Introduction

When a student approaches a law professor to declare an interest in finding a meaningful, well-paying legal job in the sports industry, it’s tempting to reply, “If I knew how to find that job, I’d be doing it now.”

Such a reply is, of course, tongue-in-cheek. For one, as we discuss in the chapters that follow, one of the more meaningful sports law jobs out there is teaching and writing on the subject in an academic setting (either full-time or part-time). And both of the authors did find employment at law firms with some notable sports law work in their portfolios.

But the tongue-in-cheek reply is also meant to evoke some of the key considerations a student interested in sports law work must embrace. These jobs, while available, are heavily in demand. Many more lawyers would like to work in the sports industry than there are jobs that can pay the bills. With a challenging legal market in all fields, being too picky can be a recipe for a difficult and perhaps unsuccessful job search effort. Sports law professor Michael McCann, interviewed by the Sports Agent Blog, urges students to view sports law “as the ideal career option rather than the likely one.”

This book aims to provide law students – or those thinking about law school – with practical insight into how to build a background to maximize the chances of a successful sports law job search. This book is not meant to be a placement guide – while we identify current internship opportunities where we can, our goal is not so narrow. Instead, we aimed to conduct a thorough, thoughtful investigation of what options may exist and what kinds of steps are needed to maximize one’s chances of netting a coveted sports law job. To accomplish our investigation, we sought out the stories of those who have found serious work as sports attorneys, including through conducting interviews. The stories of successful sports lawyers, and the lessons and implications we draw, represent the heart of our contribution. Having attended numerous presentations and conferences at law schools in which sports lawyers gave presentations, we have almost universally witnessed law students ask, either during a panel or afterwards, how they can break into the industry or what advice the panelist might offer. Part of our contribution is to collect such responses for readers and present them in a comprehensive way.

While each of the sports lawyers with whom we spoke or about whom we read found a different path into the industry, there are certain common features uniting their experiences. Most were deeply committed and persistent. They were flexible and creative in their approaches to their job searches. They recognized that any personal or professional contact could someday provide a job search lead.

Good sports lawyers are first and foremost good lawyers. The attorneys we interviewed honed drafting and negotiation skills in law school and applied those skills in a variety of fields before finding success in sports. While taking a course in “Sports Law” or earning one of the several certificates offered in the area by law schools can help a job candidate demonstrate sincere interest, it’s proven more important for sports lawyers to acquire the basic toolkit of legal analysis, persuasive and clear writing, and oral persuasion that makes lawyers successful across
the range of professional fields. Professor Kenneth Shropshire described one professional sports union General Counsel as opining that “‘Sports layer’ is a meaningless term,” in the ABA’s 1990 monograph *Careers in Sports Law*.

The sports lawyers we interviewed also thought broadly about their career trajectories. While it’s easy to imagine riches flowing from negotiating contracts for athletes, the Jerry Maguire model of sports lawyer has its drawbacks. Agency work is highly competitive if not ruthless, dominated by a few large firms, and is unlikely to allow a JD graduate to pay back student loans easily and build a financial footing for raising a family, buying a home, and building a professional reputation in law practice. Successful sports lawyers have realized that thinking broadly about what their legal training has prepared them to offer the sports world can be a key to ensuring that sports work becomes a cornerstone of their professional lives.

Sports is big business. By the middle part of the last decades, estimates for the total value of the sports industry in the United States ranged from over $40 billion per year to over $70 billion per year. A typical NFL franchise may now be worth more than $1 billion; a typical MLB franchise $523 million, and even a “lowly” NHL franchise as much as $240 million. Individual athletes and coaches earn multi-million salaries and similar levels of compensation for endorsement deals. College sports conferences have multi-billion television contracts and the NCAA spends nearly three quarters of a billion dollars a year.

Any time lots of money flows into an industry, the need for talented and effective legal representation intensifies. Sports lawyers advise leagues and teams on a host of legal and compliance issues. Sports lawyers help professional athletes negotiate contracts with teams and develop wealth management and estate planning strategies suitable for each athlete’s circumstances. Sports lawyers, working as NCAA and Title IX compliance officers at colleges and universities, help navigate an increasingly complex array of rules and an evolving NCAA enforcement process and counsel schools on the federal laws and regulations governing gender discrimination in educational funding. Sports lawyers litigate cases – a number of which have gone all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court – in a range of disputes involving athletes, leagues, and teams.

Sports law jobs aren’t just appealing because of the money involved in the industry at all levels. Sport is an essential part of the fabric of modern American society. To paraphrase Liverpool Manager Bill Shankly, sports aren’t “a matter of life and death” – they are “much, much more important than that.” With the stakes seemingly higher than life and death, the lawyer is, as President Lincoln said, a “peacemaker” with a “superior opportunity of being a good” person. Lawyers help athletes, coaches, leagues and teams use the tools of wisdom and reason to resolve disputes that tug at the hearts of those involved. In this sense, sports lawyers can help fulfill the highest aspirations of our profession.

The remaining chapters are organized as follows. We begin with how students should get started – thinking about law schools, whether sports law is a realistic prospect for them, and how to find that first experience one needs to market oneself for sports law jobs. We then take a short detour to discuss why sports matters, and why a career in this field may be a particularly meaningful one for some lawyers. In chapter three, we turn to the realities of sports law,
discussing changes in the field and the need to think broadly. Chapters four, five and six discuss traditional and non-traditional legal jobs in sports and non-legal jobs that may be available for lawyers in the industry. In chapter seven we conclude.