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Confessions of an agent

By George Dohrmann, Sports Illustrated

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I will never forget the first time I paid a player.

There are moments you will always remember, like your first kiss or your first home run or the day you met your wife. For me, the first time I broke an NCAA rule to try to land a client is just as indelible.

It was before the 1990 football season, and I flew from Los Angeles to Denver and drove to the University of Colorado to try to meet with Kanavis McGhee. He was a big, pass-rushing linebacker who was expected to be a high pick in the 1991 NFL draft. I was 20 years old -- the youngest agent ever certified by the NFL Players Association -- and had less than a year's experience, but for whatever reason I convinced myself that I had a shot with him.

I figured out where Kanavis lived, drove to his apartment and knocked on the door. No one answered, so I waited. About four hours later, Kanavis finally came home and I bum-rushed him at the door.

"Hey, Kanavis, my name is Josh Luchs. I'm a sports agent, and I flew here from Los Angeles specifically for you," I said. "You're a great player and I came a long way, and I'd really appreciate it if you would sit down and talk to me for a few minutes."

Kanavis said, "Sure, man. Come on in."

We sat on his couch, and I gave him my spiel. I told him about myself and asked him questions, trying to connect with him. After about half an hour, Kanavis said to me, "Josh, you seem like a pretty good guy, can I share something with you?"

"Sure."

"I need some help. My mom lost her job and she's sick and she hasn't been able to make her rent. If I don't come up with \$2,500, she is going to get evicted from her apartment."

"I don't know," I said. "Let me think about it. I'll come by tomorrow and let you know."

That night I sat in my hotel room making a list of pros and cons in my head. Sure, it was breaking NCAA rules, but I would be helping Kanavis out. How would I feel if my mom was sick and I didn't have money to help her? I went through this for hours and finally decided to do it.

Story Highlights

Josh Luchs admits he paid thousands to dozens of college football players. In addition to money, Luchs gave players meals, trips and concert tickets. Luchs is leaving the agent business and is coming clean to set record straight.



Josh Luchs first got into the agent business at age 20 and represented more than 60 NFL players over the course of his career.

Robert Beck/SI

Editors' Note

This story includes the names of 30 former college football players who are alleged to have taken money or some other extra benefit in violation of NCAA rules. The primary source of these allegations is Josh Luchs, who has been a certified NFL agent for 20 years.

SI senior writer George Dohrmann met Luchs [pronounced LUX] in July while working on a story about the agent business. Luchs represented more than 60 players during his career, which placed him in the middle class of the industry. He was viewed by other agents as a particularly dogged recruiter and noted for his partnerships with more seasoned player representatives. When Dohrmann learned that Luchs was leaving the profession, he proposed a first-person account of life as an agent. Luchs was initially reluctant but ultimately decided to tell his story. At no point was he

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The next morning I went to the bank, pulled out some of my bar mitzvah money, \$2,500 in cash, showed up at Kanavis's door and told him, "Kanavis, I gave this a lot of thought, and I want to help you out. I know how I would feel if it was my mom."

"Thank you so much," he said. "You're my boy, man. You're really coming through for me."

I went back to my hotel and for a little while I felt good, but then the phone rang. It was a teammate of Kanavis's calling.

"Hey, man, Kanavis told me you're a pretty good dude," he said. "I got this problem, and I need some help. My father is really sick and he is losing his apartment and I need \$2,500. Do you think you can help me out the way you helped Kanavis?"

My heart dropped. I hung up and got the hell out of there. The whole flight home I was kicking myself. How could I be so stupid?

THE BALL BOY

How does a dyslexic Jewish kid with no college degree become an NFL agent? How does he last in the profession for nearly 20 years? As it did with many others who became sports agents in the 1980s and early '90s, the career found me. This was pre-Jerry Maguire, before football agents became as famous as their clients. It was not a glamorous profession and was full of guys who had fallen into it.

I was born in Brooklyn. My father was a urologist and an acupuncturist, and he treated New York Knicks Spencer Haywood and Earl (the Pearl) Monroe. They would come by the house and play basketball with me on the hoop in the front yard while waiting for their appointments. I saw how magical those athletes were, how people responded to them, and knew I wanted to be associated with athletes in the future.

