



# 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



still at the University of Baltimore School of Law.

Now, back to Rainess and Tom Cruise: Do an Internet search of Rainess' name, and you'll see him mentioned time and again as Cruise's consultant for *Jerry Maguire*.

It's not true. Rainess advised John Leguizamo, who played a slick agent in the movie *The Fan*—Leguizamo expressed thanks in a scene in which he yells into his cell phone during a tense negotiation, "Come on, Ira!" Still, the *Jerry Maguire* myth has persisted.

Recently, Rainess has made a few other forays into the entertainment world: He lasted longer than half the field at last year's World Series of Poker in Las Vegas; he briefly advised Baltimore R&B crooner Mario (even getting a shout-out in the liner notes to the singer's album); and, curiously, he helped Jason Alexander, the childhood friend who was married to Britney Spears for 55 hours last year, deal with a brief but intense bout of media attention.

But for Rainess, his most important job is maintaining a relationship with his clients: 15 to 20 baseball players, mostly young, high-round draft picks—and Ray Lewis. His devotion equates to about 200 days a year on the road, meeting his clients in restaurants and hotel rooms, ballparks and parents' homes. "It's hard to balance a personal life," says Rainess, who is divorced and currently single. "When the phone rings late at night after games and you have to drop everything you're doing or cancel any special weekend plans when something comes up, it's not easy."

Still, the dedication is paying off; a typical fee for a sports agent is about three percent of a contract and 20 to 25 percent of an endorsement deal, both of which Rainess negotiates for his clients. In 2001, Rainess helped engineer what was one of the largest signing bonuses for a high school pitcher, a \$4.2 million deal between Anne Arundel County's Gavin Floyd and the Philadelphia Phillies.

AFTER RIPKEN RETIRED IN 2001, HE AND Rainess amicably parted ways, and Rainess set up his own agency. That's the simple description of what happened, though another version (that Cal fired Rainess) continues to circulate around town. Leffler, who helped write the press release for Rainess when he and Ripken moved on, says that it was "a natural parting of the ways. It was a very natural change of business."

"Cal was moving from a baseball player who did endorsements," says Leffler, "to a cottage industry. It was a whole different bag of tricks, which isn't to say that Ira couldn't have helped him. [Ira] just wanted to do other things. What Ira needed to do for Cal was done. Cal needed employees, as opposed to a single representative."

Leffler said that because Ripken was Rainess's one major client, and such a big client, "these [rumors] were natural things that people were going to say. It happens all the time in this business."

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WITHIN A YEAR OF LEAVING RIPKEN, Rainess was working with a man who has made one of the most remarkable marketing comebacks in sports: Ray Lewis.

When Rainess first met the fiery linebacker in 2002, Lewis was as far from Ripken's lofty perch as an athlete can get, image-wise. Originally charged with the murder of two men outside an Atlanta club after the January 2000 Super Bowl, Lewis eventually pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of obstruction of justice. But even after leading the Ravens to a Super Bowl win (and landing the MVP award) the next year, television sports shows were still running video of Lewis in handcuffs and a prison jumpsuit. And even though the prosecutors dropped the murder charges, the NFL welcomed him back with a \$250,000 fine for "detrimental conduct" that wasn't doing much for Lewis's tattered image.

But Rainess saw something in Lewis, and together they've rebuilt the linebacker's image, relentlessly marketing the Ray Lewis who hands out turkeys at Thanksgiving to poor kids in inner city Baltimore; the Ray Lewis who plays through injury; the Ray Lewis who's twice been named Defensive Player of the Year.

It's been a near total victory, so much so that the Ravens have reproduced Lewis's fierce scowl on enormous "Ravenstown" billboards and banners

that hype the team around Baltimore. To put an exclamation point on the resurrection of his name and reputation, Lewis recently opened a popular new restaurant, Ray Lewis' Full Moon BBQ, in Canton (Rainess was involved in only the planning stages of that enterprise).

The success has surprised many. "Ray was looked at as a tarnished individual for corporations, and now he seems to have reinvented himself to a degree pundits wouldn't have thought possible a few years ago," Swangard, the sports marketing expert, says. "Rainess's ability to make Ray believe that he's got something to market, despite the history, is maybe as big an asset as anything else."


