

COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST®

VOL. 20, NO. 33

THE CENTRAL OHIO BUSINESS AUTHORITY

APRIL 9, 2004

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION



DAPHNE DAVIS JOHNSON ■ FOR BUSINESS FIRST

Kirk Dixon, seated, founder of the career-counseling firm Sports Professionals Inc., consults on upcoming events with Howard Kellner, left, CEO of Apparel Sourcing Group Inc., and AG Edwards broker Terry Carter.

BEYOND THE GLORY

*Local firm helps athletes move on
after their professional careers*

BY KATHY BERGSTROM ■ FOR BUSINESS FIRST

The blow of losing a job in the corporate world is often cushioned with a severance package that includes help finding a new job.

Not so in the world of professional sports, says Kirk Dixon, president and chief executive officer of Columbus-based Sports Professionals Inc.

Dixon says athletes who are cut from their teams typically are left alone and unprepared for finding a job off the playing field.

“You’re scared because you don’t have a clue what you want to do — and what you can do —

outside the sport that has fed your esteem, your confidence and your lifestyle your whole life,” says Dixon, a former college baseball player.

Dixon started Sports Professionals in 1999 to provide career counseling and placement help for former professional and college athletes. The firm has an office at Easton Town Center but Dixon, 43, spends much of his time on the road.

GLORY: Most clients come from the NFL

The one-time Ohio State University baseball team captain says he faced the same challenges his clients struggle with when he gave up the dream of playing pro ball.

"My identity was pretty much wrapped up in the game," says Dixon, who graduated with a degree in communications and later added a master's degree in education and counseling.

Unique skills

In the National Football League, about 80 percent of players are cut in three years, Dixon says. Many live beyond their means, don't have much money saved and have no career goals outside of football, he says.

But former athletes have skills that can be transferred to the business world, Dixon says, including the ability to handle stress and pressure and

SPORTS PROFESSIONALS INC.

Founded: 1999

CEO: Kirk Dixon

Business: Providing career coaching and placement services to former professional and college athletes. The firm also provides business training, publishes career guides and puts together alumni networking events.

Based: Columbus. Other offices are in Kansas City and Columbia, Mo.; North Attleboro, Mass.; Orlando and Boca Raton, Fla.; Houston, Texas; Portland, Ore.; Chicago.

Employees: Three full-time in Columbus, and 10 part-time at regional offices.

Web site: www.sportsprofessionals.org

to help athletes.

At Reebok in 1993, Dixon helped the National Football League develop a pilot program that placed NFL players in unpaid internships at Reebok. The program was successful but, six years later the league still had no structured transition program for players being cut, Dixon says.

In 1999, Dixon got a contract from the NFL to create a pilot program to help 11 former players find jobs. All of them found positions.

Sports Professionals has since provided career coaching and placement services to hundreds of athletes from a variety of sports, Dixon says. The firm has offices in eight other cities and employs three full-time and 10 part-time, in addition to contract consultants.

Back to basics

The firm starts by helping players deal with the emotional effects of being cut or retiring, Dixon says, before determining what kinds of jobs would suit them. It helps clients focus on two or three opportunities and assists with industry research and identifying employers, he says.

Counselors then coach athletes on interviewing and networking skills, help them write a resume and cover letter and, when athletes find a position, help with salary negotiations.

If the clients have the time and money, job shadowing and unpaid internships are an effective tool, Dixon says. Many athletes also return to school.

Todd Scott, a former defensive back with the Minnesota Vikings and other teams, met Dixon through the NFL program. He credits Dixon for getting him a job in player development with the Houston Texans.

"Transition is always tough," Scott says. "It's doubly so for athletes because you spend the majority of your time on the playing field as opposed to working."

Scott, who worked for the Texans for two years and still consults for the football team, now works for Sports Professionals in Houston.

The NFL represents about 80 percent of the firm's business, but Dixon says athletes in any sport can benefit from the company's services. That makes a big potential market, but making money with the business is a challenge, Dixon says.

"It's very difficult to get people to pay for this service," he says.

Sports Professionals has not yet turned a profit, but Dixon predicts the company will turn the corner this year.

Other revenue sources include alumni networking events, career publications, training and consulting services. Sports Professionals also has helped corporations recruit former athletes who already have a lot of business experience, and it receives a fee for that service.

The professional leagues and sports teams have hired Sports Professionals for projects for active players, but there isn't a league-wide outplacement service to help players who are released.

Dixon would like to see such a program created.

The NFL players' union says it doesn't have the funding to pay for a league-wide service, he says.

CAREER HELP

Kirk Dixon has published several guidebooks to help athletes make the transition to the workplace:

- "Ten Key Plays for Finding your New Position Outside of Sports"
- "Writing Your First Resume Outside of Sports"
- "The Top Career Websites for Athletes Transitioning Outside of Sports"
- "A Company Playbook for Hosting NFL Players as Interns"
- "Networking Success: A Game Plan for Athletes"*
- "How to Score in Your Next Job Interview — When All You Have Done is Sports"*
- "Career Management for Professional Athletes is a Whole New Ball Game: A Guidebook for Counselors of Athletes"*

*Scheduled for release in 2004.

Few professional football players think about life after football and many don't have enough practical experience to land a job, one former player says.

Finding their niche

Jim Karsatos, a former Ohio State University quarterback who spent two years with the Miami Dolphins, says players could benefit from the kinds of services Sports Professionals offers.

"I absolutely think that the concept and the theory is fantastic," he says. "Guys need help transitioning, because it's a difficult transition."

Karsatos, who runs a financial services firm, Karsatos Financial Network Inc., also is president of the Central Ohio chapter of NFL Alumni Inc., a charitable organization that coordinates former players' volunteer efforts and helps former players with financial or medical difficulties.

Karsatos said the organization has some interest in helping former players transition into post-NFL life but he has concerns about the cost.

That's one of the challenges Karsatos can see for Dixon's business. College athletes also need more help making the transition into non-sports careers, he says.

Karsatos graduated with a degree in communications but said his income aspirations didn't match his opportunities in that field.

He said he talked to his mentors about his skills and what jobs might fit him best and decided to become a stockbroker.

Karsatos said he's seen athletes make myriad mistakes in their career searches, whether they're unprepared for an interview or have a poor resume.

Sometimes they choose jobs because of the financial rewards without realizing the work might not fit their personalities, he says. He agrees with Dixon that athletes have skills and advantages that can serve them well in the business world, including name recognition, discipline and good people skills.