My family moved to Beverly Hills when I was 10, and my father got Raiders season tickets. It became my dream to be part of that team. In the fall of 1985, during my junior year at Beverly Hills High, I talked my way into an internship with Bud Furillo, who hosted a sports talk show on KABC-AM. After I'd worked for free for several months Bud asked how he could repay me.

"Help me get a job with the Raiders," I said.

Bud talked to owner Al Davis, and a few weeks later I drove to Raiders training camp in Oxnard, Calif., for the first of three summers I would spend as a ball boy.

One of the players I was most excited to meet that first year was Greg Townsend, the star defensive end. When Greg pulled up in his Mercedes for the first day of camp, I ran over to him like some goofball fan, wearing my Raiders-issue, silver-and-black knee socks and shorts, and said, "Hey, Greg, how are you doing?" I offered to help carry his bags, and as we were walking, he asked me where I was from. I knew that Greg grew up in the inner city, in Compton, and I worried that if he heard I was from Beverly Hills he would judge me harshly. I told him I didn't want to say, but he kept asking. "I am from Beverly Hills, but not from the really, really rich part," I finally admitted. "I'm from the rougher part."

Greg laughed his butt off. From that day forward I was his guy, like his little mascot. For Greg and the other players, I would do anything. I sneaked beer up to their rooms; I sneaked girls into their hotel. Once Greg called me at 1 a.m. and asked me to come to his room immediately. I hurried up there, and he answered the door wearing silk pajama bottoms and a smoking jacket and holding a cigarette in one hand and a glass of Grand Marnier in the other. After a long discussion about whether I did drugs (I did not), Greg took out this plastic container, put it on a table and said, "I need some piss I can trust, Josh. Is your piss trustworthy?" He told me he was going to be drug-tested the next day, and if he tested positive, he would be suspended. In my mind, helping him was the right thing to do; Greg was an important player. By giving him my urine, I was doing my part for the team.

Days later, I heard that Greg had been suspended. I couldn't believe it. Had my urine tested positive? Greg had been sent home from camp so I rushed to his house, and again he answered the door wearing that

promised or given any form of compensation for his participation.

In more than 20 hours of interviews Luchs - described the payments he says he made to players as well as other events in his career. He spoke in detail, remembering that a Miami player who visited his home ate a cold steak with his hands and that an Arizona lineman liked to hit golf balls through one wall of his apartment and that a key conversation with a player from Washington State took place in a hotel bathroom. Many of his accounts were bolstered either by photographs, money-order receipts or loan agreements, or by confirmations to Dohrmann or SI staff writer David Epstein from third parties who were present for meetings that Luchs had described. The response to each allegation can be found on the bottom of the same page on which the allegation appears.

Eight players confirmed to SI that they had accepted money or benefits from Luchs. Several of them, including former USC receiver R. Jay Soward, said they took the payments because their scholarship didn't provide enough money for rent and food. "I would do it again," Soward said. "I have four sons, and if somebody offered my son money in college and it meant he didn't have to be hungry, I would tell him to take it."

Seven other players said they knew Luchs but declined to comment when asked about the allegation that he had given them money or other benefits. Another player, when told SI was working on a story with Luchs, said he didn't know who that was; when informed of the allegation that he had accepted money from Luchs, the player asked SI to call back the next day but then did not respond to further phone and e-mail messages. Three other players also initially responded to calls or e-mails from Luchs or SI but did not reply to further messages from SI after being made aware of Luchs's allegations about them.

Five players and one television personality denied all or part of Luchs's allegations. SI could not reach two other players, including a current NFL player whose agent and team were informed of the allegation about the player; neither the agent nor the team responded. Four other players to whom Luchs said he gave money are deceased.

Neither the schools nor the players in this story are likely to face NCAA scrutiny. The NCAA has a four-year statute of limitations on violations, and the most recent violation alleged by Luchs occurred in 2005. There are exceptions to the statute, but none appear applicable.

The responses of the parties mentioned are included at the bottom of the story.

smoking jacket and holding a glass of Grand Marnier. I started babbling about how my urine couldn't have tested positive and he just laughed. He said that the testers made him pee in front of them, that my urine hadn't been used. He appreciated what I had done and that I had come to see him, and then mentioned that he had some girls inside. "Come on in," he said.

In 1988, during my third summer with the team and the year after I'd graduated from high school, Greg told me that he needed a new agent. "Josh, you are a good guy," he said. "You care about the players. You and Al [Davis] are both New York Jewish guys. You should be my agent."

