



2005 Agent draft derby

By **Len Pasquarelli**

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Condensed version

Not even the agonizing slide of former California quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who plummeted from potentially being the first overall pick in the NFL lottery all the way to the 24th slot, could keep Octagon from claiming the top spot in the annual ESPN.com draft agent derby.

Just as conspicuous, however, were impressive performances by several smaller agencies.

Only four agencies have rated among the top 10 in the derby in each of the past three drafts, and that IMG and Octagon represent half of that elite group is reflective of their muscle. The two other agencies with top-10 finishes in each of the last three years, Manhattan-based Sportstars and Priority Sports and Entertainment.

Both firms have moved, in recent years, beyond the label of "boutique" agency. Despite the intense competition from the conglomerate firms, and the ongoing contraction of a business in which fewer agencies represent more players, Sportstars and Priority Sports have become fashionable options for draft prospects.

Priority Sports doesn't miss very often, the result of a philosophy established by Rick Smith, one of the firm's three primary NFL agents.

"We don't throw darts," said Smith, whose firm finished sixth this year after being No. 2 in 2004 and fifth in 2003. "We're not out there chasing every player with a pulse. For us, it's a process. We want players who are going to be solid throughout, not guys who might just have one good day in April. So we do a lot of research, talk to a lot of scouts, and then we sit and watch tape and evaluate. We target a reasonable number of players, and we work off that list."

Although the firm typically has a narrow list of candidates, Smith and his partners, Kenny Zuckerman and Mike McCartney, Mark Bartelstein, offer diverse perspectives. Smith is an attorney by trade, a Northwestern graduate who practiced law for years before being certified as an agent. McCartney is a former scout, and Priority leans heavily on his expertise. Zuckerman is a former college football player and longtime agent with deep ties and a fat Rolodex.

Unlike Herman, who acknowledged the difficulty in competing against the conglomerate agencies, Smith contended that Priority Sports hasn't really lost that many potential clients to the big guys.

"It's still about building relationships," Smith said. "In the end, we've generally found that a [player] is usually going to sign with the agent with whom he's most comfortable."

That comfort level remained diverse this year even as the agent universe continued to shrink a bit, which was best demonstrated by the fact that the 32 first-round choices were spread among 19 different agencies. There were seven agencies with multiple first-rounders, accounting for 20 of the selections, but there was still plenty of action to go around.

"I think it showed," Smith said, "that the people who do it right are still very viable, no matter the size of the [agency]."