

Athletes, Agents, and Image

By Steve Tappan

Kevin Johnson was a ten-year-old living in Oak Park, a rough-edged subdivision of Sacramento, when a burglar made off with a local family's unopened gifts one Christmas Eve. After hearing about the robbery on the news, Johnson's grandfather woke him up so that the two of them could deliver \$20 to help out a family they had never met.

For Johnson, now an all-star guard for the NBA's Phoenix Suns, it was an early, and lasting, lesson in philanthropy. Today, as head of St. Hope Academy, an after-school program for kids in his old neighborhood, Johnson is still putting into practice the values his grandfather taught him on a Christmas Eve 20 years ago.

Athletes have long been involved in charitable work. Indeed, given their elevated stature in the community, they are expected to do so. Foundations created by athletes range from Pam Shriver's efforts to introduce disadvantaged youth to tennis through a charitable tournament, to the ill-fated Michael Jordan Foundation, which closed last year amid criticism that it spent a disproportionate amount on administrative costs. There is no authoritative count of how many foundations have been created by athletes nationally, but the Washington-Baltimore region alone can claim seven.

For athletes, charitable foundations are about more than just good works. They're also good business. Many of the top sports agencies require that athletes agree to set up a foundation or volunteer their time or money for a charitable purpose before they will represent them. Through this charitable stipulation, of course, agencies ensure favorable publicity for their athletes, initiating a chain reaction of commercial opportunity that can lead to increased sponsorship and salaries for the athlete and, ultimately, fatter commissions for the agency.

"Frankly, it's a good business decision," says Dewey Blanton, vice president for communications at ProServ, one of the country's top sports agencies. "Anything to raise their profile and get people thinking positively about our clients is what's important," he says. The athlete, Blanton says, gets the image of being "the good citizen in the community and it only helps them in the marketplace."

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A well-placed gift once the foundation is established can produce other potential benefits for sports business professionals. Glue Wilkins, president of the National Alliance of African-American Athletes, charges the agents sometimes use the philanthropy of athletes for client recruitment. He points to a recent \$2.5 million gift to Michigan State University from Steve Smith, who attended M.S.U. and is now with the Atlanta Hawks, suggesting that Smith's generosity will ultimately rebound to the benefit of his agent. "Who do you think is going to get the first crack at promising athletes coming out of the M.S.U. pipeline?" Wilkins asks.

Whether created out of altruism or self-interest, athletes' foundations are not always successful. Sometimes this is due to poor management. Juwan Howard, star player for the Washington Wizards, formed a highly publicized foundation in 1995 to assist children in the inner-city. But an investigation by The Washington Post last March revealed that Howard's foundation had not registered to solicit funds in Washington, D.C. Another foundation created by Washington Redskins' cornerback Darrell Green failed for six years to file required IRS tax forms.

Other athlete-affiliated foundations suffer from hiring inexperienced family and friends to manage them—a practice that Wilkins says is widespread. The Post reported that Michael Jordan's sister, Roslyn, was paid \$47,500 in 1996 to direct his failed foundation. Charlyn Aikman, the mother of Dallas Cowboys quarterback Troy Aikman, was paid \$42,063 by his foundation between 1993 and 1994.

More often than not, when such charities under-perform, the source of their dysfunction can be traced to a lack of attention from the athletes who created them. When asked by the Washington Post how much money his foundation had raised and how much he himself had contributed to its efforts, the Wizards' Howard had no answer. His foundation, like those of many other athletes, is administered by his Washington-based agent, David Falk.

ProServ's Blanton says his firm also is "full service" when it comes to administering its clients' charities. ProServ, which counts only three full-fledged foundations among its approximately 125 clients, will set up its clients' charitable institutions and hire and pay the salaries of foundation staff, leaving the athlete to lend only his name and occasionally his checkbook to the organization. The result is that many people who are portrayed as "volunteers" are actually paid employees of the agent's firm.

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The more successful athlete-sponsored foundations often command more of the personal attention of their creators—such athletes as Kevin Johnson, the Baltimore Orioles' Cal Ripken, Jr. and Randy Myers, and tennis player MaliVai Washington. What distinguishes these individuals, say charitable officials, is a commitment to give back to their communities that predates their ascendance to the ranks of professional athletics. More often than not, what these athletes give is their most valuable commodity--their time. And they are assisting their communities, usually their hometowns, because they themselves wanted to, not because someone else thought that they should in order to burnish their image.

Take the example of Cal Ripken, Jr. A small, family-managed organization that he and his wife Kelly began in 1992 grew out of their earlier work with Baltimore Reads, Inc., a program devoted to promoting adult literacy. In 1988, the Ripkens donated \$250,000 as a challenge grant to establish the Ripken Learning Center, which is managed and staffed by Baltimore Reads. Since then, the Ripkens have contributed or helped to raise \$1.1 million for the center. The learning center offers free services to Baltimore residents in reading, writing, and arranges internships with area businesses to prepare students for full-time employment.

Ripken's teammate, Randy Myers, is also actively involved in charitable work. Myers set up his foundation in 1993 to "benefit youth and athletics," according to its director, Lowell Garrison. Myers was raised in Vancouver, WA and still returns there during the off-season. Since the end of 1996, Myers' foundation has awarded over \$49,000 to assist youth and athletics, and more than 1,000 individuals have benefited from its largesse. Garrison is certain that Myers, a top relief pitcher, will continue his involvement after his professional career is over. "He has been interested in helping his community ever since he was a youth," Garrison says.

MaliVai Washington, a rising American tennis star, has begun an innovative program in Jacksonville, his adopted hometown. Started in 1994 to introduce tennis to kids who would likely never encounter it, the program has grown from an annual clinic to a year-round instructional program through the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Jacksonville area. Approximately 60 kids are currently members of the CHAMPS (Champions Have Aspirations, Motivation, Perseverance, and Sportsmanship) program, which meets twice weekly for tennis lessons, sometimes coached by Washington himself. All members must maintain grades of "B" or higher and assist the group with a community

service project. In addition, according to Terri Florio, executive director of the MaliVai Washington Foundation, Washington will arrange to meet with kids from local Boys & Girls Clubs when he is playing in U.S. tournaments. Florio says that Washington, a ProServ client, had focused his foundation only on grantmaking until last year, when he was chosen as the role model of the year by a group of Jacksonville area kids. "That's what tugged at his heartstrings and caused him to say 'I really want to do something at home. I want to give something back to here,'" says Florio.

"The thing I think is so unique about what MaliVai is doing," says Florio, "is that he is personally involved in every aspect of the foundation. He goes out to visit every club once a month. It was his idea to have e-mail to be able to correspond with the kids. There's not one aspect that he's not involved with, not because he has to be, but because he wants to be."

ProServ's Blanton agrees. He says that Washington is often seen conducting clinics for kids, even after he has been eliminated from tournaments, and concedes that "it is very rare for someone to do that. His father has been a terrific influence on him."

According to Florio, people often tell Washington that he is a role model and that he has a responsibility to be a role model because he is an athlete. Says Florio, "He responds by saying, 'I have a responsibility to be a role model, not because I am an athlete, but because I am a human being. We all have a sphere of influence and you don't have to be a professional athlete to make a difference in someone's life.'"

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