I had never thought about being an agent, but it made sense. I could be close to the players, I could help them, and it would allow me to have a job in sports. I filled out the paperwork required by the NFLPA, just a few forms, and paid about \$300. I was 19. I was still living with my parents. I didn't know anything about contracts and negotiating. But it didn't matter. I was officially an agent.

PAY TO PLAY

When I first got into the business, I naively thought that if players just got to know me, they would hire me. It had worked with Greg Townsend, so why wouldn't it work with others? I drove to colleges along the West Coast such as Oregon, Stanford, Fresno State and San Diego State and introduced myself to players. I was about the same age they were, and I could talk to them. I think some liked me. But none hired me.

After Colorado, after Kanavis McGhee took my money and then never answered my calls when it came time for him to pick an agent, you would think I would have sworn off paying players. But in my first year in the business, 1990, I paid Chuck Webb, the running back from Tennessee. I gave him a couple hundred dollars during his sophomore year. I also paid several hundred dollars to Mel Agee, the big defensive lineman at Illinois. As with Kanavis, I didn't land either of them as clients. Mel came to L.A. and said he would sign if I bought a diamond engagement ring for his girlfriend. I would have done it, but the ring cost too much.

It was rough that first year, but I learned valuable lessons. Most of all, I realized I needed someone to show me the ropes. Harold (Doc) Daniels became that person. Doc was a legend, one of the first prominent black NFL agents. Doc, who would die in 2001 after a long illness, was a big dude, like 6'6", and he wore all this gold jewelry and had a shiny bald head. Other agents were afraid of him, and he also had a reputation for paying and giving gifts to college kids. There used to be a joke in the industry that if you saw a college player driving a Datsun 280Z, then you could forget about signing him. It was widely known Doc had a hookup at a Datsun dealership in Southern California.

In 1992 Doc began helping me understand the business. First, I learned that if I was going to keep paying players I had to do it differently. Giving money in one shot didn't build a long-term relationship with a prospect; I had to give smaller amounts each month so the player would stay in regular touch. Doc also taught me to focus locally. A common way for an agent to gain a foothold in the business is by getting in with a single school. How did Drew Rosenhaus become so big? He graduated from Miami and was embedded in the school when Ray Lewis, Warren Sapp & Co. went there. I had UCLA.

I rarely went to Bruins games or practices, but I was hanging out all the time with players, including someone who would become my first UCLA client, receiver Sean LaChapelle. Sean and I got to be good friends. He would come over to my parents' house even when I wasn't there, like a member of the family. He even gave me a dog, Touchdown, a golden retriever. I hoped to represent Sean after his junior season in 1992, but Rick Neuheisel, a UCLA assistant coach at the time, talked him into coming back for his senior year. I was worried about other agents' getting to Sean, so I had him give the agents who contacted him the phone number for my house in Woodland Hills. When agents called him they were actually calling my home phone.

Landing Sean gave me credibility with other players, and after him I signed fellow Bruins Carl Greenwood; Othello Henderson; Jamir Miller, who was the No. 10 overall pick in 1994; Matt Soenksen; and Chris Alexander. I did a lot for Sean, but I never gave him money. I did, however, pay all the others. Doc and I gave them money around the first of every month. We paid quarterback Ryan Fien while he was at UCLA, and when he transferred to Idaho in 1996 we kept paying him. We gave Bruce Walker and Vaughn Parker of UCLA money too, but they didn't sign with us. I did more than just hand players cash. When Bruce was thrown in jail for shooting off a gun in L.A. [he would later plead no contest to disturbing the peace], whom do you think he called in the middle of the night to bail him out?

If you were a good player at UCLA, I made a run at you. I tried to get can't-miss NFL left tackle prospect Jonathan Ogden as a client, but he wouldn't take my money. He did, however, go with me to a Janet Jackson concert. My girlfriend got two tickets, and I told her, "Sorry, I need those tickets for J.O. He's a big Janet Jackson fan." Instead of going to the concert with my girlfriend, I went with a 6'9" guy who weighed more than 300 pounds and who screamed "Janet!" the whole night like a teenage girl.

