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REDEFINING THE BUSINESS

TWO BROTHERS FROM BROOKLYN DID WHATEVER
IT TOOK TO BECOME PLAYERS IN THE GAME THEY ADORED

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How Sam And Seth Levinson Are Redefining The Sports Agent Business With ACES

By Jason Belzer | **SPORTSMONEY** | forbes.com

According to the dictionary, hustle is defined as “obtainment by forceful action or persuasion.” Yet ask any successful entrepreneur what the word really means, and they will quickly point out the utter inadequacy of such a definition. You see, hustle cannot simply be branded as some verb or adjective. Indeed among all the entries in the dictionary, it is far less a word and far more a way of life. Hustle is built from grit and moxie; it means starting with nothing and not stopping till you have everything. There is no end game in the hustle, just the constant grind towards the quenching of an ever growing ambition. **One does not hustle... they are hustle.**

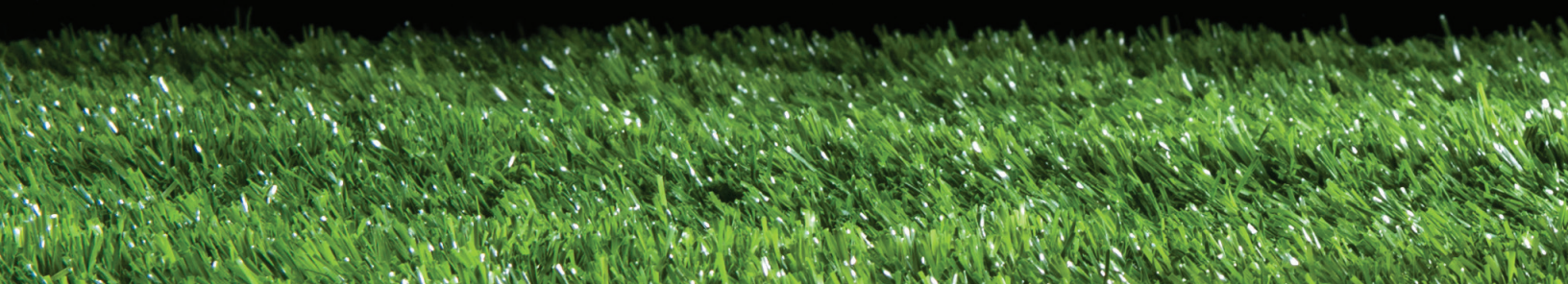


Maybe there's an easier way to define hustle. Rather than using words, we can use a picture instead – one of Sam and Seth Levinson. Two brothers that grew up on the streets of Brooklyn and who decided early on that they were going to do whatever it took to become players in the game they adored – baseball. Yet neither of them had any expectation (at least a real one) of ever actually stepping foot onto the diamond of a major league baseball team, instead they'd use brains over brawn to build influence off the field and in the front office. They would become sports agents, representing the game's best players and negotiating the biggest deals that baseball had ever seen.

Seth graduated from law school at 23 and immediately started working as a defense attorney; saving every penny he could to help him and his brother towards their goal. Meanwhile, 19 year old Sam began recruiting players, making phone calls to clients and clubs from pay phones at Brooklyn College. Soon enough they incorporated their agency ACES (Athletes' Careers Enhanced and Secured Inc.), and split duties down the middle – from client maintenance to contract negotiations to everything in between. The brother's would get in their car and drive on a cross-country tour of minor league stadiums as they visited with prospects. Altoona, Biloxi, Clinton, Dayton – an alphabet soup of baseball, thousands of miles wide and hundreds of games deep. The two men were on a mission to utterly dominate the business of baseball, and no one would dare stop them.

“Maybe we were naïve. Or maybe ignorance is bliss. It didn't matter that we were going up against agents with bigger clients and bankroll. Who cared if no one but our parents believed we would ever accomplish anything? We were ready to do whatever it took, to make any sacrifice necessary to achieve what we had set out for ourselves. We might not have always been the smartest guys in the room, but we sure as hell were going to be the ones working the hardest till our last breathe,” reveals Sam Levinson.

Not surprisingly, it didn't take long for the Levinsons to make a name for themselves. One of their first clients to make the major leagues was New York Mets' utility player Keith Miller (who would later become an agent partner at ACES). In 1992, when Miller was traded to the Kansas City Royals several of his teammates approached him to discuss what salary he was able to draw from the team. Miller presented them with a 200 page brief that had been prepared by the Levinsons containing an exhaustive analysis of his statistics compared to other players around the league and a very persuasive argument that he should be making more than them. In 1994, the brothers entered into arbitration on behalf of St. Louis Cardinal's first basemen, Gregg Jefferies and walked away with a \$4.6 million victory – the second-highest arbitration win at the time and still one of the top 25 ever won by a player. The concept of using detailed statistical analysis to prove a players worth was still a novel concept in the sports world, and the Levinsons quickly developed a competitive advantage over front





offices (and competing agents) when it came to salary negotiations for their clients.

“We never set out with the express intention of differentiating ourselves [from other agents]. Our primary concern was, and still is, to provide the absolute best service possible for our clients at any particular moment in time,” reveals Seth Levinson. “I learned the absolute necessity of meticulous preparation when I practiced as a criminal defense attorney. If you go into a trial without having a fundamental understanding of how the facts of the case fit within the context of the law, and more importantly the ability to present a persuasive argument to the jury as to why your client is innocent, you won’t just

fail your client – you’ll send them to jail for the rest of their life, or worse. When you’re dealing with life and death, something like a baseball arbitration seems insignificant in perspective. But in reality, your client in both situations expects you to do everything in your power to protect their interests and create the best possible outcome for them. That is why we put so much time into preparing for negotiations; it would simply be malpractice of us not to do so.”

