

THE REAL DEAL

7/1/2008

Athletes playing on a new field

Former pro athletes start new careers as real estate agents

By Lauren Elkies

The life of a professional athlete is similar to that of a real estate agent: The competition is fierce, the future is uncertain and he has to be on top of his game.

So it makes sense that a number of former professional athletes whose careers were cut short due to injury, burn-out or unfulfilled expectations have turned to real estate for a second or even third or fourth career. Former pro athletes have turned up at various firms including the Corcoran Group, Prudential Douglas Elliman, Halstead Property and Core Group Marketing.

"Pro sports has done nothing but help prepare me for my real estate career," said Holly Rilinger, a former professional basketball point guard and new sales associate at Elliman. "I've learned how to deal with all kinds of people and work under extreme pressure."

Still, after a successful run as a pro athlete, it can be difficult to start at the very bottom in a new career. "My biggest challenge has been coming from a profession where I was exceptional, where I basically had gotten to a point where I operated on 'autopilot,' and here I am in a new 'sport.' It's like having to learn to dribble the ball for the first time," Rilinger, 34, said. "I'm used to being the best and plan on being the best again in this new arena. I have to remember that it takes time."

Rilinger has played in professional leagues all over the world and was picked up as a free agent by the Arizona-based Phoenix Mercury in the WNBA on the preseason roster. After Rilinger injured her foot in 2002, she packed up her basketball sneakers and entered the real estate business. She started at Elliman five months ago.

The real estate business can be good for athletes because they can be their own bosses, said Ric Swezey, a former professional gymnast and a senior associate broker at Corcoran. They know how to motivate themselves, and they generally "don't have the patience to work for someone else," said Swezey, who has been in real estate for six years.

Swezey, 36, was on the U.S. national gymnastics team, and his college team won the NCAA National Championship title his freshman year. An injury cut his professional gymnastics career short, and he had a string of careers — stuntman, recruiter, casting agent and actor — before becoming a real estate agent. Swezey was ranked Corcoran's No. 4 broker in April.

Sports careers — even for those not at the top of the food chain — afford athletes some level of notoriety, which can bolster their real estate careers.

"My background in athletics and my Ivy League education made me unique to the real estate community," said David Owens, a former professional baseball player and vice president at Halstead. "Through networking and relationships I had gained during my playing years, I have

been able to represent many athletes in many sports as customers. The Halstead Homers company softball team is also currently undefeated — there's a plus."

Owens, 40, was a second baseman for four years on the San Francisco Giants minor league team and played two winters for Estrellas Orientales, a baseball team in the Dominican Winter League based in San Pedro de Macorís. During a month of spring training with the St. Louis Cardinals, he "decided I really didn't want to play anymore."

Former linebacker Ansel Shields, 31, hopes to close his first real estate deal — if not more than one — by the end of the year. After he was cut from the Dallas Cowboys practice squad, he went on to play for the semi-pro indoor Arena Football League before getting injured. While undergoing physical therapy at the U.S. Athletic Training Center in Midtown, he decided to become a physical therapist and trainer there. One of his clients was Steven Cayre, brother of Jack Cayre, co-founder of Core, who thought Shields might succeed in real estate. He started at Core in December.

Also at Core is former tennis player David Gergely, 30, who played in the highest German league as well as in tournaments in Scotland, France and Israel, including the Maccabi Games, the Jewish Olympics.

Hall of Famer and former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach has had the most success as an athlete turned real estate pro with his commercial real estate firm Staubach, which is being acquired by Jones Lang LaSalle for \$613 million, in a deal slated to close in the third quarter.

Kevin Jenkins, 42, a former tennis pro and an associate broker at Corcoran, said persistence is a trait that benefits athletes and real estate agents. "You have a competitive drive. For example, I had someone [a seller] who'd been — I don't know — begging me off an exclusive, like, three times. She kind of rebuffed me," Jenkins said. "I just refused to take no for an answer." He landed the exclusive.

