

by Matt Tuthill

## The Life of a Football Agent

# Leigh Steinberg

Think being a sports agent means wearing a fancy suit and smooth-talking GMs over lunch? Think again. We asked Leigh Steinberg to take us through a typical day in his field. As it turns out, the life of an agent is an often grueling, year-round (not to mention costly) endeavor. Here, Steinberg breaks down the life of an agent into three basic functions.



Until that moment, there was never a hint that he was onto something so monumental. Leigh Steinberg thought he was just helping out an old friend. But as he and Steve Bartkowski stepped off their plane onto the Atlanta tarmac one night in 1975, the gravity of the situation became glaringly apparent. Hundreds of fans were crushing against a police barrier and a TV crew mobbed the two men. "There were fleet lights flashing in the sky," Steinberg recalled. "And the first thing we heard was, 'We interrupt the Johnny Carson show to bring you a special news bulletin. Steve Bartkowski and his attorney have just arrived at the Atlanta airport. We switch you live for an in-depth interview.'"



In retrospect, Steinberg should have expected such pageantry. He'd just helped Bartkowski sign a contract with the Falcons worth \$600,000, the biggest in pro football history at that time. Still, it's easy to understand Steinberg's naiveté. It was the first deal he had ever negotiated.

"I looked at him probably the way Dorothy looked at Toto when they got to Munchkin Land and said, 'I guess we're not in California anymore,'" Steinberg said with a laugh.

Before Bartkowski—an old dorm mate of Steinberg's from UC Berkeley—called him asking for representation, Steinberg had never given any serious thought to being a sports agent. He was a law school graduate with no experience, lying at home battling back a case of dysentery he'd caught courtesy of an ill-advised leap into the Nile while traveling the world after graduation. In fact, the concept of football agency was only in its infancy at that time. Before 1977, players had no guaranteed right of representation.

"At that time, most players were represented by their parents or themselves," Steinberg said. "A GM could slam the phone down and say, 'We don't deal with agents.'"

Steinberg recalled an anecdote about Jim Ringo and Vince Lombardi to illustrate the point. Ringo had called Lombardi to tell him he'd secured an agent, and Lombardi asked for a moment, during which he promptly picked up another phone and traded Ringo to Philadelphia.

"It was a very hostile world to the concept of agency," Steinberg said.

Since the day he secured Bartkowski's deal, Steinberg has negotiated what he can only estimate as "multiple billions of dollars" worth of NFL contracts. He's broken his own record for the biggest contract in NFL history on several occasions, represented the first pick in the draft eight different years, and written a best-selling book, *Winning with Integrity*.

Steinberg has also served as a technical consultant on Hollywood projects like *Any Given Sunday*, HBO's *Arli\$\$*, and is recognized by many as being the main inspiration for the Cameron Crowe film *Jerry Maguire*, though he balks at taking too much of the credit.

"It's Cameron's movie," Steinberg said. "He wrote it. I don't think it's right for someone to claim that they were *Jerry Maguire*."

But in many ways, Steinberg quite literally was *Jerry Maguire*. Crowe began shadowing Steinberg in 1993 to pick up atmosphere for the movie, following the agent to the draft and to league meetings. He watched Steinberg counsel, schmooze and negotiate. The film crew even

borrowed photos of Steinberg with different athletes and celebrities, superimposing Tom Cruise's face overtop. Various awards in Steinberg's office were emulated, the facsimiles emblazoned with the name Jerry Maguire, and the movie's set was even modeled after Steinberg's headquarters in Newport Beach, CA.

More to the point, that famous Jerry Maguire moment when Cruise's character is robbed of his clients and fights tooth and nail on the phone to retain them, this actually happened to Steinberg in the mid 80s when an agent left his firm.

In 2001, the scenario essentially repeated itself when the agency of Steinberg, Moorad and Dunn was purchased by Assante, a Canadian firm. Some agents working for Steinberg were angered by the buyout and left, taking several clients with them. The agents were sued by the Canadian firm for breaking binding non-compete, non-solicit documents and lost a contentious lawsuit worth over \$44 million, \$22 million of which were punitive damages.

During the trial, some media outlets took the "hostile environment" defense as a damning blow to the agent's Jerry Maguire image. But the defense didn't hold water in the courtroom and Steinberg's firm won. Former partner David Dunn has since been forced to serve a year-and-a-half suspension from the players union.

Through it all, Steinberg has maintained that big money, a huge client list and a powerful firm are low on his list of priorities.

"I was raised by my father to make a fundamental difference in the world," Steinberg said. "If I weren't an agent, I probably would have been involved in some political cause. Right now, one of my big missions is fighting global warming."

Steinberg's annual Super Bowl party—which attracts everyone in Hollywood from Jay Leno to Ludacris—was carbon neutral this past year. Guests perused artist renderings of wind-turbine powered stadiums that feed into the grid. It's a perfect cause for Steinberg, who has always believed that athletes and professional sports as a whole should give back to the community.

His position as an agent to some of the world's greatest athletes allows him to give back on a level he never dreamed possible. Charity isn't just Steinberg's passion, it has become a trademark of every athlete he represents.

