

# Trying to Spin the Star Dust of Athletes Into Gold

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Brandon Steiner is a fast-talking, faster-thinking New York businessman who can simultaneously conduct two conversations, scan a business proposal and point out lightning-quick nuances in a Knicks game.

His interest in the Knicks' playoff success, to be sure, dwarfs that of the fellow with an interesting side bet or two. He has assiduously cultivated the team's players as friends, meanwhile establishing the groundwork for a number of lucrative deals if the local tall people go all the way.

There is the proposal for a new line of expensive Knick T-shirts, feelers from a bevy of electronics and clothing companies and a sweet invitation already in hand for Coach Pat Riley to address a financial services firm. No matter how the current teams, Mr. Steiner is already having success. In 1973, the last to win a championship, drop by Madison Square Garden skyboxes for cocktail chat at \$2,000 an hour.

### 'Getting Me Business'

"He does a great job at going out and getting me business," said Knicks guard John Starks, who took tech lessons at Mr. Steiner's urging and joined him for a steak dinner last week.

Mr. Steiner, 33 years old, is one of thousands who have made nice money scrambling for the crumbs of the multi-billion-dollar sports industry. His niche is freelance middleman between the stars. He is not a player agent, though he sometimes works with them. Nor is he directly employed by the companies he serves by getting them the most prestigious stars at the lowest price.

He grew up hawking newspapers on the streets of Brooklyn, and today sells street smarts of a specialized kind. He knows which products more than 1,000 athletes have dreamed of endorsing, which stars have drinking problems, the practice schedule of every team in professional sports and myriad other useful tidbits. "Information is my life," he says.

This is valuable information. Since he started the business, Steiner Associates, in 1987 with \$8,000 in savings, Mr. Steiner claims the privately held company's sales have grown to \$3 million a year and will reach an estimated \$5 million in 1993. His commission is 10 to 20 percent, paid by the athlete or the company depending on how the deal is structured.

### Mixing Business and Charity

Though he deals with companies and athletes in all regions, Mr. Steiner's success has been solidly local. He particularly cultivates people on local teams, often helping them make connections to local charities. He has with Rangers and Islanders helped with Hockey in Harlem. Most business deals usually follow, perhaps national ones.

His brashness has sometimes offended the larger sharks in the athletic ocean. Recently, Joe Montana's agent complained that Mr. Steiner included the quarterback's name on a list of athletes he could supply

Mr. Steiner apologized, and removed the name.

Mr. Steiner's father deserted the family before his son's fifth birthday, and the boy knew poverty as a child in Flatbush. Mr. Steiner's mother was sometimes on welfare, and sometimes in sales, peddling everything including used auto parts. It was from her Mr. Steiner learned to talk on three phones at once.

At age 5, Brandon Steiner had a lemonade stand; at 10, a fruit delivery service; at 11, a paper route. As a teen-ager, he developed his own business, delivering bagels and milk to old people. By doing a good job and being friendly, he boasts he became "an entity in the neighborhood."

### Arranging Appearances

He studied accounting at Syracuse University, then found a job as a hotel manager. His personality then won him a job as a manager at the Hard Rock Cafe, where he began meeting athletes. "That took me to the next level," he said.

The next level was a Manhattan sports bar, where he found he was

## In the billion-dollar sports industry, crumbs go a long way.

meeting still more athletes, particularly a group of Mets whom he often invited to his home. He began arranging for them to make appearances. This seemed like a nice business, but he realized he needed more than a half dozen Mets.

So he did networking of many varieties, including asking athletes with whom he had become friendly to fill out forms detailing things such as whether they would rather be paid in automobiles, stereo equipment or money. He also began focusing on companies' needs. "I realized companies were confused," he said.

Mr. Steiner helps a company focus. For instance, someone who inquires

about Michael Jordan may be told the superstar is almost surely unavailable, but that four or five other well-known athletes can be had at a fraction of the price. He will also suggest themes involving athletes. American Express, for example, accepted the idea of entertaining top clients at a Super Bowl party with Most Valuable Players from past Super Bowls.

"He helps us answer the question 'How can I generate the most dollar for my customer?'" said David Smith, an American Express executive.

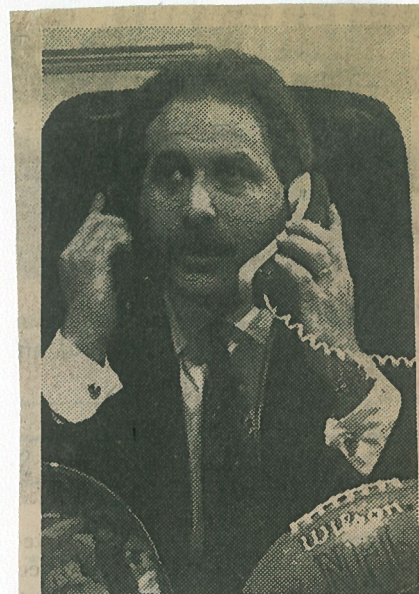
His free-wheeling business approach was evident at a recent Knicks game. He had brought David DeBusschere, the Knick legend, and Rodney Hampton, the explosive Giants' back.

He had several endorsement ideas to discuss with Mr. DeBusschere, whom he idolizes as the first athlete to endorse Grecian Formula hair dye.

Repeatedly, Mr. Steiner expressed regret that he had not been able to come up with a deal that Patrick Ewing, the Knicks' pre-eminent player, would accept. One problem, Mr.

### MAKING MONEY IN THE SPORTS BUSINESS

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Jack Manning/The New York Times

Brandon Steiner

Steiner believes, is that Mr. Ewing has not laid the groundwork with local charities and minor appearances.

The other, he said, is shared by a host of famous New Yorkers waiting for the phone to ring: "He wants such big money."