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Ripken's Business Interests Have a Lot of Range

By Thomas Heath
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Cal Ripken Jr. spent 21 years with the Baltimore Orioles, playing in a record 2,632 consecutive games and earning a one-of-a-kind reputation for teamwork, determination and work ethic. Now he is taking the same approach to business, putting his name on products ranging from instructional CDs to a 1 million-member baseball league to a 6,000-seat minor league baseball stadium.

While most former athletes spend their retirement fishing, golfing and tending to their investments, Ripken is building a conglomerate designed to make him one of the game's most visible ambassadors while bringing him more wealth than he earned at the height of his playing career.

"He is leveraging his reputation to the hilt," said Bob Williams of Burns Sports Celebrity Service Inc. "When you have an all-American image based on honesty, integrity, hard work, overcoming adversity and winning, it's the kind of image that lends itself toward business."

Although he has become one of the game's foremost boosters without the help of Major League Baseball, a return to it is a possibility because he is being courted by bidders to become part of the Washington Nationals' ownership or management groups. Since his retirement, he has declined opportunities to align with either Northern Virginia or D.C. groups.

"I have said consistently that if someone wants to speak to me about any opportunity I would be open to listening," Ripken, 44, said. "Right now, I am very satisfied and challenged by our business. However, my entire life has been in baseball and over the last 20-plus years, I have developed philosophies and ideas that I would like to implement. While I believe it is important for me to maintain a home base for my wife and kids, I would be interested in a position that would allow me to impact an organization. If that opportunity presents itself, I will look at it and analyze it at that time."

The Cal Ripken "brand" is on an \$18 million minor league baseball stadium, home to the Ripken-owned Aberdeen, Md., IronBirds, a Class A affiliate of the Baltimore Orioles that plays in the New York-Penn League. Thousands of kids play tournaments each summer or attend the Cal Ripken Experience summer camps and clinics at the 40-acre Cal Ripken campus, which adjoins the minor league stadium.

There's a Cal Ripken Baseball league with 1 million players and an annual Cal Ripken World Series; a Cal Ripken stadium design and market research firm and Cal Ripken speeches starting at \$50,000. There's a new Cal Ripken weekly show on XM Satellite Radio, a CD and book titled, "Play Baseball the Ripken Way."

There aren't many athletes who could pull it off.

Advertisement

The advertisement is a vertical banner. At the top, the word "True" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font on an orange background, with a trademark symbol. Below it, the tagline "LIVE. LOVE. LEARN.™" is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. The main image shows a man and a woman in a close embrace, with the man's hands on the woman's waist. The background is a blue grid pattern. At the bottom of the image, the text "GET A FRESH LOOK ON LOVE" is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below this, a blue button with white text says "FIND LOVE NOW" and has small white arrows on either side.

"Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Magic Johnson and now Cal Ripken is the latest to leverage his name to drive the breadth of his business interests," said David M. Carter, a professor at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business. "But he has to be mindful of the trade-off between quality and quantity of the exposure. Ripken has been smart to temper his business opportunities with good works, such as the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation, which positions him as not a baseball spokesman but as someone who cares about the community."

Agent Greg Clifton, who represents several players including Tom Glavine, B.J. Surhoff and Mark Mulder, said Ripken's post-career businesses show the same preparation that Ripken put into his game: "This is not something he did in a weekend," Clifton said.

The Ripken Baseball Inc. holding company evolved out of the need to handle the demands for endorsements, autographs and appearances when Ripken was still playing baseball. The company started with about \$10 million in seed money from its owner, which includes \$6 million for a one-third ownership of the stadium, \$3 million for the IronBirds and another million or so to buy property and build the four junior baseball fields, where Ripken's summer baseball tournaments and clinics are held.

"I created Ripken Baseball Inc. because my needs needed to be managed," said Ripken. "I also wanted to create roads I could travel down after I retired from baseball. The game gave me a platform, and I wanted to use that platform after I left baseball for two things: to be an ambassador for the game and to energize kids."

Ripken Management and Design also advises municipalities and investors on how to build stadiums and start baseball teams; Ripken Professional Baseball operates the IronBirds, a play off Ripken's "ironman" streak; Tufton Professional Baseball operates Ripken Stadium, which earns income from the games as well as from special events such as corporate meetings or weddings. The IronBirds have sold out every game since Ripken bought them in 2002. Ironclad Authentics manages Cal Ripken's licensing of his name and likeness as well as his signature.

And recently Ripken signed a three-book deal with the Penguin Group, including one titled "Parenting Young Baseball Players the Ripken Way." The other books will be motivational, one for adults and one for children.

Ripken's popularity allows him to demand from \$50,000 to \$90,000 for each of the 20 or so speeches he gives every year. The speeches and endorsement deals with sponsors such as Coca-Cola, MBNA America, Radio Shack, Comcast and Nike help shore up the losses from less-developed parts of the business such as the stadium design firm and the camps and clinics. The camps and clinics, including the Ripken Experience, should start posting a profit this year, Ripken said.

There are also the Ripken tournaments, in which teams pay between \$600 and \$700 for a weekend of play at Ripken's four, junior-sized baseball fields modeled after Wrigley Field, Fenway Park, Oriole Park at Camden Yards and the Orioles' former ballpark, Memorial Stadium. Ripken Baseball supplies the equipment and umpires. More than 5,000 youths from around the country have played in Ripken Baseball tournaments so far, with 72 teams participating each major holiday, including Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day.

Cal Ripken Baseball for 12-year-olds and under is part of Babe Ruth League, which renamed its younger division after Ripken. Although Ripken Baseball doesn't receive a fee from Babe Ruth, the league helps keep Ripken's name popular among the 12-year-olds who travel from around the world to play the World Series each year in Aberdeen.

"A lot of these businesses presently depend on my time," Ripken said. Although he won't say how much the conglomerate turns, sources familiar with the business estimate that it earns several million a year on revenues of \$15 million. "Hopefully, they won't be dependent on my time as we progress. Now they may need 80 percent of my time, then we can lower it to 50 percent, then 20 percent and then hopefully they can operate on their own."

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