The lunches, the money each month, the bail, the concert tickets, those were all NCAA violations, of course, but in my mind I wasn't doing anything wrong. Doc would say to me, "We ain't members of the NCAA. We didn't agree to follow these rules." I also justified it by remembering that the schools and the NCAA were making money while the players, many of whom came from poor families, weren't getting anything but an education, which many of them didn't take seriously. Plus, Doc and I knew that if they didn't take our money, they would take it from one of the dozens of other agents opening their wallets. Agents have been giving kids money for decades. It was more open in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, before states passed sports-agent laws making it illegal. Now, agents still do it, but they are more secretive and use middlemen. Anyone who thinks it doesn't go on needs to look at all the schools currently being investigated by the NCAA for contact between players and agents, places like Alabama, Florida, Georgia and North Carolina. It goes on everywhere.


While most of my energy was spent recruiting UCLA, Doc and I also went after players who had ties to the Los Angeles area. Chris Mims, the Tennessee defensive end who was picked in the first round in 1992, was an L.A. kid Doc and I landed. We paid him about \$500 a month during his final season in Knoxville and also paid a guy who was sort of his handler. Michigan State's Tony Banks, the first quarterback taken in the '96

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draft, was another client. Doc had known Tony since he was a little kid and had represented his uncle, former USC and NFL linebacker Chip Banks. We paid Tony several hundred dollars a month. Colorado's Greg Thomas, USC's Delon Washington and Phalen Pounds, and Portland State's Darick Holmes also took our money and became clients.

However, there were scores of others we paid but lost out on. Between 1990 and '96 I'd estimate that I paid more than 30 players. Joel Steed of Colorado; Rob Waldrop, the Outland Trophy winner from Arizona; and Travis Claridge of USC all took my money but signed with someone else, as did many others. When I called those players and asked them why they didn't sign with me, they always had the same line: "Sorry, I gotta do what is best for me and my family."

One of the misconceptions about the agent business is that the kids are victims, preyed on by people like me. When Alabama coach Nick Saban and others rail against the agent business, they don't mention that most of the time the player or someone from his family approaches us. Guys see that one of their teammates has some cash, ask him about it, and suddenly my phone rings. It was rare to find a player who wouldn't take the money. I put \$10,000 cash in front of Kansas's Dana Stubblefield, and he wouldn't take it. I tried to pay UCLA's J.J. Stokes and USC's Keyshawn Johnson, and they said, "No." But for every kid who didn't take the money, there were dozens who called me and asked to get paid.

THE WHALE

The maximum commission an agent gets for negotiating an NFL player's contract is 3%. As recently as the mid-1990s it was 5%, but the NFLPA cut it down over the years, and now it is the lowest in any major sport. This makes the competition for the highest draft choices even more ruthless. Doc and I had signed some good players, but to earn real money, I had to land the kind of player every agent covets: a franchise quarterback.

I had spent several years working to get inside the program at Washington State. The school often signed players from Southern California, and I got close to them. Eventually, I was paying several players on the team, including three starting defensive backs from the early 1990s -- Torey Hunter, Singor Mobley and John Rushing -- and also defensive lineman Leon Bender. Word spread in the locker room that if you needed money, you called me.

One guy who needed money was Ryan Leaf, which was why in 1996 I met with the Cougars' quarterback at a hotel near campus. This was before his junior season, and Ryan was on the cusp of stardom. He was a whale. I knew that if I could sign him, it would change my life.

At the hotel, Ryan made it clear that he had significant credit card debt, something like \$5,000, and needed help. I knew that if I just paid off his debt, he would forget about me and have no reason to develop a relationship. "But I want to help," I said. "How much do you think you would need each month to make your life easier?" He said he needed around \$500 a month, which wasn't much to pay for a player with Ryan's potential earnings. In the bathroom of that hotel, he signed an undated representation contract and a loan agreement for the money. Soon afterward, Doc and I began paying him monthly with money orders, ranging from \$300 to \$700.

I got close with Ryan in a hurry. We talked two to three times a week. I was 26, and he was 20, so I was like an older brother he could party with. I got as close with him as I had with Sean LaChapelle. I had bought a town house in Studio City, and Ryan and a lot of players knew they could crash at my place when they were in Southern California. I kept the fridge full of beer, soda and steaks, and I had every video game. Ryan stayed there a few nights, and I always showed him a good time. He was from Great Falls, Mont., and he would come out here and party with these amazing L.A. girls, and he loved it.

For all of 1997, Ryan was the main focus of my recruiting. At the time I was losing my parents. My mother died in October 1996, and then two months later my father learned he had an inoperable brain tumor.

