



The idolmaker

A decade after sports agent Ira Rainess guided Cal Ripken Jr. through the media crush of 1995, he's helping Ray Lewis become his own marketing icon. By Foster Klug

Cal Ripken Jr. saved baseball. Ira Rainess saved Cal Ripken Jr. from baseball—and the media.

In the summer of 1995, the game was reeling from a players' strike that had ruined the previous season, wiping out the World Series and leaving droves of fans feeling betrayed.

And then along came Ripken, and the streak.

For most of that dramatic season, the Orioles' soft-spoken shortstop stalked a

record many experts considered unbreakable: Lou Gehrig's 2,130 consecutive games streak. Yet for Ripken, taking his position in the infield day after day was the easy part. What threatened to swamp the Iron Man was the worldwide spotlight, with reporters clamoring for interviews and more than a hundred people a month pitching products, charities, and business ventures.

It was clear that baseball's savior needed a hero of his own.

That was the job of Ira Rainess, the 28-year-old Baltimore sports attorney who managed Ripken's business interests. For that season, Cal Ripken was marketing gold, the most sought after athlete in the country. And to get to Ripken, you had to go through Rainess. It was the kind of opportunity that comes along maybe once in an agent's career, the kind of chance that either makes or breaks a reputation.

It made Ira Rainess.

"It really was a dream come true. To this day, I still think about how lucky and fortunate I was," says Rainess, now 37. "But at the same time, it's hard. You become the bad guy, by design. You want to try to make people happy, but your client's interest is always paramount. There's an image you're trying to maintain. Always the image."

FOR THE SPORTS AGENT GUIDING AN athlete's career, image—and its careful maintenance, packaging, and sale—is everything. Image trumps a good smile, a sunny personality, lavish charitable works, even the glories of the playing field.

The manipulation of image—the branding of a player—is how an agent defines his success. And, by most accounts, the brands Ira Rainess markets are among the most successful in the business.

"What he has done is find the essence of the people he represents and then find ways to protect and promote that image," says Brian Murphy, the former owner and editor of *The Sports Marketing Letter*. "Protection is as important as promotion, because the way that Cal Ripken is seen by his fan base, that is his fortune, that is his equity, and it can never be squandered. It should be reinvested and reinforced by the kinds of things that he's chosen to participate in."

Besides guiding Ripken through one of the most magical, and profitable, seasons in baseball history, Rainess is also the man behind the extraordinary marketing comeback of Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis, who emerged from the specter of murder charges to become the face of advertising campaigns for EA Sports, Reebok, and NFL Proline.

"The people he has worked for, and their successes, speak louder than being known as the super-agent of super-agents," says Paul Swangard, managing director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon. "He's got a proven track record of not only creating value for his clients fiscally, but he can take an athlete in different stages of their career and, in one case [Lewis], reinvent him after a very bad piece of press, and in another, take advantage of one of the most beautiful moments in baseball history, which he did with Cal."

Rainess is also acknowledged as one of only a handful of agents who can successfully negotiate the blockbuster contracts and the lucrative endorsement deals that form the bulk of an athlete's income.



"When you're on top, people are always gunning for you," says another sports marketer of Rainess.

"There are very few people who can do that, and do it as well as Ira does," says Reed Bergman, the former representative for New York Yankees third-basemen Alex Rodriguez and the current head of Playbook, Inc., a sports marketing firm. "It makes him unique in the business."

The attention hasn't all been positive. By the end of 1995, Rainess was one of the most famous—some would say infamous—people in the business.

"When he was working with Cal, there were people who were jealous, people who thought they should have that job. The same is true with Lewis," says Bob Leffler, the former marketing director for the Baltimore Colts who now runs a successful sports advertising firm. "Some people like him and some don't. He was the gatekeeper, and if you were stuck in 'Ira Country' and couldn't get to Cal, you might not like Ira so much."

Rainess says the mixed image among competitors and businesses he works with goes with the territory. "When you tell someone that their project doesn't fit your client's image, they're never going to be happy."

"In my business, there are people who love you and people who hate you. It's a very competitive business. There are plenty of people around who will tell your guys [clients] that they'll spend time with them.

"When you do a good enough job, you don't have to worry about losing your clients or about what people think."

Bergman, the fellow sports marketer, says: "This is a highly charged, competitive

environment we're working in, and there's going to be jealousy whenever there's a limited supply of talent and you're controlling a marquee player."

FOR THE RECORD, RAINESS LOOKS (AND behaves) very little like the man who gave a face to sports agents: Tom Cruise, whose turn as Jerry Maguire in 1996 gave many people their first glimpse into the agent's world (more on that later).

Rainess is taller, for one thing, with a Baltimore accent that comes out when ordering a cheeseburger during a recent interview at a Baltimore County steakhouse near his home.

He loves to read, mostly books about history. His favorites are two volumes of Winston Churchill's war memoirs: *The Gathering Storm* and *Their Finest Hour*. And like the rest of America, he's currently reading *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown.

He's also an avid poker player, something he says he gets to do a couple of times a year, including last year's World Series of Poker and a recent tournament in the Bahamas.

He was raised by his mother in Pikesville, where she works as an administrator at the Chizuk Amuno Synagogue. He graduated from Pikesville High School and then went to the University of Maryland where he got a degree in business and management in 1989.

Rainess got his first big break during an internship with legendary Baltimore attorney Ron Shapiro (Cal's agent), while

