

{ ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT }

New Game Theory

Rob Pelinka, BBA '93/JD '96, Goes from Athlete to Agent



Rob Pelinka, BBA '93/JD '96, and client Kobe Bryant, with Bryant's NBA MVP Trophy.

The year was 1993, and BBA senior **Rob Pelinka** was on the road to his third NCAA Tournament as a member of the Michigan Wolverines men's basketball team. With college coming to a close, the conversation turned to careers. One of Pelinka's teammates asked him what he planned to do after graduation.

The former athlete says he looked out the window and saw a line of sports agents trailing the team bus. Pointing to the string of headlights he said, "Definitely not what those guys do."

Fast forward to 2009, and Rob Pelinka is on the road again. This time he's returning from the NBA Championship series where the Los Angeles Lakers took their 15th title. And this time he's actually doing "what those guys do," but on a much bigger scale. As founder of The Landmark Sports Agency in Los Angeles, Pelinka counts NBA superstar Kobe Bryant, the leader of those Lakers, as his top client.

Still, you won't find Pelinka chasing buses.

"Forming relationships is something I take great pride in," Pelinka says. "We're very select and form individual relationships with the guys. In business if you can find a niche, you can own it. If you do too many things, you do them kind of average."

This year The Landmark Sports Agency signed Arizona State University's James Harden, the third year in a row the agency added a top NBA draft pick to its roster. Harden was selected third overall by the Oklahoma City Thunder.

"The megafirms want to have a lot of clients," Pelinka says. "I want to have fewer — and bigger — clients."

He connects to those clients by fusing his passions for basketball and mentoring young people. When he was on the college court, Pelinka was one of the few men's basketball players in the country to go to three NCAA Final Fours. And he did it with different lineups. As a freshman in 1989, the Michigan team "shocked the world" with its title, earned after coach Bill Frieder left the squad right before the NCAA Tournament. Interim coach Steve Fisher led the Wolverines to the final wins. As a junior and senior Pelinka played on teams led by the infamous "Fab Five."

"I was blessed to go to three Final Fours, and each of the teams had totally different cultures and leadership styles," he says. "I've been able to study successful cultures and team dynamics and borrow bits and pieces from each of them. To form your own style you look at other models that have worked well. I've been fortunate to be part of some."

During his senior year Pelinka was named the NCAA's Walter Byers Scholar Athlete of the Year. After earning his BBA he attended the University's law school, graduated in 1996, and went to work practicing corporate law in Chicago. But it was a transition to the agency SFX Management that forced a true turnover in Pelinka's career. SFX represented the NBA's Bryant and Carlos Boozer, and when Pelinka left to form his own firm, Bryant, and later Boozer, went with him.

"Kobe has taught me so much about life and competition," Pelinka says of his superstar client. "We share a lot of qualities. He's incredibly detail oriented, strategic, and disciplined."

Pelinka himself was highly recruited out of high school, drawing interest from Northwestern, Illinois, Yale, Princeton, Duke, and Arizona. But Michigan offered the mix of athletic and academic excellence he sought.

That experience — the great teams on the hardwood and the multidisciplinary education — laid the foundation for representing the NBA's best. Finance, marketing, communication, and game theory all come into play when negotiating contracts and signing endorsement deals, Pelinka says.

"To me, business school is so much about learning how to think critically and work in group dynamics," he says. "The finance classes I had provided some numbers analysis that plays a big role in how I negotiate today. And when I get on the phone with an NBA executive, they know they're talking to somebody who's played at a high level. There's a trust there, and it's helped in convincing a team of a player's value — or whether a shoe deal is actually a good fit." ✦ —Terry Kosdrosky

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