8-1-2003

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Boston College Law School

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ICON Sports Management

8/01/03—On July 30, David Sanders threw his first official pitch for the Lowell Spinners, the Single-A affiliate for the Boston Red Sox. It is the first step on the long road of a professional career, and for a lot of people the fulfillment of a dream. For Rob Martin ('02), Sanders' agent and co-founder of ICON Sports Management, it is a validation of the idea upon which ICON was founded: that professional athletes need representatives who care about them as role models, and who work with integrity in an industry too often driven purely by greed.

From a business perspective Sanders exemplifies what any agent looks for in a prospect. He is 6'5" tall and throws hard left-handed. He was a standout high school player, and a Cape Cod League All-Star last summer. In other words, he has the tools, and he's succeeded at every level during his budding career. But to Martin and ICON, Sanders' other qualities are equally important: He has integrity. He worked youth camps in Wareham and described the relationships he made as his proudest accomplishments. He works hard every day at being a better pitcher and strives to be a role model—and he succeeds at both.

Martin's relationship with Sanders is typical of the majority of ballplayers he represents. It began back when Sanders was in high school, when he was a young up-and-coming prospect. Martin followed his career closely, and continued to visit him when Sanders was playing in the Cape Cod League. He spoke with coaches, teammates, scouts and other baseball contacts to determine if Sanders had the personality and integrity (as well as talent) that ICON was looking for in its clients. The eventual business relationship they forged was founded on hours of personal time together.

"We specifically look for individuals with a reputation of handling themselves with class," Martin says. "ICON was founded with the belief in the power each individual has to inspire others. We envisioned a way to represent professional athletes where we could assist them in making an impact on a vast number of lives due to their societal status. Our mission was to find incredible athletes who were also outstanding individuals, and then to help those athletes do more with their talents than just play pro sports."

Game of 'What If'

ICON began as little more than a game of "what if" between friends barely out of college: Martin, Michael Hunt, and David Lukowski. As part of another job at a marketing agency, Martin had just helped mediate a dispute between a professional ballplayer and his team. It was an eye-opening experience for a young man who had played baseball for most of his life, and who loved the game itself, but had been growing frustrated with the perceived selfishness and immaturity of today's professional athlete. It seemed to him that more often that not those athletes’ agents had helped steer them in the wrong direction. He and his friends wondered out loud whether there was a place for an agency that focused as much on the athletes’ community-building activities and public service as their contracts and monetary pursuits. One idea was to write incentives into contracts for players to give money back to their high schools, their public libraries, to create scholarships for youth baseball programs among other community interests.

They decided to give it a try. Each of the friends was assigned a particular duty in the emerging group: one would handle marketing and design, one would focus primarily on the
business end, and so on. Martin decided to become the legal expert, and began to look carefully at law schools. He needed a place that had a reputation for both public service, and for sports law. It didn't take long before he found Professor Robert Berry and Boston College.

"Professor Berry was a huge reason I decided to come to BC," Martin says. "I would visit other schools that had top-notch sports law programs, and their textbooks would be written by Bob Berry. It just seemed like if I wanted to do this right, I should learn from the best."

Though he wasn't yet eligible for Berry’s class his first year, Martin sat in on it anyway, and impressed the legendary sports law professor with his eagerness to learn. What many people didn’t know was that as a first-year law student, Martin was also already a full-time agent, sometimes working 60 hours a week, flying across the country meeting potential clients and signing deals. It was a hectic schedule, but ICON was growing fast. Martin often found himself cramping for a con law exam in airport and hotel lobbies, and relying on fellow classmates for copies of class notes when he had to jet out of town at the last minute.

The other members of the group had moved to Boston to continue the business while Martin attended law school. They were signing up a lot of young college prospects and the legal questions were getting more complicated. It wasn’t long before Professor Berry was deeply involved.

“When he found out what we were doing, I think he was impressed with our intent to focus on the athletes’ image within the community,” Martin says. “He liked that we wanted to do something more with all of this than just make money. It went along with BC’s mission of social justice, and with Professor Berry’s own philosophy.”

