

Blue grows into NFL

Sports agency adds Segal firm to tennis, hoops presence

BY LIZ MULLEN

STAFF WRITER

Blue Equity, which launched a sports agency business last year by buying the former SFX tennis, events and television divisions, has acquired the firm of top NFL player agent Joel Segal, who counts Reggie Bush and Michael Vick among his clients.

The acquisition will bring 50 NFL player clients to Louisville, Ky.-based Blue Equity and will instantly mark the firm as a major

player in representing athletes in the most popular sport in America. Segal's other clients include NFL quarterbacks Jason Campbell and Tarvaris Jackson, rookie standout Marques Colston, and Pro Bowlers DeAngelo Hall, Muhsin Muhammad, Darren Sharper and Will Smith. In last month's NFL draft, Segal represented three first-round selections — Levi Brown (No. 5), LaRon Landry (No. 6) and Craig Davis (No. 30) — and was the only agent to represent two top-10 picks.

Jonathan Blue, chairman and managing director of Blue Equity, would not provide financial terms of the deal, except to say that it was an acquisition of Segal's company, New York-based Worldwide Football, and that Segal had a long-term employment agreement. Segal, who along with CAA Sports agents Tom Condon and Ben Dogra and independent agent Drew Rosenhaus is considered one of the most powerful football agents in the country, will become

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president of Blue Equity's football division.

"Joel is one of the premier agents in the entire sport," Blue said, adding that he was "not buying client lists," but rather was adding people who are "the right fit" to build Blue Equity's sports division into a multisport marketing company that can take advantage of what Blue predicts to be enormous growth in the sports business.

"Football's popularity in this country, in the last five years, has exploded," Blue said. "We just have to be there. It's the No. 1 dominant sport in the country based on fan support and economics, and we think we found the perfect person to be added to our platform in that sport."

Segal said he has met with other companies interested in acquiring his firm in the last few years. "You go with your gut and what you think is a perfect fit," Segal said. "I think that when I met Jonathan, his

plan, his credibility in the business world, and his enthusiasm, all combined, seemed like the right fit at the right time."

Last year, Blue Equity jumped into the agency business by acquiring the SFX tennis, media and events businesses, led by sports pioneer Donald Dell and tennis agent Ken Meyerson. Shortly after that, the company hired veteran basketball and football agent Bill Strickland. Strickland said he was part of the review process for the acquisition of Segal's business and that it will allow him to concentrate on his preferred sport of basketball.

Blue said he is in discussions about additional acquisitions and could announce another deal as soon as this week. Blue said he is interested in acquiring sports properties, including events, as well as agents, and that Blue Equity could expand into baseball, hockey and golf.

The deal to acquire Segal's company signals that the run on agent firms, which

began last year with major acquisitions by Wasserman Media Group and Creative Artists Agency, is not over. And Blue Equity, which has not received the same industry-wide attention as WMG and CAA Sports, may very well be a serious player.

In addition to the purchase of Segal's business, there has been a buzz about Blue Equity in agent circles of late, as the fledgling firm has had a surprisingly strong recruiting season prior to next month's NBA draft, signing University of Florida and NCAA Championship star players Joakim Noah and Corey Brewer.

Blue Equity now represents stars in multiple sports, including top American tennis players Andy Roddick and the Bryan brothers, top women's tennis player Justine Henin, NBA All-Star Rasheed Wallace and now NFL stars Vick and Bush.

Dell, who serves as president of tennis, media and events, said he and Strickland were both consulted on the acquisition of

Segal's business and that both liked Segal and approved of the deal.

"[Segal] is an experienced veteran, but a relatively young guy," Dell said. "I think that Jonathan Blue is really quite determined to build this thing into major proportions. I think what he is trying to build is a multipurpose, multisport marketing company. He wants to be competitive with all of them, from IMG to Octagon to Wasserman Media Group."

Blue, 40, was ranked No. 18 on a list of most powerful people in the city by Louisville magazine last year. In addition to sports, Blue Equity has holdings in publishing, real estate and financial services. Last year Blue Equity sold an 80 percent stake in its Spanish language telephone directory business, which publishes the Enlace Spanish Yellow Pages, to Telmex, a telephone company owned by billionaire Carlos Slim Helú, one of the richest men in the world.