

Super sports agent Leigh Steinberg talks to ASU Law students about success in the business

The inspiration behind ‘Jerry Maguire’ spoke about his career — and setbacks — for students in ASU’s sports law and business program

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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Leigh Steinberg is considered one of the most powerful sports agents in history.

He has negotiated record-setting contracts for elite NFL quarterbacks, represented hundreds of professional athletes and hosted annual Super Bowl parties for 5,000 of his closest friends.

His career even inspired the film “Jerry Maguire” and the iconic line, “Show me the money.”

But when the featured guest for this year's [Selig Speaker Series](#) spoke on April 2 at Arizona State University's [Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law](#), he discussed more meaningful motives for his work than making money.

When choosing who to represent, Steinberg said it was important that their values aligned.

“I knew that athletes were held in veneration in so many communities across the country and I thought, if athletes could be role models then we could root them in the community and they could do a lot of good for the world,” he said.

The event was hosted by ASU’s [Allan “Bud” Selig Sports Law and Business, or MSLB, program](#), a graduate degree designed for legal careers in the sports industry.

In an hourlong conversation with [Aaron Hernandez](#), executive director of the MSLB program, Steinberg shared advice for aspiring agents, offered insights on negotiating contracts, and reflected on his successes, struggles and sobriety.

Much of the discussion was drawn from his latest book, “The Comeback: A Playbook for Turning Life’s Setbacks into Victories,” which he signed after the talk.

The start of his success

Hernandez kicked off the conversation by asking Steinberg about his earlier life and upbringing.

Steinberg was raised in Los Angeles and his path to success began with his parents.

“I was brought up with two core values: treasure relationships, especially family, and try to make a meaningful difference in society in a powerful way,” he said. “Try to heal pain and help people who can’t help themselves.”

He attended the University of California, Berkeley, in the '60s and became the student body president during a period of social upheaval. He said that every time the students demonstrated, Ronald Reagan, who was governor of California at the time, would crack down.

“I learned everything I needed to learn about the art of negotiating from dealing with Reagan,” Steinberg said.

Hernandez asked Steinberg how he broke into such a competitive field, and what it takes to succeed today.

Steinberg said his break came unexpectedly when he was a counselor for the dorm where the freshman football team resided. One of the students was quarterback Steve Bartkowski, the No. 1 pick in the 1975 NFL draft.

“We were asked to represent him at a time when sports agents were barely recognized,” he said.

Steinberg negotiated what became the largest rookie contract in NFL history.

“That was 52 years ago,” he said.

Clients, contracts and collaboration

Over the decades, Steinberg has represented more than 300 athletes, including Hall of Fame quarterbacks and dozens of first-round draft picks.

But he told the ASU audience the job was never about just about securing the biggest deal.

“I don't agree that the only thing you do with an athlete is stack dollars in their bank account,” he said. “You have to take a holistic viewpoint of who this young person is and who they become.”

For aspiring agents in the room, Steinberg offered practical advice.

“Don’t quit your day job,” he said.

Breaking into a sports agency, he explained, requires persistence, networking and creativity. He encouraged students to volunteer, build connections within athletic departments and establish themselves as knowledgeable voices in the industry.

“Create content,” he said. “Build your reputation.”

Above all, he stressed the importance of listening.

“You have to understand the person across the table,” he said. “See the world the way they see it.”

Despite having a reputation for record-setting deals, Steinberg said he never adhered to aggressive approaches in negotiations.

“You may be dealing with the same general manager for 30 years,” he said. “Everything is about trust.”

Instead of confrontation, he focuses on collaboration.

“Craft a win-win scenario,” he said. “Don’t push someone into a corner.”

Representation in Hollywood

Steinberg talked about being approached by writer and director Cameron Crowe for the film “Jerry Maguire” starring Tom Cruise. The movie explores the idea of personal connections being more important than material success.

Steinberg said that the filmmaker followed him to the NFL draft, the 1996 Super Bowl (held at Mountain America Stadium, formerly Sun Devil Stadium, in Tempe), press conferences and more to gather material for the movie.

And although it has been 30 years since the film came out, Steinberg says he is still approached by people in airports or when he’s out to dinner with the famous line — “Show me the money.”

“Was that something that you really said?” Hernandez asked.

“No, no, no,” Steinberg said. “I would say ‘show me the victory’ or ‘show me respect,’ but never show me the money.”

Struggles and setbacks

For all his success, Steinberg did not shy away from discussing the most difficult period of his life. After the death of his father and learning that his two sons faced near blindness, he turned to alcohol.

“I felt like I couldn’t protect the people I loved,” he said.

At his lowest point, he lost his business, his home and his sense of direction.

“My only coherent thought was, where can I find more vodka?”

He eventually entered a 12-step program and rebuilt his life. When he shared that he has more than 16 years of sobriety, he received an enthusiastic applause from the audience.

“My comeback is not that I did the biggest contract of all time for Patrick Mahomes,” he said. “My comeback is being a good father and maintaining sobriety. My career is just a cherry on the top.”

Steinberg encouraged students to develop resilience and to recognize that setbacks are part of any meaningful path.

“We all have dreams in life that get shattered. We all have expectations and unexpected setbacks,” he said. “The question is not whether life knocked you down ... but can you get back up and can you visualize the light at the end of the tunnel?”

A final message

Before leaving the stage, Steinberg urged students to step back and take inventory of their lives.

“Understand what matters to you,” he said. “What are your values? Is it economic gain? ... Is it family? Is it a geographical location?”

Steinberg said there are certain junctures in life that give you the opportunity to evaluate where you are, whether you are 20 or 50 or older.

“In the worst moments, you've got the potential to change things,” he said. “And be more fulfilled in life.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Sports agent Leigh Steinberg (left) speaks with Aaron Hernandez, assistant dean of ASU Law's sports law and business program, for the Selig Speaker Series held on April 2 at the Beus Center For Law and Society on the downtown Phoenix campus. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University

Text image(s)



Sports agent Leigh Steinberg (left) was the inspiration for the character Jerry Maguire from the 1996 film. He talked to ASU sports law and business students about the industry and how it was represented in the movie. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University