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Why one of St. Louis' largest law firms grew a sports-focused practice group



BY JAMES DREW
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Shortly after making partner in 2009 at Bryan Cave LLP, Ryan Davis approached then Chairman Don Lents about the need to start a sports and entertainment practice group.

Davis had represented the St. Louis Blues in the deal to rename Savvis Center as Scottrade Center, among other sports engagements. He presented a business plan to Lents, who signed off on the proposal.

"I saw an industry that was rapidly growing and teams that were looking for opportunities to leverage their brands and their relationships with their fan bases," said Davis, whose local clients include the Blues, the St. Louis Cardinals and Stifel Financial Corp. His national practice includes representation of numerous corporate and sports clients, including 31 National Hockey League teams.

"Personally, I saw an area that I loved. I've always been a sports fan," he added.

In the 11 years since its creation, the Sports & Entertainment Group at what's now Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner has grown to over 90 attorneys worldwide. Chambers and Partners, the global

law firm rating agency, has recognized the firm as one of only two law firms worldwide featuring a ranked sports practice in both the U.S. and the U.K.

The latest deal came last week when the law firm represented Acrisure in its acquisition of the naming rights for the Pittsburgh Steelers stadium, formerly known as Heinz Field and now known as Acrisure Stadium. The Michigan-based insurance company did not disclose the financial terms.

"It's an iconic venue and the Steelers are a pre-eminent sports brand," said Davis, managing partner of BCLP's St. Louis office and co-leader of its Sports & Entertainment Group. "And we were proud to represent Acrisure in connection with such a high-profile engagement."

Following its engagement by the Blues on several matters, including a concussion lawsuit filed by more than 100 former players against the NHL, BCLP was hired by all 30 NHL teams at that time in connection with the concussion lawsuit. The federal lawsuit, alleging negligence for dealing with head injuries, was settled in 2018.

"Through the course of that representation, we developed good relationships with all of those teams and many of them have hired us to represent them in several follow-up matters, including both transactional and litigation matters," Davis said.

The growth of BCLP's Sports & Entertainment Group can be traced in part to mergers and acquisitions.

In 2012, Bryan Cave merged with Colorado-based Holme, Roberts & Owen. That brought in Steve Smith and his team. Smith, managing partner of the firm's Colorado Springs office, has negotiated over \$3 billion in naming rights agreements, including SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, and is a critical part of the firm's nationally recognized Olympics and National Governing Body practice.

When Bryan Cave merged in 2018 with Berwin Leighton Paisner, based in London, England, Gra-

ham Shear and his team joined the Sports & Entertainment Group. As a result, BCLP represents several English Premier League and La Liga clubs.

Davis, Smith and Shear are co-leaders of the Sports & Entertainment Group.

Chris Schmidt – a partner in the St. Louis office, global practice group leader of the firm's Class Actions and Mass Torts group and a co-leader of the firm's Sports Litigation practice – is national coordinating counsel for the NCAA's sports injury claims. Together with Davis, he leads the firm's representation of 31 NHL teams.

Rich Young, a partner in the Colorado Springs office and the leader of the firm's Anti-Doping practice, was the principal draftsman of the World Anti-Doping Code and represented the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency in cases against Tour de France winners Lance Armstrong and Floyd Landis.

"We work together very collegially and in a team-oriented, client-first manner," Davis said.

The other factor driving the growth of the team is organic.

"It's extremely easy to staff these matters. People are very excited to get involved. Here in St. Louis, if we have a summer class of 20 in any given year, I'd guess that at least 15 of them will ask me at some point during their summer about our sports practice and how they can get involved in it," Davis said.

As the sports industry continues to grow, Davis expects BCLP's Sports & Entertainment Group to grow alongside it. The firm said it does not disclose what impact the group has had on billing revenue.

"We want our clients – both our traditional sports and entertainment industry clients and our corporate clients involved in the sports and entertainment industry via naming rights, sponsorship and advertising – to know that we have world-class expertise and depth of resources to meet their needs. And we are always looking to add superior talent to our team," he said.