Rainess gives most of the credit to Lewis: "He has such a big heart, and people see it on the field. If there's anything I do, it's to help people get to know him a little off the field."

YOU CAN HEAR HIS PRIDE AS RAINESS talks about his other clients, ones who have hit it big or come back from injuries, or finally broken into the majors. When Jason Grilli, a 28-year-old former fourth overall pick, returned to the major leagues after spending two years recovering from a devastating injury, Rainess was standing by Grilli's family for his home pitching debut.

"We have a friendship and I have a loyalty to him that comes from him being there for me, from him working pro bono when I was struggling, from him caring for me when others didn't," says Grilli, who recently signed with the Detroit Tigers. "It goes way beyond the typical player-agent relationship."

Still, not everyone likes Rainess, and he knows it. As Bergman, the fellow sports-marketer, says: "When you're on top, people are always gunning for you, and Ira has been one of the best for a long time."

But Rainess believes he's found the key to success in an often cutthroat business: find talented players who also happen to be good people; "I'm just allowing people to get to know who a player is and showing all the good things they do. It's that simple—if the person is authentic."

He pauses, then grins, in what turns out to be a pretty good impersonation of the fictional agent Tom Cruise made famous. "If they're not, then it's a whole different story." 

*Foster Klug is a reporter for the Associated Press. This is his first story for Baltimore.*



As Seen in *Baltimore* magazine June 2005 issue.

Foster Klug "Ira in person was very friendly and helpful with details about his life and career," says another first-timer, Foster Klug, about sports agent Ira Rainess. "Which surprised me, given his reputation as a tenacious protector of his clients' privacy and image.




"I'd heard the rumors all over the internet about him being the model for *Jerry Maguire*, about him being unyielding when it came to protecting his clients, and so I went into our interview expecting a little of that slick agent stereotype. But he was friendly and earnest even."

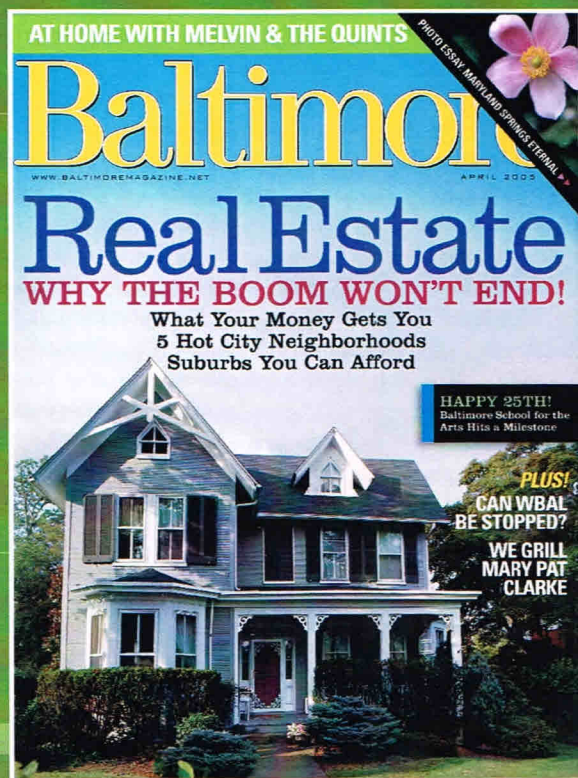
Good sport

I read with interest the article about Ira Rainess ("The Idolmaker," April). I would like the readers of *Baltimore* magazine to know about another side of Ira.

Diane M. Geppi-Aikens was Loyola College in Maryland's Head Women's Lacrosse Coach. She was not a professional athlete as were Cal Ripken Jr., Ray Lewis, or the other athletes Ira represents. But she was an inspirational leader among college athletes. Ira knew Diane and became aware that Warner Books was interested in producing an inspirational book about her. He negotiated, pro bono, the book *Lucky Every Day*, written by local author Chip Silverman.

Although Diane passed away in June of 2003, her legacy continues today because Ira unselfishly took the time to make this book possible.

 John A. Geppi Jr.  
Baltimore  
The writer is the father of  
Diane Geppi-Aikens.



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