Ryan knew what I was going through. One day, he came with me to my dad's house, and while he was there my dad got very upset, talking about how he hated that his illness prevented me from doing my job. Ryan told him, "Don't worry. Josh doesn't need to recruit any other players. He's got me."

My dad died in May 1997, and I was a mess. But a few weeks later I still went on a trip with Ryan to Las Vegas because I knew he was looking forward to it and I wanted to maintain our bond. It was supposed to be just him and me, but at the last minute two other Washington State quarterbacks, Steve Birnbaum and Dave Muir, joined the trip. That pissed me off. They were not potential clients, and yet Ryan expected me to take care of them too.

We spent two nights in Vegas, and when we checked out, I paid for the room Ryan and I stayed in, but I didn't pay for Birnbaum and Muir's room, and that caused a big stir. It was only about \$500, and in hindsight I should have just paid for the room, but I was upset at the world because my parents were dead, and for the first time I resented someone expecting me to pay.

After that I was screwed. We drove from Vegas to Lake Havasu in Arizona, and it was very awkward in the car. Even a few days of partying on the lake didn't change that. Ryan started giving me the cold shoulder, and that continued when I tried to call him in the weeks after. Still, I felt that as long as he needed my \$500 a month, I could reel him back in.

You know when you are in a relationship with a girl and you can just tell she is about to break up with you? That is what being around Ryan felt like in the months that followed. Before the 1998 Rose Bowl, I talked to Ryan in a bathroom at the team hotel and gave him some cash, and he couldn't even look me in the eye. Then the day after the Rose Bowl, Jan. 2, I watched on television as Ryan announced that he was going pro. Leigh Steinberg was standing next to him.

Losing Ryan, who would end up being the No. 2 overall pick in 1998, hurt, and that will never completely go away. But Ryan also did something I found somewhat redeeming. During training camp of his rookie year with the Chargers, I went down to San Diego. I met him in the lobby of the team's facility, and after

coming back with me to my car he ultimately gave me \$10,000 in cash -- close to the total amount I had paid him. He never explained why he didn't sign with me nor did he apologize for breaking the promise he made to my dying father, but at least he paid me back.

My parents' deaths and my missing out on Ryan changed how I looked at my life. In 1997 I met the woman who would become my wife, and I wanted to start a family. I was also getting to an age when it wasn't fun partying with college kids anymore.

The last player I went after with Doc was R. Jay Soward, a receiver at USC. At the beginning of almost every month during the 1999 season, I would give him \$1,500. R. Jay and I were cool; we got along great. But after the season, when he told his father that we had taken care of him, his dad was so mad that he refused to let R. Jay sign with us.

In 1999 the NFLPA had changed a rule to say that players who were found to have taken money from agents while in college would not have to pay the money back. Before, agents had the threat of litigation, so it was often easier for a player to just let the paying agent do his rookie deal. However, the floodgates opened after the NFLPA changed that rule. Players, their parents, everyone put their hands out because there were no ramifications.

R. Jay's dad knew about the rule change, and he told Doc, "We don't have to repay you s---."

That was the last straw. You would think I would have left the business altogether, but I still loved being an agent and being around the sport and players. However, I knew that to keep going I needed to become a different kind of agent, and to do that I needed a new partner.

RAISING THE STAKES

Whenever some college kid asks me how he can become an agent, I tell him, "Go get tight with a player and serve him up as leverage to get a job [with an agenting firm]." The bottom line is that no agent is going to work with you unless you bring something to the table that he doesn't have.

I had a skill -- I could recruit all the big schools on the West Coast -- and I needed to find an agent who valued that. Gary Wichard was one of the biggest around, the guy who represented Brian Bosworth, Keith Brooking, Jason Taylor and others. But even though Gary's company, Pro Tect Management, was in Pacific Palisades, Calif., overlooking the ocean, he had almost no West Coast clients.

I reached out to him at the 2000 Senior Bowl. Eventually, Gary recognized what I could bring to the table, and we agreed to a contract that paid me 25% of the commission on any player we signed from any school in the Pacific or Mountain time zones except Utah, because Gary had an in at that program. The deal was less than the 50-50 split I had with Doc, but I had gotten married and was looking to provide for my family, and I thought Gary could help me become the agent I wanted to be.

Immediately, Gary told me that he recruited differently and that the Wild West way I learned under Doc wasn't going to fly. He said I needed to be "reprogrammed." There would be no more partying with players, no more paying players. That was music to my ears.

