

BEING A SPORTS AGENT WHAT IT'S LIKE

When many people think about professional athletes, they think not only about their tremendous ability and athleticism, but also the staggering salaries that many of them make annually.

As *The Carnation* was thinking about different topics for the Sports Talk portion of this issue, we decided it might be interesting to delve into the business side of professional sports, and have enlisted the help of folks from both sides of the field, a former certified sports agent and a current NFL General Manager.

Todd Newman, *Louisiana Monroe '84*, is an attorney by trade. Currently, he has limited his practice to personal injury, workers compensation, domestic law and criminal law, but has done many different things over the years. These include being the owner of the Monroe Moccasins, a minor league hockey team in his hometown, and being a part-owner of a Bingo Hall that raises approximately \$1 million a year for charity.

But back before these other pursuits, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Newman tried his hand at being a sports agent, which was an up and down experience. During those six years, he represented such clients as NFL third-round draft pick Steve Foley, NBA second-round draft pick Mike Smith (who happened to be Michael Jordan's first draft pick when he was with the Washington Wizards), and Arena Football League quarterback Raymond Philyaw, in addition to others.

Getting into the Business

He became an agent after meeting Foley while he was teaching a class at the University of Louisiana Monroe in the mid-90s. Having gotten to know Foley and his mother, he felt strongly that he could make a difference for him. So, he went through the process and got certified as an NFL and NBA agent.

To become an NFL agent, there is an exam on the collective bargaining agreement, and the agent must attend a seminar and pay the requisite fee. For the NBA, Newman mentioned that all you had to do was pay the money and you were an agent.

When he first went to the seminar in Indianapolis for the NFL, he felt naïve about the process, "I thought Good Lord, who in the world would want to pay \$1,500 or whatever it was back then on the chance that they might get somebody,"

he said. "I had just assumed everyone there had a client, but when I went the first time and they asked how many of us had someone that we expected to go in the Draft, I raised my hand. Out of 400 people, there may have been 50 that had a client that was going to go in the Draft."

Finding Clients

While most people think that being an agent is all about negotiating the best deal for their clients, many people forget that there is a step before that – finding the clients in the first place! Apparently, for the many people who were at his seminar back in the mid 90s, that was easier said than done.

Newman's experience was that all of his clients were local to his hometown – Monroe, Louisiana. As someone who taught on campus at the University of Louisiana Monroe, he knew some of them from classes. Others he knew about from talking to the coaches. He always followed all rules, and never lured a potential client with money and "toys" to get them to be his client.

However, he saw some other agents who used different tactics, even on players who ended up as his clients! A very easy example of this was evident when he helped Steve Foley move to Cincinnati after being drafted. They moved 100 pairs of high top sneakers that were gifts from other agents trying to get him to become their client. "They literally followed his mother at the Senior Bowl, would stay in the same hotel as her, and would call her before she went to bed at night to talk to her about how I had never been an agent before, that it was my first time, and all of that stuff."

While one would think that it would take more than developing relationships to land an athlete as a client, according to Newman, all he had to do to land Foley was make his mother feel comfortable. He was a like a college football coach going into the player's home to sell him and his parents on going to school, but instead was selling them on him and his attributes to be the player's agent.

And once he landed Foley, he began getting all of the ULM football players who were potential professional prospects. The same happened once he got basketball player, Mike Smith. "There were a lot who called wanting me to be

their agent, but the chances are that if it's the player calling the agent, they probably don't have a very good chance," Newman said.

Getting Ready for the Draft

After recruiting his clients, then came the opportunity to assist them in getting ready for the Draft. In Steve Foley's case, the first step was the NFL Combine in Indianapolis. Newman helped prepare him for it, and his philosophy for Foley was "do it all." A lot of times at the Combine, players decide not to do certain aspects of the workouts because they don't want their draft stock to drop, but for Foley, who was being projected anywhere from the late first round to the end of the fifth round, Newman knew it would be in his best interest to do it all and show them what he had.

Following the Combine, around ten coaches came through Monroe to see him work out, and Newman oversaw this and set up all of the workouts. Following those, it looked like he would be picked by the Green Bay Packers, as Newman had received a call from a Green Bay television station asking him questions about Foley.

When Draft day arrived, Foley and his many friends and family members gathered at Newman's house for the event. While they were watching, Green Bay got through their first round pick, but it was not Foley. Then, Newman saw that they had traded their second round pick, so the likelihood of him going to Green Bay was close to zero. All of a sudden, Cincinnati was on the clock, and they were one of the teams who worked him out. But Newman knew that they had already picked Takeo Spikes and Brian Simmons in the first round, two players at Foley's position. However, the phone



Todd Newman, *Louisiana Monroe '84*, and his son Ty at their home in Monroe, Louisiana. Ty is proudly wearing his Dad's 1987 E. Allen James Outstanding Undergraduate Award medal.

rang, and they did end up picking Foley as the 75th pick in the 1998 NFL Draft.

The Negotiation

After the Draft the next step was negotiating the contract and getting him the most money possible. Cincinnati had another pick four spots later in the third round, and the thought was that Newman would not allow Foley to sign a contract until the player picked four spots later signed. Had he done so, the other player's agent would have been able to say that he could have signed his player for more money had Newman not signed early at a lower price.