The Crescent Moon Foundation, the Forever Young Foundation and the Aikman Foundation have more in common than the financial assistance they provide to young people in their respective communities. Steinberg helped plan the charities, each named after a Hall of Fame client: Warren Moon, Steve Young, Troy Aikman.

"One of the things we've always required at our practice is that an athlete retrace his roots," Steinberg said. "That he go back to the high school, collegiate and professional community and set up programs that enhance the quality of life."

All three men also run successful businesses and have enjoyed lucrative broadcasting careers. Moon works as an analyst on Seattle Seahawks broadcasts, Young works for ESPN, and Aikman works for FOX.

It is this aspect of representation, typically called "second career," which the legendary agent finds far more important than securing a big contract or any other part of his job. An athlete's success after football, he said, needs to be the ultimate goal of any agent worth his salt.

"We know that football is the most brutal of sports," Steinberg said. "And it will not last forever."



# DOs, DON'Ts and HOW TOs

## 1: Recruiting New Players

As the college season ends and players start to think about declaring for the draft, it's not unusual for those players to form a panel with parents or other family members to find an agent. During this process, Steinberg interviews with the potential client, and is typically competing with three or four other agents.

Once a player hires an agent, the agent's most critical function as the combine approaches is to provide training for the athlete. This means owning or renting a training facility, as well as hiring a trainer and a nutritionist. The typical cost of training one player for the draft is about \$20,000.

During this period, agents also need to get a handle on a player's overall goals: How important is playing in a city close to home? Is it more important to play for a winning team or to get starting time?

Moreover, players need to be prepared for the constant media storm that surrounds the NFL.

"One of the basic roles of agency is to try to center them behaviorally and prepare them for what it means to be a public figure," Steinberg said.

Preparing an athlete for public life involves talking to new recruits about the dangers of drunk driving, physical altercations or any other trouble with the law. It also helps if players are ready to graciously sign autographs for fans and give interviews with the media.

"They need to understand that they're involved in a form of the entertainment business that doesn't work if fans aren't excited about their conduct," Steinberg said. "If they're unwilling to play that role, then they can play the purest form of the sport, which is on the sand lot."

## 2: Client Maintenance

This part of the job involves everything from marketing and setting up charitable foundations to talking to coaches about playing time and potential trades. Agents also have to monitor the rehab progress of injured players and be able to counsel them.

"Players who get injured are usually depressed," Steinberg said. "They've always been able to trust their bodies."

Steinberg says a caring attitude toward an injured player is essential to a good relationship. When Troy Aikman suffered a concussion in the 1994 NFC Championship game, Steinberg spent the night with him in the hospital, keeping his family apprised of the situation on the phone.

Preparation for a second career is a major focus of Steinberg's client maintenance. The agent pushes all of his clients to finish school if they haven't already, and to get involved in activities they're passionate about. Learning how to parlay one's NFL marketability into second career profit isn't exactly rocket science. But this is crucial to a player's success after retirement or, in the worst cases, a career-ending injury.

## 3: Contract Negotiation

In an era when the majority of media attention on agency has to do with contract disputes and trade demands, it's easy to forget that one of the biggest agents in football history has never been involved in a public dispute like the one that earned Terrell Owens a one-way ticket out of Philly.

He aims to keep it that way.

"The minute a veteran player calls out a team for renegotiation, he ensures that it becomes less likely that it

will ever get done," Steinberg said. "Number one, to call out a proud owner, a billionaire or multi-millionaire creates a level of confrontation where most human beings will not back down. Second of all, it creates a policy crisis. If a team does a renegotiation for one player, it fears an avalanche of players pushing them against the wall." There's an old saying that you can shear a sheep a million times but skin him only once. In pro football, this means it wouldn't make sense for any agent to try to get a team to spend more than it can afford on any single player. Steinberg says this requires coming up with creative deferrals and bonuses—anything that can make a team feel like it's getting a bargain while still paying top dollar for a great player.

"The key to successful negotiation is to leave the other party happy," Steinberg said. "Properly done, football agency should never push fans away. It should never involve publicly getting involved in contract fights or having a collective bargaining agreement turn into a protracted fight . . . One of the reasons that pro football has become, far and away, the most dominating sport in the country, is that there has not been a protracted strike or collective bargaining morass. The games are played. Fans have that certainty." F



## ▶ SIDELINES

### FACE THE MUSIC

It's not likely that any of Steinberg's initiatives or his vigorous promotion of personal responsibility would carry any weight if he didn't practice what he preached. In April of 2007, when Steinberg was arrested for a DUI, he didn't shove away TV cameras or stonewall reporters' questions with the old "no comment" approach. He took it like a man, which, says Steinberg, is the only thing to do in such a situation:

"You have to come out about it. You have to acknowledge that you were wrong and acknowledge that you're taking steps to stop it . . . It was a ridiculous thing to do . . . In this lifetime, you have to be morally and ethically responsible for your conduct, especially if it's going to have an influence on other people."