Much of how I recruited with Gary was similar to before: cold calls, going to schools, introducing myself to players and getting close to them and their families. The difference now was that I had something special to sell: Gary and his client list.

Gary was a master in front of kids. If I got him in a room with a prospect and he made his presentation, we had a great shot at signing the player. Gary put together what he called a Game Plan for each prospect he recruited. Each Game Plan came in a large bound book that contained, among other things, information on how Gary had improved his clients' draft stock over the years. Of course, he left out his clients who fell in the draft, but the college players bought it. At one point in our presentation, Gary would hold up the Game Plans for two players from the previous year's draft, one in each hand. One was for a player who signed with him, and one was for a kid who didn't and was drafted lower. "Next year, what hand do you want your Game Plan to be in?" he would say. It was brilliant.

Gary also used his contacts in the media to help him recruit. In 2000, before a meeting with Stanford defensive lineman Willie Howard, Gary arranged for ESPN draft analyst Mel Kiper to call. Gary and I were talking to Willie in Gary's office when Gary's phone rang, and he put it on speakerphone.

"Viper, how are you?" Gary said. That's what he called Mel, Viper or Vipe. "Viper, I'm sitting here with the best defensive lineman in college football. Do you know who that is?"

"You must be with Willie Howard," Mel said.

Gary used Mel like that all the time. In the agent business, people know Gary and Mel are close, and some people suspect that Mel ranks players more favorably if they are Gary's clients.

In my first year with Gary, I successfully recruited Willie and also Adam Archuleta and Todd Heap, both from Arizona State. In the 2001 draft Adam and Todd were picked in the first round and Willie in the second. I'd never had a haul like that when I was with Doc, so even though I was getting a smaller percentage, I was making more money. My wife and I had our first daughter the month after the draft, and I remember that Gary told my wife what a gifted recruiter I was and that we had a bright future.

Gary used his contacts in the coaching community to help him get players. This has recently come into public view, as the NCAA and the state of North Carolina are investigating the Tar Heels football program and whether John Blake, a Carolina assistant coach since 2007, steered players to Gary and received money from him. It's no secret in the agent business that some college coaches steer players to certain agents. I laughed when I heard Gary deny in the media that John ever worked with Pro Tect.

When I was with Gary, John worked hand in hand with us, and Gary called him his "partner." John was the defensive line coach of the Dallas Cowboys when they won Super Bowls XXVIII and XXX, and the head

coach at Oklahoma from '96 through '98. He was one of the best recruiters I'd ever seen. He was just electric, and I leveraged him to get clients whenever I could. In '02 two of the biggest clients we got were due, in large part, to John. He went with Gary and me to meet with Fresno State defensive lineman Alan Harper, and Gary and I had John work out defensive end Kenyon Coleman from UCLA before his senior year. That was an NCAA violation, but it wasn't like paying a kid. It was helping Kenyon become a better player.

Alan and Kenyon were talented, but what I remember most about the 2002 draft were the kids we missed. Before the 2002 Rose Bowl between Miami and Nebraska, I brought Hurricanes tight end Jeremy Shockey to Gary's house in Westlake. Shockey is this kid from Ada, Okla., so who does Gary have waiting for him when he arrives? The Boz, Brian Bosworth. The dinner went great, but then Shockey signed with Drew Rosenhaus.

That year I also set up meetings with Cal cornerback Nnamdi Asomugha and Washington defensive lineman Larry Triplett, but Gary wouldn't see them. Why would Gary pass on potential first-rounders? It was around that time that Leigh Steinberg sued former partner David Dunn, a young guy who had left him and taken a lot of clients. After that, every big agent started looking at younger employees more warily. I think Gary viewed me that way too. He told me, "What happened with Leigh will never happen to me. I've got my house in order."

In 2003 I helped Gary get Arizona State defensive end Terrell Suggs, the No. 10 overall pick, USC running back Justin Fargas and others, but I started feeling as if Gary were trying to limit the number of clients I could claim. He turned me down when I asked him to meet with kids, and -- without me present -- he tried to meet with kids I had recruited. He also belittled me in front of people, saying I didn't have a college degree and wouldn't be anything without him.

My wife and I had our second daughter that year, and I was making good money, but it became hell working with Gary. Once, when I told him that we were in danger of losing a prospect and that he needed to call him, he yelled, "You don't tell me what to do. No one tells me what to do."

