

# Representing the best

## *UI Grad has built agency on foundation of loyalty, trust*

By JEFF MEZYDLO  
News-Gazette Staff Writer

The sun peeks through the windows of Mark Bartelstein's office in the tourist mecca that is Chicago's River North area.

His office is the biggest of any in the sixth-floor headquarters of Priority Sports and Entertainment, which the Illinois grad started almost 20 years ago.

Sports memorabilia and framed press clippings fill his shelves and walls, as Bartelstein sifts through a manila folder while trying to set up workouts with NBA teams for former Illini Brian Cook.

Outside, the "El" train breezes by, while inside phones ring as frequently as car horns honk below on Ontario Street.

"Being on the phone is a big part of the day," Bartelstein says with a smile.

Bartelstein is battling a cold, but that's no excuse for one of the most successful sports agents in the business. There's work to be done, schedules to secure and clients to speak with.

Since 1985, when Bartelstein walked away from a sexy job as an arbitrator at Chicago's Morgan Stanley to jump into the business of representing professional athletes, he's lived a life "Jerry Maguire" didn't do justice.

In the beginning, he didn't have a spacious office in a six-story building next to Chicago's famous Ed Debevic's. Instead he was a 25-year-old newlywed working nights in a small room in the back of a printing company owned by the financial backer of his infant company.

"I always felt like I had a great passion for sports," said Bartelstein, 42, who graduated from Illinois in the early 1980s. "I made the decision to walk away, but I'm not sure I'd want to do it over again. It's been an unbelievable journey." It's been a journey Bartelstein, his rock-solid group of co-workers and his clients have taken together. The company was built on positive referrals from clients and cemented on loyalty and trust.

It has the highest retention rate of any agency of its kind and was named the No. 1 independent agency by Street & Smith's Business Journal. Bartelstein also was ranked among the top agents under 40 years old in 1999 by the same publication.

To do the job right means being a sports geek, with the mind and intelligence of a corporate business shark and the suaveness of a car salesman, combined with being a father, big brother and best friend.

Bartelstein and his agents have a family-like relationship with their players. They go after athletes with good character, not just good statistics. And they go after former Illini. Brad Hopkins, Ken Dilger and Cook are just a few of his clients.

"The thing that impressed me the most was that he was sincere," said Cook, who signed with Bartelstein this spring and is expected to be a first round pick in this month's NBA draft. "He's a family guy, and he cares a lot about his players. He wants to make people happy."

That's all the advertising you need.

### Going against the grain

Basketball always has been a love for Bartelstein. He enjoyed a solid prep career at Highland Park in suburban Chicago's North Shore area.

He even flirted with walking on for Lou Henson's Illinois teams in the late 1970s and early '80s.

"I used to play with a lot of the guys from the team at IMPE," said Bartelstein, who graduated with a degree in business administration.

Bartelstein stuck to intramurals, then went to Northwestern, where he earned his MBA in 1984. He jumped into the real world with Morgan Stanley but after a couple of years changed his mind.

The idea of representing pro athletes was intriguing to Bartelstein, who knew someone not only willing to offer financial help, but also knew some pro baseball players.

Bartelstein began sifting through baseball's collective bargaining agreements. He picked the brains of anybody already in the business. He would finish his job at Morgan Stanley at 6 p.m. and head to his cubbyhole at the printing company for another eight hours of work trying to jump-start his new career.



Illinois graduate Mark Bartelstein has become one of the most successful and respected agents in professional basketball and football in less than 20 years. His Chicago-based Priority Sports and Entertainment represents former Illini like Brian Cook, Robert Archibald, Brad Hopkins and Ken Dilger.



ABOVE: Word of mouth among clients has boosted Mark Bartelstein's Priority Sports and Entertainment to the No. 3 independent agency in the industry. BELOW: Former Illinois and NBA star Eddie Johnson gave Bartelstein his framed, autographed Houston Rockets jersey to show the appreciation. It hangs next to the jersey of NFL superstar Kurt Warner, one of the top icons in the PSE stable of current professional athletes.



"It was evenings, middle of the nights, whatever," Bartelstein said. "I just kept going."

His first clients included former Iowa basketball players Greg Stokes and Michael Payne and former Buffalo and Detroit quarterback Joe Ferguson. The early days weren't easy, filled with rejection and watching other agents test the ethical boundaries.

"It was like the wild, wild west," Bartelstein said. "There was a lot of competition going on. There were a lot of rejections in the beginning."

But as time went on, the word spread. One happy client gave a shout to another, and so on. In time, Bartelstein's agency was rounding into form.

"That's been the belief of this company," Bartelstein said. "It's the referrals of our clients, and word of mouth is important. There's no real secret."

Today, Priority Sports represents 50 NFL and 30 NBA players. There are four agents each who work with NFL and NBA athletes and others employed in marketing and public relations.

Not a bad gig for a guy who started it all in the back of a printing company. But all the time Bartelstein and his associates have put in would be meaningless without their clients.

### A hand to hold on to

The bevy of autographed pictures, posters and jerseys that fill the walls of Priority Sports would make a sports memorabilia hound salivate. The company doesn't do it to show off, but to show thanks to the athletes who have put them on the map.

"We stay involved with the players," Bartelstein said. "You have to because you're close with them. You're part of their lives. It's a tremendous, emotional journey, and every decision is affecting their lives. They are putting their livelihood in your hands."

They have big names like St. Louis Rams quarterback Kurt Warner, who was introduced to Priority by a friend of a client while Warner was in the Arena League. Ron Artest, Brad Miller and Brian Grant weren't marquee names when they started their NBA careers but now have their faces on everything from billboards to cereal boxes.

