

THE BUSINESS OF SPORTS

A View from the Top

Potomac parent Phil de Picciotto (father of Robbie '04) never thought he'd be involved with overseeing and protecting the careers of such sports stars as two-time NBA champion and MVP Stephen Curry, tennis legend Martina Hingis, and Olympic icon Michael Phelps. In fact, less than a decade before founding Octagon – one of the top sports and entertainment management firms in the world – Phil thought he'd be a social scientist.

While earning his anthropology degree at Amherst College, Phil played on the tennis and squash teams. Although he loved athletics, he didn't see a career in it until he began working at a firm that specialized in sports law while earning a J.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.

After the firm dissolved in the early 1980s, Phil and some colleagues co-founded Advantage International, which later became Octagon, with the primary goal of helping their clients understand and create value in the sports marketing landscape. Today, 35 years later, Octagon is a global leader in sports, talent, and brand management, with nearly 900 employees in more than 60 offices across the globe. Each day, Phil and his firm advise and manage some of the world's most recognizable athletes and brands.

So how does a guy who intended to study human cultures become one of the most influential people in the world of professional sports? Well, according to Phil, it takes alignment.

"At Octagon, we pay attention to determining the 'next right move' for our clients," he says. "We specialize in career choreography and getting each client into the best possible situation."

Describing what he means by this, Phil uses the analogy of a point guard in basketball, who may be the second best in the league, playing



on a team with the league's best point guard. It's wonderful to be second best at something, but in sports if your opportunities are limited by playing behind others, it's hard to get noticed. "Finding the position, team, and playing situation that provides the best alignment is key for an athlete to get the opportunity to showcase his or her skills," he says.

Phil found that alignment when he recognized the intersection between his expertise in law, his global perspective in business, and his love for, and knowledge of, sports. He believes that developing a professional skill-set and building relationships are the keys to success.

Phil explains, "Having sustainable success in the business of sports requires an application of a skill-set. If you think of the industry in its broadest terms and recognize all the places sports reach within our society, inevitably you will be able to find connections between a wide range of professions and sports."

Phil knows that many people dream of working in some capacity within the professional sports industry; in fact, he notes, "At Octagon, we literally get thousands of requests for informational interviews." Since the company is unable to accommodate this large number of requests, Phil advises those inquiring to begin by looking closely at Octagon's website, to learn more about the work that a firm of this type does. Beyond that, he says, "I would advise candidates to spread as wide a net as possible, looking for positions everywhere sport touches – with teams, leagues, player associations, agencies, individual events as in tennis and golf, TV networks, stadia and arenas, equipment companies (like Nike), and big sports sponsors (like Coke, Anheuser Busch, MasterCard, etc.) All of the above are legitimate entry points into the industry, and much of the actual work is the same wherever you go."

He continues, "I also encourage candidates to be as specific as possible as to what skills they can offer to produce value for an organization. Rather than approaching an organization based simply on a desire to work in sports management, the individual should be able to articulate what he or she can do to help that organization. Most entry-level positions will probably be either sales oriented, as everyone is looking for revenue these days, or event-planning oriented."

Phil concludes, "People need to keep in mind that sports is only a career for athletes and coaches; for everyone else, this industry simply offers opportunities to apply a professional skill – marketing, sales, accounting, medicine, journalism, or something else. It is critical for young people to identify and continue to develop a skill-set that has the potential to add value; this is the way to break through the clutter and get noticed."



< Phil and NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson

Phil with tennis greats Anna Kournikova (l) and Martina Hingis (r)

