

INTERVIEW

By Mark Gallagher

He still hears it. Almost every day. Leigh Steinberg might be in an airport or out for a meal when a stranger will come up to him and say, or ask him to say, those famous four words.

‘No, I don’t mind it,’ Steinberg smiles about his association with one of Hollywood’s most recognisable catchphrases.

‘It has been 27 years since the movie came out and the fact that it still plays somewhere around the world on television almost every day means that it is still resonating with people. So, no, I quite enjoy people coming up to me on an airport or when I’m out for dinner and saying those four words – Show Me the Money!’

During nearly 50 years as a sports agent, Steinberg has represented some of the biggest names in American sport – and continues to do so, Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, the current NFL superstar, is one of his current clients. He has represented 12 members of the NFL hall of fame, some of the most famous players in baseball, as well as boxers like Lennox Lewis and Oscar de la Hoya. He has battled back from bankruptcy and alcoholism and yet, he remains most known for being the real-life inspiration for the 1996 smash hit Jerry Maguire.

‘It’s not a biographical film, but it certainly elevated my profile,’ Steinberg explains over zoom from his home in California on the eve of the NFL season. ‘I’ve represented 64 first-round draft picks and we have 12 players in the Hall of Fame, but nothing elevated my profile like Jerry Maguire. My clients use lines from the movie to tease me all the time. [Miami Dolphins quarterback] Tua Tagovailoa told me that he watched the movie and went home and said, “Well, that makes my decision about an agent”.’

In 1993, Steinberg took a phone call from the filmmaker Cameron Crowe, who had an idea in the back of his head.

‘He asked me if he could follow me wherever I went because he wanted to do a movie that would centre on a sports agent,’ Steinberg recalls. ‘So, he went to league meetings, the NFL draft, he went regular season games with me and Super Bowl parties and I told him stories, lots and lots of stories.’

‘Cameron went off and wrote the script and as his technical adviser, my role was to vet it, make sure it made sense to real sports fans, that people sounded right and the phraseology was correct.’

That script spawned several popular movie quotations from ‘You complete me,’ ‘Help me, help you,’ ‘The key to this business is personal relationships,’ ‘You had me at hello’ – but none made the mark like the four words Steinberg still hears almost every day.

As he remembers it, the line came from a meeting he had with one his clients, safety Tim McDonald, in a California hotel room for which Crowe was present. ‘The director asked McDonald, a free agent at the time, what he was looking for in his new team.

‘I’m looking for a team to show me some respect. I’m looking for a team to show me a big contract. I’m looking for a team to show me some money!’ McDonald appar-



MAJOR CLIENT: Leigh Steinberg (left) and the Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes

sought by others in Hollywood. He worked with Oliver Stone as a script consultant for the acclaimed Any Given Sunday, starring Al Pacino, and with Kevin Costner on baseball movie For the Love of The Game.

‘It has been fun as a sideline,’ the 75-year-old smiles.

But his primary role for the past five decades has been representing athletes, particularly NFL players.

BATTLING REAGAN

Steinberg fell into the life of a sports agent. Having graduated with a law degree from University of California, Berkeley, he had shared a dorm with Steve Bartkowski, the star quarterback of the university’s football team.

‘In 1975, Bart was the first player picked in the first round of the NFL draft.

‘There wasn’t really sports agencies back then, players usually represented themselves or were represented by their parents.

Steve asked me to represent him and here I was, with little legal experience and never having practised law and I have the first pick in the NFL draft. And we got the largest rookie contract in NFL history at the time when he signed with the Atlanta Falcons,’ Steinberg recalls. Going from laid-back California to Atlanta was also a bit of an eye-opener for the two friends.

‘We were coming from Berkeley, which was pretty laid back when it came to sports, and we touch down in Atlanta, and their lights flashing, there is this huge crowd out to see Steve being cordoned off by police and the first thing we heard was: “We interrupt the Johnny Carson Show to bring you a special news bulletin, Steve Bartkowski and Leigh Steinberg have just arrived at the Atlanta Airport. We switch you live for the interview.”

‘It was really the first time that I saw how athletes were venerated and worshipped in communities across the country.’

The deal Steinberg struck for Bartkowski made his name and ensured his later client list would include Warren Moon, Troy Aikman, De la Hoya and Mahomes.

And he credits it with being student president of Berkeley during the 1960s – a tumultuous time on

the campuses of America – and having to negotiate with then-Californian Governor Ronald Reagan.

‘Ronald Reagan was the Governor when I was Student Body President of Berkeley and at the time, we were on the streets, protesting against the war in Vietnam. Every time we would protest, he would crack down on us. So basically, I learnt all I needed to know about the art of negotiation from talking and interacting with Governor and later President Reagan. Team owners and general managers were far easier after that, at least they didn’t send the police in on you,’ he laughs.

CHANGING TIMES

Initially, being schooled in negotiating with a heavy-handed Governor allowed him to thrive in the boardrooms of the NFL, NBA and MLB. But social media has also altered the parameters of an athlete’s marketability.

‘The advent of social media means you have players, even in high school, trying to brand themselves. The new currency for doing endorsements is how many followers someone has on tiktok, how many followers on Instagram and the rest of it and teams at the college level are using this in their

recruitment.