Ironically, if there’s one thing the Levinson’s have learned through the more than quarter century they have spent representing major leaguers, it’s that even though you may be armed with superior information when entering



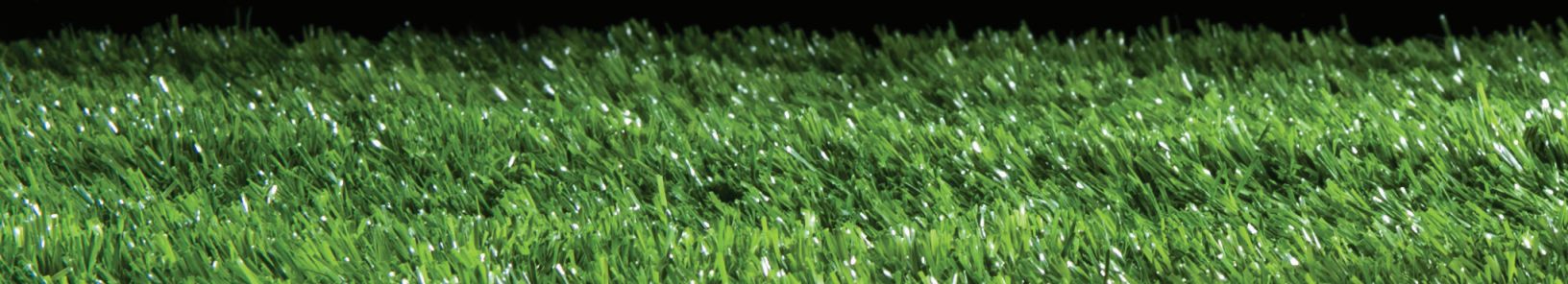


a negotiation, sometimes the best weapon in an agent's arsenal is something far simpler – patience. There is no better example of this than when ACES entered contract negotiations on behalf of current Cincinnati Reds second baseman Brandon Phillips in March of 2011. As negotiations grinded through the summer and entered the fall, Reds general manager Walt Jocketty eventually informed them that they would be exercising the team's option to extend Phillips for an additional five years. Yet for the Levinson's, having a guaranteed sixth year was simply a non-starter. In April of 2012, more than a year after negotiations began, Brandon Phillips signed a fully guaranteed, six-year, \$72 million contract with the Cincinnati Reds. Preparation, patience and a whole lot of nerve once again paid off for ACES and their client.



The Levinsons relentless negotiating style is perhaps best described by Theo Epstein, President of the Chicago Cubs. “They get you into their world, into their suite. It’s 2 in the morning, 3 in the morning, and they just keep going. They wear you down, and it’s almost like you start hallucinating and they become vampire like guys who convince you that they are right.”

In the three decades since they started their agency, the Levinsons have gone on to work with some of the greatest Major League players of all time, and in just the last few years have represented 14 different All-Stars, numerous Gold Glove and Silver Slugger



recipients, All-Star MVP, World Series MVP, and League MVP. ***In totality, they have negotiated an astounding \$3 billion in contracts for their clients, and rank No. 3 on Forbes list of the world's most powerful sports agents.*** Included among the Levinson's largest current deals are: the Chicago Cubs' six-year, \$155 million contract with pitcher Jon Lester; the New York Mets' eight-year, \$138 million contract with third baseman David Wright; and the Boston Red Sox's eight-year, \$110 million contract with second baseman Dustin Pedroia.

Perhaps most significantly, the deep relationships that the Levinson's form with their clients leaves a lasting impression that continues to pay dividends well after the cleats have been hung up.

As recently retired client and New York Yankees legend Jorge Posada puts it, "I love these guys because they worked as hard for me off the field as I worked on it. They always did everything they could to make my life better and easier."

There is no question that from a financial perspective, the Levinsons have proven that they are among the most successful sports agents ever. The Biogenesis scandal, however, was a wrenching challenge. The scandal broke in 2013 when several Major League Baseball players were accused by the league of obtaining performance-enhancing drugs ("PEDs") from a rejuvenation clinic based in Coral Gables, Florida named Biogenesis of America. The majority of the players suspended by MLB in the case were

represented by the Levinsons, all of whom came from Latin America. That being said, those players (6 of whom were minor league players) represented just 5% of ACES' clientele at the time. After a lengthy investigation, the MLB Players Association, which certifies agents, "found no evidence that Sam Levinson, Seth Levinson, or any other ACES principals participated in, or had knowledge of, the supplying of banned drugs to players." Sources close to the investigation also confirm that none of the players investigated implicated the Levinsons in any way during their testimonies.

For the Levinsons, Biogenesis was simply just another challenge to be overcome. Yet as the contracts get bigger and the stakes become higher, the sports agent business will only become more competitive. And while no one can predict what the future might hold for the Levinsons or ACES, what is certain is that you'll be sure to find the two boys from Brooklyn hustling to try to get over any obstacle in their way.

In the words of retired ACES client Elliot Johnson, "While I wasn't as well known as some of the most popular players in MLB, Seth and Sam treated me exactly the same as David [Wright], Dustin [Pedroia], Jon [Lester] or anyone else. I was treated with respect and integrity with every interaction and given the same options as those guys. Simply, I was treated like family. I don't think they try to be that way, I think it's simply who they are."

