

Rising Star: Covington & Burling's Peter Zern

By Ben James



Peter Zern

Law360, New York (April 12, 2013, 4:26 PM ET) -- Covington & Burling LLP's Peter Zern played a role in the sales of the New Orleans Hornets, Golden State Warriors, San Diego Padres and Miami Dolphins and counts nearly every major U.S. professional sports league as a client, making him an easy pick for Law360's list of four outstanding media and entertainment lawyers under 40.

The 39-year-old, one of Law360's Rising Stars, teams up with Covington partners Douglas Gibson and Bruce Wilson and a group of litigators and antitrust lawyers to form the firm's corporate sports practice. In recent years Covington has worked on rounding out its sports work, going from what was a league-focused practice to one that includes representing teams and owners as well, Zern said. The firm's current sports practice is much more diverse and robust than it was a decade ago, he added.

"There's nobody that can hold a candle to scope of the experience we've got in sports," Zern said. "There are few other firms in America that can really rival our depth of knowledge, and no other firm that can rival our bench strength."

Zern was quick to tout Covington's accomplishments and capabilities in the sports realm, however he was reluctant to take credit himself, instead pointing to his current and former colleagues at the firm.

"We've got over 50 years of experience within the sports industry. I'm fortunate to be a part of this practice. I'm really riding on the coattails of folks that have come before me," he said. "Bruce and Doug could not have been better mentors, and the same is true of Paul Tagliabue and Gregg Levy." Tagliabue returned to Covington after serving as National Football League Commissioner; Levy is a veteran antitrust litigator with the firm.

But Zern, who arrived at Covington in 1998, has amassed a lengthy track record of working on high-value deals involving some of the biggest names in professional sports.

In 2012 Zern counseled Tom Benson, who owns the New Orleans Saints football team, on the purchase of the New Orleans Hornets basketball team. That deal, for an undisclosed sum, closed in June. Previously, Zern represented Christopher Cohan, former owner of the Golden State Warriors, on the \$450 million sale of that basketball team.

Zern has also done significant work for the National Football League, advising the NFL on the sale of the St. Louis Rams to Stan Kroenke and the complex reorganization of the Pittsburgh Steelers ownership. He also represented the NFL on the sale of the Miami Dolphins. The billion-dollar acquisition of the Dolphins and its related stadium company was completed in January 2009.

"Our continued representation of the NFL remains an incredible source of pride for the firm," Zern said. "We're very fortunate to be able to work with them on a range of matters."

Zern represented sports marketing company IMG College in a transaction that led to the launch of the Longhorn Network — which carries University of Texas sports programming — and a 20-year deal between Longhorn Network owner the University of Texas at Austin, ESPN and IMG College.

The Longhorn Network deal was "pretty novel at the time, and really hasn't been repeated since," said Zern.

Also on the college sports front, Zern leads the team representing the Big East Conference and headed the Covington group that advised Turner Broadcasting System Inc. in its 14-year rights agreement with the National Collegiate Athletic Association and CBS Sports to carry Division I men's college basketball championship games.

Zern counseled the National Hockey League in the negotiation of agreements for television rights in the U.S. and Canada, and negotiated agreements for the launch and carriage of the MLB Network, which shows major league baseball games.

In addition, Zern advised the U.S. Olympic Committee on the review and negotiation of the U.S. Olympic telecast and media rights agreement covering the 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020 Olympic Games.

Zern said that his relatively young age has never caused problems for him in terms of credibility with existing or prospective clients.

"In part, it's because we've got the brand recognition within the U.S., and in part, it's because we work as a team here," he said. "When you look to hire the firm, we've always taken the view that you're hiring the firm, and not an individual."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.

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