Martin was now coming to Berry with every important legal question he had. Between his second and third years of law school, he worked as Berry’s research assistant. Berry became a more official advisor to ICON, and later became a real member of the team.

From the Minors to the Majors
Martin graduated from BC Law in 2002. Somehow within that crazy schedule he’d managed to serve as President of the Arts Music Sports & Entertainment Society and as a Law Student Association Representative. He’d also managed to graduate with a 3.37 GPA. Now, it was time to put his new law degree to use. ICON was off and running.

ICON continued to provide a breath of fresh air to the business of professional sports, by their commitments to their players, the depth of their research and their relationships, and by the unusual incentives and conditions they were writing into contracts. In 2001, ICON had negotiated a bonus for Brad Nelson that made him the highest paid player drafted in his round by $90,000 when he signed his contract. They also leveraged a $75,000 scholarship for Nelson to use to attend any college of his choice--and assisted Brad in giving money to his local library and to the KARE Foundation of Kossuth County (an organization that provides gloves and shoes and other sports related equipment to underprivileged children). Nelson has since become one of the most feared hitters and top prospects in the minor leagues. He was named the Brewers number one prospect heading into this season.

ICON’s wave crested just about a year ago, when they merged with Brian Goldberg and Mike Paolercio of Riverfront Sports Management, the individuals who had represented Ken Griffey Jr. since he was the first pick of the draft in 1987. Griffey, now a superstar and a role model for thousands of aspiring players, helped bring a big name to the new group (which kept the name ICON). Berry was a vital figure in bringing the two groups together, and continues to serve as a vital member of the ICON team.

“We take pride in the fact that our present group’s vast experience and professional contacts result in premium representation for our athletes,” Martin says now. “We set out to do a first-class job representing the client from a business perspective, so the philanthropy will not come at any cost to the athlete. Not coincidentally, the end result is the opposite. Our athletes
benefit from positive public perception, becoming more marketable and more valuable to their teams. Thus, the athlete enjoys a more fulfilling professional experience while benefiting financially from ICON's approach to representation.”

**All in the Family**

Martin does have a favorite client these days, and he’s not afraid to say so. Forrest K. Martin, Rob’s younger brother, is currently dominating pro hitters through his first six weeks of pro baseball in the Milwaukee Brewers organization. He has 23 strikeouts and an ERA under 3.00 through 15 innings.

“I was happy when Forrest [a Division-III NCAA All-American] referenced ICON as his future management group when he was being interviewed out of college,” says Martin. “It made Thanksgiving dinner more pleasant not having to fly home and "pitch" my mom and dad on what we could do for their son!”

As for David Sanders? He threw one inning in relief in his debut on the 30th, facing only 4 hitters, and giving up one hit and no runs. He felt good, and the coaches were encouraged.

“He’s in good spirits,” Martin says. “We spoke about his impressions of pitching as a professional for the first time and I congratulated him on such a solid performance in his first outing. The Sox are really pleased with his progress, arm-strength and mental approach to the game. I can say this: David is what you look for in a player and a person. He blends passionate dedication to sport with well-balanced perspective on life outside the lines. He dedicates himself to his game and to his values, and leaves an indelible impression on the individuals he plays with as well as those he comes into contact with off the field.”

Though Lowell was on the road on the 30th, and Martin was not able to be at the game personally, he was waiting by the phone. He was the first person Sanders called, phoning from the locker room even before he hit the showers. It is all part of the lifelong relationships Martin and his teammates at ICON strive to build with all of their prospects and clients. It is part of their philosophy of honesty and integrity at all costs. If that philosophy pushes them to the top of the heap in a profession known for being driven purely by the bottom line, so much the better. That will be the final validation of a theory and business plan conceived years ago, in the hearts and minds of a group of pure fans of the national pastime.

“Together our partners and I hope to continue representing athletes who inspire us,” Martin says. “We believe we do a better job, and that everyone involved comes out a winner. For us, the excitement lies in a doing a job that combines our passion for sports with the feeling that we are using our talents to make a difference in the lives of those around us.”

**ICON Principals:**

*Rob Martin*
*Michael Hunt*
*David Lukowski*
*Robert C. Berry*
*Brian Goldberg*
*Michael Paolercio*