It took another year, but by August 2004 I had finally had enough. I handed Gary my letter of resignation and then spent an hour listening as he told me I should find a new profession. "Josh, you are a great salesman. You can be successful in any business," he said, and then he offered to call a friend of his who worked at Mattel. I knew he just didn't want me out there recruiting against him.

As I walked out of his office, I thanked Gary. I think I did far more for him than he did for me, but as much as I hated to admit it, Gary had taught me a ton.

HOLLYWOOD, BABY

This is what it was like at the top: It's 2006, and I am sitting in an office in a building in Beverly Hills, and a whole floor is dedicated to the sports-agency division. Huge pictures of clients like Corey Dillon and Rodney Harrison hang on the walls. I am on the phone with Dallas Cowboys defensive end Marcus Spears. I'm trying to persuade him to switch agents, and I'm telling him to come to L.A. I sense hesitation, so I put the phone out the window.

"Do you hear that, Marcus? Do you hear it?" I yell. "You know what that is? That's Hollywood, baby. Hollywood's calling. You gonna answer the call?"

A week later, Marcus was in my office signing a representation agreement.

The transforming development in the agent business in the 2000s was Hollywood's move into sports. It started when CAA lured Tom Condon from IMG in 2005. The firm that represented Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie joined forces with the guy who represented Peyton and Eli Manning. That deal overshadowed another one: Steve Feldman and I joined The Gersh Agency, another of Hollywood's big talent firms.

After I left Gary Wichard, I teamed up with Steve, who had a small but solid client base that included Dillon and Harrison. Almost instantly we got some new clients, including troubled Ohio State running back Maurice Clarett (for whom we did some of our best work; a player no team should have touched got taken in the third round). But it was nothing like when Steve and I joined Gersh. At our new agency, we had something powerful to sell to players: celebrity. We told them, "Come sign with us and be a star." We put Marcus Spears in a TV pilot; NFL wideout Kassim Osgood made a guest appearance on *Jericho*; when I was recruiting receiver Steve Smith from USC we got him on an MTV pilot. We were selling TV and movies to athletes, and it was like having the freakin' Golden Calf.

Steve and I got meetings with almost any player we wanted. Tight end Dustin Keller, an eventual first-rounder out of Purdue, paid his own way to come see us. That doesn't happen. In November 2005, Steve and I flew to Ohio State to talk to receiver Santonio Holmes. We met him outside the football building, and he said, "Listen, I want to save you the time. We don't need to meet. I've been taking money from [an agent] the last couple years, and he's been taking care of my family too."

Had it been 10 years earlier, I would have probably said, "Santonio, whatever he's paying you, I'll double it." But now, being at Gersh, I had Hollywood to sell. Let the other agents pay kids.

That first year at Gersh was the best of my career. We were making inroads with all sorts of clients. I was earning a six-figure salary plus bonuses. I had health benefits for the first time. My wife was happy. It was everything I wanted.

Then it all came crashing down.

A year after I left Gary, I sued him for breach of contract because he had stopped paying me the 25% I was owed on the clients I helped him recruit. Just before I filed my lawsuit, one of those clients, wideout Keenan Howry, sent me a commission check for \$5,320. I was not sure what to do with it. I wasn't going to give it to Gary so I gave the check to my lawyer, who deposited it into a trust account.

In 2007 I lost my lawsuit against Gary. During the lawsuit, Gary's lawyer sent me a letter that stated that if I didn't settle the case for \$50,000, Gary would file a grievance against Keenan over that \$5,320 check, which he ultimately did. The union looked into the matter and determined that because I had given the check to my lawyer rather than passing it on to Gary, I had breached my fiduciary duty to Keenan. The NFLPA suspended me for a year and fined me \$25,000.

Gary, his lawyer and the union knew where that check was; Keenan was also fully aware that I had given it to my lawyer. There was no intent to do anything wrong, and yet when the suspension came down, it came across as if I had stolen that check, as if I were some sort of thief.

I know people may not believe my version of events. Gary and the NFLPA will have a different view, I'm sure. I should have been suspended 100 times for all the players I paid, but not for what they did suspend me for.

Because of the suspension, I was done at Gersh after a little more than two years there. The agency didn't have much use for an agent who couldn't work for 12 months and who had that on his résumé. To survive as an agent after the suspension, with other agents using it to recruit against me, I would have had to start paying players again. I wouldn't do it.

