

At the top of their game

By Maria Iacobo and Gilien Silsby



There is no set path to a career in sports law. A high-profile industry, sports spans the globe and legal landscape with increasingly complex and dynamic issues.

A couple of decades ago, a sports law class offering was a rarity in most law schools, and the American Bar Association's only sports-related member-group was at its inception.

Today, USC's sports law curriculum is typical of programs around the country that teach students from multiple-edition sports law textbooks. Not only is the ABA's sports-related member-group booming, but another national sports lawyers association boasts hosting its 34th consecutive annual meeting in 2008. The sports industry is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and is rapidly expanding even in today's shrinking economy.

USC Law graduates have created their own game plan to achieve roles in some of the world's most recognized sports organizations and they use these positions to shape the industry and its players.

Breaking into sports law takes more than just being a fan. Legal knowledge and business savvy are required to navigate the multitude of subjects including contracts, torts, real estate, franchising, insurance, global marketing, employment, collective bargaining and intellectual property.

In fact, "sports law" itself does not refer to any particular body of law. On the contrary, the different areas of law are applied to the industry in layers, creating a matrix of rules that are referred to as "sports law." What that means to the student or practitioner interested in sports law is that he or she can enter the field from countless points on the legal map.

Los Angeles Lakers General Counsel and Secretary Jim Perzik's work is illustrative of the evolution of sports law, while Vered Yakovec is still growing and shaping her career in the field. Amy Trask, chief executive of the Oakland Raiders, and Joe Bogdan, senior vice president of legal and business affairs for World Wrestling Entertainment Inc., have used their legal skills to sharpen their business acumen.

Read our "Alumni Profiles" section of this issue (pages 28-31) and you will be introduced to four more alumni with careers in sports law affording different perspectives and challenges. Their stories are compelling and demonstrate the excellence and flexibility that a USC Law education can deliver.



Vered Yakovee

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INSURING VICTORY WITH CALCULATED RISKS

“How did you get where you are?”

Vered Yakovee '02 asked sports lawyers, including Jim Perzik, that question for years. Most of the time, people were friendly and took the time to tell her how they did it.

Along the way she learned that there was no single answer to her question.

“No two stories are alike,” she says. “If you want to make it happen, you have to be creative. You have to find your own way.” Now, six years after graduating, Yakovee has her own practice with both sports and music clients. She is also editor-in-chief of the American Bar Association (ABA)’s quarterly publication *Entertainment & Sports Lawyer*, and serves on the governing committee of the ABA Forum on the Entertainment and Sports Industries. And, she did it her own way.

Listening to her heart and volunteering her time are two keys to Yakovee’s success. A life-long athlete, Yakovee knew she wanted her “career to have something to do with sports” when she entered USC Law. She sought out Perzik for her law school mentor and developed mentor relationships with others she met by attending the annual Sports Lawyers Association (SLA) conferences.

After graduation, she found freelance work in both litigation and

sports. A member of Southern California Outrigger Association (SCORA) ocean outrigger teams since college, Yakovee spent her post-grad evenings on the Pacific preparing for weekend races. As a new lawyer, she volunteered to do anything SCORA needed, and was asked to join the executive board as the Insurance Coordinator. Four years later, she had taught herself the ins and outs of insurance coverage as well as risk management, and became SCORA’s vice president for insurance and risk management.

Another volunteer opportunity came up while attending one of the ABA’s Forum on the Entertainment and Sports Industries annual meetings. The editor-in-chief of the group’s quarterly publication asked her to write a four-part series on all legal aspects of big sports event management, and she agreed, “not realizing what a large endeavor it would be while working full time.”

One year later the series, which became eight articles, was complete.

“I don’t think he expected me to do as much work as I did,” says Yakovee, who convinced others to contribute sections as well. The work was a good learning experience and one she believes led to her being offered the editor-in-chief position last year.

With the insurance background she received from SCORA, Yakovee landed a job at Dickstein Shapiro LLP in Los Angeles. Finding she spent less than half of her time working in sports, Yakovee knew she was not focusing on what she truly wanted to do. Less than two years later, she left and opened her own practice in January 2008.



Far Right: Vered Yakovee

“There is an amazingly strong network at this school. When you come into contact with another alum, you have an automatic bond. You know that person will not mind talking with you about his or her career.”

— Vered Yakovee

“It’s kind of courageous and kind of crazy, but I just had to go for it,” she says, laughing in the conference room she shares with other businesses.

Behind her is the Pacific Ocean and fantastic views of boats bobbing in the Marina del Rey harbor.

Yakovee has repeatedly been asked why she wants to work in sports law and warned about the work it would involve.

“‘The practice of sports law is still the practice of law’ people would tell me,” she says. “‘It’s not any different than practicing law in any other industry, and don’t get too excited because it will still entail hard work.’”

She concedes that may be true to some extent, but not altogether.

“I tried to tell myself that they were right. But, you know what? It is more fun working in sports law. Part of practicing law is applying the law to the facts. And, if the facts consist of fun stuff that you would read about in *Sports Illustrated* or someplace else in your free time, then it is more fun. If you’re an athlete and you love sports, then it’s just more fun to work with a sports client. So, I think what I was told was not altogether true. It’s definitely more fun.”

Yakovee is working hard, however, to have her fun. She recently signed on as general counsel for the inaugural U.S. Sports Film Festival to be held October 2008. She will handle some of the festival’s risk management and also organize its continuing legal education program for sports and entertainment lawyers. In addition, her practice

has grown beyond insurance coverage to include corporate and other work; her clients include a major rock band, a Heisman Trophy winner, a music festival and a small recording studio.

Grateful for the time and encouragement that others give her, Yakovee pays it forward by speaking to students at local law schools. She has also offered a few students editing and writing roles with *Entertainment & Sports Lawyer*.

Recently, Perzik called to ask her thoughts on a contract he was working with.

“He asked me a substantive insurance question,” says Yakovee, half in amazement. “I don’t know if he knows how much that made my day. It really marked a coming-of-age moment for me.”

Running a business has been both exciting and time-consuming. With her office just a short walk from her SCORA team’s launch point, Yakovee remains on the team, though she has transitioned out of her insurance role.

And although Yakovee won’t say where she would like to be at the height of her career, one thing she’s learned is that there isn’t an established road to get there.

“I have an ultimate goal,” she says. “I know it’s among the stars and it may be too much for me to reach for. But, I feel like I have to try. Even if I don’t reach the stars, I’ll have had an enjoyable journey, and I may land on the moon to find I like that just as well.”