"The spirit of this company is to outwork and out service the others," Bartelstein said. "We want to make it so our clients can't live without us."

He surrounds himself with talented agents like Mike McCartney, a former personnel man for the Chicago Bears and the Philadelphia Eagles, and Rick Smith, an Illinois graduate who is the agency's president and general council and works with their football clients.

Bartelstein has been courted by larger agencies who want to buy him out or merge, but his company has stood true to its cause. It has kept the client stable manageable to allow them to have that family relationship that isn't always evident among today's agents.

"When you don't play well, he hurts, too," former Illini and NBA star Eddie Johnson said. "He feels it. A guy like that is almost like family. Most agents are not like that. He gives you his time. You know as a player that he's someone you can trust, and he's doing the right things for you.

"He's still doing things for me when I'm not playing."

Bartelstein and his associates do extensive research on their potential clients.

"(Bartelstein) has a great eye for talent," said Johnson, whose Houston Rockets jersey is prominently displayed in a frame next to Warner's Rams jersey in the lobby of the Chicago office.

"He doesn't always go for the big names like Patrick Ewing, but he went out and got the P.J. Browns and the Bobby Phillips. These are the type of guys he had to get, and now they are stars."

Cook heard about Bartelstein from former Illinois trainer Rod Cardinal. Cardinal's son, Brian, is a Bartelstein client, as is former Illinois basketball player Robert Archibald and former UI football player Tony Pashos.

Pashos, who was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens in April, is typical of a Priority Sports client.

"He's an incredibly hard-working guy," said Smith, who knew Bartelstein in high school. "He's got a great leadership background. He just gets it.

"There's a Midwestern work ethic that we have, and Illinois kids have that similar work ethic. We're looking for that type of person."

It didn't take long for Pashos to know these were the right people for him.

"They're Illinois guys; there's no BS-ing," said Pashos, who was referred by Archibald. "The clientele they have are stand-up guys you can look up to. They prepare you for what's to come."

## Taking it all in

It's 12:25 p.m., and Warner rings the Priority Sports office. At 12:28 p.m., Cardinal checks in. Another agent is talking with former Gonzaga star Casey Calvary.

Agents refer to their athletes by first names, like talking with old friends at a Rush Street bar.

Bartelstein takes a meeting with two other men, studying contracts and sipping water from a Dixie cup inside a meeting room cluttered with posters of the Minnesota Timberwolves and the late Phillips.

His days are hectic as the NBA draft approaches. In addition to Cook, he represents Utah's Britton Johnsen and LSU's Ronald Dupree.

"With all the guys that are here, they are all good people," Cook said. "I fit in well."

His employees are the backbone of the business, but he still has direct contact with most of his basketball clients. Still, Bartelstein can get home by 5:30 or 6 p.m. to take one of his four children (ages 3-13) to basketball practice or enjoy a home-cooked meal with his wife and children.

"I enjoy that I have a great group of people to work with," Bartelstein said. "They are a lot of the reason behind the success. It's not hard to manage things properly. We never take on more than we can handle."

He still lives in Highland Park and plays basketball on the weekends. He doesn't hold a grudge toward Henson for not welcoming walk-ons.

"I still love to play," Bartelstein said.

He doesn't necessarily like the idea of drawing attention to himself, like when Grant signs a \$90 million contract or when his agency negotiates basketball contracts totaling almost \$170 million in the summer of 1997. Agents can make anywhere from 2 to 4 percent of the player's contract and up to 20 percent in ventures outside the lines, so the life can be pretty good.

That makes it tough to dodge the spotlight when agents like David Falk (Michael Jordan), Scott Boras (Alex Rodriguez), Aaron Goodwin (LeBron James) and Arn Tellem (Kobe Bryant, Jason Giambi) are just as glamorous - and draw the same headlines as - the people they represent.

"It shouldn't be that way," Bartelstein said. "I never really enjoyed it. I want it to be about the clients. That's what is important. It's blown up to the degree that you can't spend seven days, 24 hours a day with one client, but we have to do a great job for them."

As Bartelstein tries to ignore the numerous flashing red lights on his phone, he thinks of the one downside of his job. This avid sports fan misses being just that - a fan. With clients on teams throughout both leagues, his loyalties are toward individuals. But that's why his agency is successful and has a stellar reputation among NBA and NFL franchises.

"You want a guy who can work for you," Johnson said. "That makes you feel a lot better because you trust him."

Bartelstein will sit back and rewind his life. There have been good and bad times and everything else in between. In the early years, he would wonder if he was right for this job. His 80 clients, and the hundreds who have come before them, have proven he is.

"It's not a 9-to-5 job," Bartelstein said. "You must have a passion for what you're doing and a sense of loyalty to your clients so they'll do the same for you."

"It's been fun to watch it grow and evolve."

### How do you like me now?

It's been almost 20 years since Illinois alumnus Mark Bartelstein started Priority Sports and Entertainment. The agency started small with some not-so-household names as clients but now represents some of the heaviest hitters in professional football and basketball:

#### That was then...

- **Michael Payne** - Quincy High grad starred at Iowa and made a living playing basketball overseas
- **Greg Stokes** - Another Iowa product, had short NBA career and now is coaching for Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa
- **Joe Ferguson** - Former Buffalo and Detroit QB best known for being laid out by Bears linebacker Wilber Marshall during the 1985 season

#### This is now...

- **Kurt Warner** - The ultimate Cinderella story was referred to PSE by a client whose friend was a teammate of Warner's in the Arena League
- **Ron Artest** - Indiana Pacer problem child drew enough headlines in one season for an entire career
- **Brian Grant** - The "Rasta Monsta" inked a 2000 deal for \$90 million over seven years in a sign-and-trade deal from Portland to Miami