‘And it has changed my role in the sense that I need to master those forms of social media. So, it is becoming all about your number of followers, the visuals, and being able to project an attractive image.’

What has also changed in the last few decades has been how the behemoth – both sporting and corporate – of the NFL has overshadowed everything else in America.

It dominates the national discourse and tends to be the only singular unifying aspect of life in what is becoming an increasingly polarised country.

‘The NFL captivates America like no sport ever, or no other form of entertainment. Last year, in the top 100 most-watched shows on television here, 93 were NFL games. And they were all but one of the top 20.

‘People’s whole week is built around game-day. And it seems to be getting more popular. When I was starting out in 1975, a team in the NFL received \$2m from their national television contract.

‘With the latest deal signed, teams get \$250m (£226m) annually and that isn’t going to come down.

‘And with the explosion of fantasy and gambling and all these other revenue streams, they are

just going to generate more and more money,’ Steinberg added. He feels the way American Football has embraced gambling might be the biggest change he has seen – and not necessarily for the better.

The relationship was franked last year when the Chiefs beat the San Francisco 49ers in the Super Bowl in Las Vegas.

‘I had to pinch myself. This was a city that was never going to have a professional sports team and now they have a hockey team and a football team and they have hosted the Super Bowl,’ he says.

‘For a long time here in America, there was this impregnable wall between gambling and professional sports but that has been broken now and among other things, I think it is going to produce a whole slew of gambling addicts who can’t control the habit.

‘And nobody has anticipated that,’ he says.



PALS: Arnold Schwarzenegger (left) and Steinberg

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Nevertheless, the NFL will continue to captivate America, especially this season as Mahomes tries to lead Kansas City to an unprecedented third Super Bowl title in a row.

Like all his clients, the superstar quarterback engages in a lot of philanthropic work. Over the years, it’s reckoned that Steinberg’s athletes raised more than \$4bn (for good causes.

‘The thrust of what we do is to find those special athletes who are willing to serve as role models. Go back to their roots, their high school, and set up a scholarship fund or set up a charitable foundation with community leaders. [Hall of Fame quarterback] Warren Moon has sent hundreds of kids through college with scholarships through his Crescent Moon Foundation. Troy Aikman has enriched children’s hospitals. We have athletes working on causes from

dyslexia to endangered species. They pick something near and dear to them and go ahead and make a difference.’

Perhaps the athlete of his who has made the biggest difference is Warrick Dunn, a former Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Atlanta Falcons running back, whose charity foundation provides assistance for single-parent families in Atlanta, Tampa and Baton Rouge – Dunn’s hometown – to buy a home.

‘The foundation recently celebrated having helped its 200th single mother and her family into their first home. And that is what really leaving a legacy is all about, and means much more than all the glory and the Super Bowl rings.’

Steinberg feels that the most important thing in his role is to be able to listen. Just to discover what the athlete needs. Or, as Jerry Maguire might say, ‘the key is personal relationships.’

For almost five decades, this Californian has been cultivating those personal relationships and helping them to change lives.

‘Steve Bartkowski probably saved me from a life of legal drudgery,’ Steinberg suggests.

And set him on the path that helped create one of the most quotable four words in movie history.

SHOW ME THE MONEY!

The real-life Jerry Maguire lifts lid on five decades as a top sports agent



REVVED UP: Patrick Mahomes (main) before the season opener last weekend and (above) Tom Cruise as Jerry Maguire

Irish on the up despite T20 defeat

By Ger Siggins

IT’S been an excellent month for Ireland’s women cricketers, even if they did go down to a 67-run defeat to England in the Certá series at Clontarf yesterday.

They have notched up four victories against two of the world’s leading sides, to add to recent wins over South Africa, Australia and Pakistan. And Ed Joyce can be happy that his charges have battled hard at times, standing toe-to-toe with the very best.

That they will not be at the T20 World Cup in Bangladesh next month is a shame, but the rebuilding process is under way and bearing instant fruit.

Nowhere more than in the spin department, now overseen by ex-Ireland bowler James Cameron-Dow, where two 18-year-olds have had a string of excellent displays.

Slow left-armer Aimee Maguire got the headlines on Wednesday with a brilliant 5-21 in the ODI win over England, while yesterday



PROMISING: Aimee Maguire

there wasn’t a wafer between her and off-spinner Freya Sargent with identical four overs analyses of 3-30.

Maguire trots in like a dressage pony while Sargent is feistier, threatening Mankads, and varying her pace to good effect.

Ireland’s fielding needs work but the exception was Orla Prendergast, who had been taken apart by Bryony Smith’s five fours in her second over, a dropped catch coming off the other delivery.

The Pembroke all-rounder was livid and became a catch-magnet, holding three crackers in front of the delighted pavilion crowd.

Smith went for 58 off 30 balls, England’s second fastest T20 fifty but hopes of 200+ were thwarted when Sargent and Jane Maguire held their nerve and England collapsed from 170-5 to 176 all out.

In Ireland’s reply Prendergast’s 52 off 34 balls was the only score over two by a top seven batter. She hit eight delightful fours and only for a hapless run-out call might have been there till the end. Ireland struggled to 109 before they were dismissed in the 19th over.

The second T20 takes place today at 2.45, again live on Virgin Media 3.