the question, read good writing and, in oral argument, position yourself like a jazz musician—always be ready to improvise. Presenting this year’s honorees in their own words, edited for clarity and length.

—Lisa Helem

Covington & Burling

Tell us about your top U.S. Supreme Court or federal circuit court victory over the past year and how you and your team achieved the win.

We scored a significant victory in Meoli v. The Huntington National Bank, a case arising from a massive Ponzi scheme. The case was important not only because of the large amount of money at stake (approximately $72 million plus interest), but because the district court’s ruling exposed financial institutions to potentially enormous liability whenever a bank customer becomes bankrupt. The team worked collaboratively to identify the strongest arguments for appeal and to draft persuasive briefs.

How did your firm approach appellate success over the past year?

Covington relies on extensive collaboration among our appellate lawyers and lawyers with relevant subject-matter expertise. This approach often gives us a significant advantage in cases involving complex statutory and regulatory issues. Beyond that, we constantly ask whether our arguments will persuade busy, non-specialist judges.

What practice advice would you give your younger self?

1. Understand your client’s needs and goals—even a winning legal argument may provide little practical benefit.
2. Take a “fresh look” at the case, but do not reinvent the wheel—reach out to subject-matter experts and trial counsel with deep knowledge of the record.

Responses submitted by Robert Long, co-chair of Covington’s Appellate and Supreme Court Litigation Group.