On Jan. 28, 2008, the day the NFLPA declined the appeal of my suspension, I walked into a commercial real estate office near my home in Encino and signed up for a training program.

That was it. I would keep the two loyal clients who didn't leave me after the suspension, but I wouldn't recruit anymore. For all intents and purposes, I was done as an agent.

COMING CLEAN

Why am I doing this? Why am I telling everything? There are a few small reasons and one big one.

People should know how the agent business really works, how widespread the inducements to players are and how players have their hands out. It isn't just the big, bad agents making them take money. People think the NFLPA is monitoring agents, but it is mostly powerless. People should also be aware of all that an agent does for his clients. Catering to their needs can be an all-consuming job.

But those are the small reasons.

Recently, my nine-year-old daughter got an iPod, and she has figured out how to get on the Internet. My six-year-old is not far behind. At some point, they are going to Google their daddy's name, and before this story they would have found only page after page of stuff saying how I was suspended. I was a good agent and I took care of my players. I don't want my career to be defined by that suspension.

Nobody would care about my version of what happened with Keenan Howry's \$5,320 check unless I came clean about everything else. As I said earlier, you have to leverage what you've got to get what you want. What I had to leverage were the stories about paying players and all the other dirt.

Now, maybe, when my daughters Google me, they will see that I worked hard to give them a good life. And for those people who will call me a cheater for paying players and breaking NCAA rules, or who will think I am a snitch for telling how the agent business works, well, I'll just say what so many players said to me over the years:

Sorry, I gotta do what is best for me and my family.

RESPONSES

- When informed of the allegation that he had accepted money from Luchs, Kanavis McGhee asked SI to call back the next day. He did not return subsequent phone and e-mail messages from SI.
- Greg Townsend confirmed the details of his relationship with Luchs.
- Chuck Webb could not be reached for comment (SI left messages for Webb through his family).
- Mel Agee, Harold (Doc) Daniels, Chris Mims, Travis Claridge and Leon Bender are deceased.
- Carl Greenwood, Othello Henderson, Matt Soenksen, Chris Alexander, Bruce Walker, Jonathan Ogden and Singor Mobley confirmed receiving money or extra benefits from Luchs.
- Jamir Miller, Tony Banks and John Rushing declined to comment.
- Ryan Fien, Joel Steed and Torey Hunter said they did not receive money from Luchs.
- Vaughn Parker said he knew Luchs but had no comment as to whether he took money from Luchs.
- Greg Thomas, Delon Washington and Darick Holmes did not respond to phone messages.
- Phalen Pounds said Luchs was "a good guy" but declined to comment as to whether he took money.
- Rob Waldrop denied that Luchs paid him. He recalled that he had lunch with Luchs and that Luchs offered to pay a friend in an effort to get to Waldrop, but he said that he did not accept any money.
- Ryan Leaf declined to comment on specific allegations. "I remember Josh," Leaf said in a statement. "As I recall, he was an old hometown friend of one or two of my teammates and we all hung out a bit. I don't remember him aspiring to be an agent. We were all about the same age and we were interested in having a good time more than anything else."
- R. Jay Soward confirmed receiving money from Luchs.
- Gary Wichard's lawyer, Howard Silber, said his client declined to comment.

• Mel Kiper denied that it was prearranged for him to call during the Willie Howard meeting or any other. "I would never have called Gary, but Gary and other agents often call me and ask me to speak to players," said Kiper. "Gary is my friend, but I do that all the time for many different agents. I give players my opinion of them as football players. But I would never promote Gary or any other agent to a player." As for the belief among some agents that he favors Wichard's clients, Kiper said, "My player ratings are not related to my relationship with Gary or any other agent. There are many examples of players Gary represented who I have not ranked highly." (Howard confirmed to SI Luchs's account of Kiper's calling during Howard's meeting with Luchs and Wichard.)

• John Blake's lawyer, William H. Beaver II, said his client declined to comment.

• Kenyon Coleman declined to comment.

• Jeremy Shockey did not respond to messages left through the Saints or his agent, Drew Rosenhaus.

• Through a New York Jets spokesperson, Santonio Holmes denied taking money from any agent while in college or telling Luchs and Steve Feldman that he had taken money. Feldman confirmed to SI that Holmes told him and Luchs that an agent was paying him.