So, the other player's agent who worked for IMG, one of the top agencies for athletes, was calling Newman seeing what he was going to do. Newman held strong and told him that he was not signing until the other player did.

So, they moved Foley to Cincinnati without a contract, had him report to camp and do all of the workouts on time while other players were holding out, and Newman met with the team. Nothing was getting worked out the first day. "The NFL Players Association will let you know what everybody signs for, and there is a rookie salary cap. It's really not as magical as people like to make it out to be, but you still have to know what you're doing to do the best job for your client," he said.

He knew where the numbers were and where he needed to be, but he had the other player's agent continuing to call him trying to make sure he knew what he was doing. "He was being very professional and just making sure I knew what I was doing. He was essentially making sure I wasn't going to short-sell Steve so his client wouldn't then get less money. But I had already made up my mind that I wasn't signing before he did."

So, Foley and Newman went to a Reds game and he ended up calling the other agent while there to make sure things were still moving along. The other agent told him that his client had just signed, and so Newman was free to sign Foley the next morning. He went in, and with the information on what the other player made, he negotiated a salary for Foley higher than the other player.

He did that all without putting himself in a position where others could say that he made a mistake, and actually at the time he signed Foley, he had negotiated the highest signing bonus in the history of the third round of the draft. Pretty good for a first-timer!

Once the Player Makes It

It seems as though Newman's biggest responsibility once his players made it to the league was almost being their babysitter. As he brought them into the fold, he had to try to educate them on the process of becoming a player, the biggest part of which was financial. It didn't always sink in.

The Thoughts of an NFL General Manager

The Carnation: Talk a little about the GM/agent relationship. In general, is it usually positive, or are the talks and negotiations always tense and adversarial?

Heckert: The relationship that I have with agents is generally a very positive one. I'm not saying that we agree on everything during a contract negotiation, but we can normally find a common ground and get a deal done that is both acceptable for the player, as well as for our organization. In the more complicated contracts, there will always be times that both sides may need to agree to disagree and just move on from a certain point and try to work things out, but I can say that most deals are done with a hand shake afterwards and there are no hard feelings no matter how tense the negotiations get.

The Carnation: What is your personal philosophy in your work with players and agents surrounding contract negotiations?

Heckert: My personal philosophy regarding players and their contracts is pretty simple. We try to only sign and re-sign players who we think are going to be good players for a long time. The mistakes that are made in the NFL are usually ones that are made because of a situation where a team thinks that they HAVE to have a player and are willing to do whatever it takes to get that player. That can be a disaster if it doesn't work out so you have to be willing to walk away and let that player go.

The Carnation: As the GM, how much of your job is dealing with agents and players on salary and contract issues, and how much is evaluating talent?

Heckert: My primary responsibility is evaluating players. That is where we earn our money and what makes our team what it is and this has to be the main focus of my job. That being said, I do have many other responsibilities that go hand in hand with how our team performs. The salary cap is a huge part of our game and managing that is a day to day necessity that we meet on almost every day. We have to not only be in compliance with the salary cap every day, but we also have to play for the future. We are always looking at current and future contracts and deciding how they will affect us not only today but also up to three years from now. Most of my dealing with agents is done in the off season so that does not play a real big role during the season.

"Take Mike Smith for example. He goes up there and is making the rookie minimum, which is less than half a million dollars. That's more money than he has ever had or that he thought he'd ever have. They really don't have a concept of how much money that really is. Then, they turn around and think that they can't ever spend all of it. But guess what? You can go through that money mighty fast," Newman said.

He had all of his players set up in a trust, and a financial institution would manage all of their money. That arrangement included paying all of their bills, setting up investment opportunities, etc. The player would then be able to call and tell them what they wanted to get and Newman and the player would make the determination of whether the purchase should happen.

At one point, Smith had called him after having bought a \$25,000 necklace, (mind you, he was making the rookie minimum) and asked Newman to have a check cut to pay for it. Newman returned the necklace, because it was not in Smith's best interest. What was it really worth? About \$7,500 according to a local jeweler in Monroe.

"They literally have these caravans of people going into the locker rooms who sell clothes, jewelry and everything else. You have guys like Juwan Howard in the Wizards locker room making \$11 million per year buying \$10,000 worth of clothes. Guys like Mike feel the pressure to keep up with the other guys, and I had to try to help them understand how to manage their money."

Leaving the Field

After losing Foley to another agent who was wining and dining him all the time, Newman decided that it was time to go back to the law practice. He felt as though the players had the philosophy of "what have you done for me today," and it ended up that his initial thoughts on the field were different from what it turned out to be for him.

In fact, while he was Foley's agent, the player was arrested four times in one year, three of which Newman got dismissed, and the fourth, Foley pleaded to a probation offense and never missed a game. Foley's career ended (with another agent) after he was shot by a police officer who had tried to stop him for DWI, but he led the officer on a chase through San Diego.

"I had this vision of one of my guys getting into the Hall of Fame, and I would be able to present him, and he would be happy that he had someone who had guided him," he said. "The bottom line was, you can't save someone from themselves, and they are going to blow through that money unless they have enough sense not to."

Todd Newman received the 1987 E. Allen James Outstanding Undergraduate Award from Delta Sigma Phi, and currently coaches three girl's softball teams, two basketball teams and two soccer teams, where he makes a difference in kids' lives.