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Manziel finds team outside football mainstream

By [Liz Mullen](#), Staff Writer

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Heisman Trophy winner Johnny Manziel didn't set out to create a new management-team model for NFL players. It just worked out that way.

"It was never anybody's goal in this to try to do something different," said Brad Beckworth, the longtime attorney for the Manziel family and a partner in the Dallas firm Nix Patterson & Roach. "We met with numerous people, from big-name agencies to small-name agencies."

After all those meetings, the result was a surprise: a six-person team that would handle his contract, PR and marketing strategy. The selections he made raised eyebrows in the industry both for the people selected and their tenuous connections to the NFL.

Manziel hired Erik Burkhardt of Select Sports Group to be his playing-contract agent, while Sanderson Strategies Group's Len Sanderson and Denise Michaels will coordinate all communications and the media relations strategy. In addition, Manziel tabbed Maverick Carter of LRMR Management Co., in partnership with Fenway Sports Management, as his marketing agent and lead on all off-the-field business activities. Carter, of course, is the childhood friend and manager of LeBron James, who co-owns LRMR.

The selections run counter to the industry norms that suggest high-profile prospects align with



large talent agencies for all work, although at times they will tab one agency for on-the-field work and a marketing agent or agency for



Manziel's nontraditional pick of LRMR, co-owned by Maverick Carter (below), raised eyebrows in the NFL.

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off-the-field endeavors. The hiring of Carter, who is James' point person for all things off-the-court, drew the most response from NFL circles because Carter comes from a different culture. He is not a "football guy." Rather, he's the confidant of a basketball superstar.

Beckworth dismissed industry talk about the nontraditional management team and said the decisions were rooted in a friendship that Manziel developed with James, a connection that led to his relationship with Carter.

Carter declined to comment for this story, saying, through a spokesperson, that he was not planning on talking publicly about his role with Manziel until after the May draft. Contract agent Burkhardt, likewise, deferred comment until after the draft.

Beckworth reluctantly agreed to an interview on Manziel's management team but made it clear he wouldn't discuss Manziel's business opportunities.

"One of the things I really liked when I met Maverick was, Maverick has a quote; I think he borrowed it from Pat Riley. He says, 'We gotta keep the main thing, the main thing,'" Beckworth said. "And for all of us and for Johnny, the main thing is football."

Beckworth added that a big attraction for Manziel was that LRMR and Fenway Sports Management (part of the Boston Red Sox corporate family) are representing only two athletes: James and Manziel. The ability to concentrate on Manziel was important and attractive to the quarterback, Beckworth said.

"The thing that was remarkable about Fenway and Maverick was not only their experience and creativity and passion, but they both work with winners," Beckworth said. "The Red Sox are winners. LeBron is a winner."

Burkhardt, meanwhile, is very different than Carter, and the reasons for selecting him were different, as well.

A 33-year-old lawyer who was certified to represent NFL players in contract work in 2005, he may be best known as one of the agents that New York Jets quarterback Geno Smith fired last year after Smith was selected in the second round of the draft. But he has represented first-round picks, including Oakland

cornerback D.J. Hayden, the No. 12 pick in the 2013 draft, and Tennessee wide receiver Kendall Wright, the No. 20 selection in the 2012 draft.

Burkhardt went to Texas Tech as an undergrad, and he grew up in Central Texas, not far from where Manziel grew up.

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Manziel and Burkhardt developed a rapport quickly.

“When we conducted interviews, all the [agents] we talked to had good qualities, but it kept coming back to Erik,” Beckworth said.

“He didn’t just know Johnny’s abilities as a guy who came out all of a sudden and was a good college player. He knew about Johnny from when Johnny’s name started surfacing in high school because he just happened to be from an area where all of us watch Texas football very closely.”

The other piece of the team is Sanderson, the Washington, D.C.-based media strategist who has worked with a number of political candidates and political issue campaigns, as well as major corporations and sports entities. His sports clients have included Major League Baseball, the Boston Red Sox, Chicago White Sox, Washington Nationals and Miami Dolphins. He met Manziel through a mutual acquaintance.

Industry observers were surprised by the group Manziel developed, believing he would instead gravitate instead to a larger, more traditional agency. But since the team has been retained, the management group has held meetings and calls with each other and with Manziel.

Sanderson described the communication within the team as being collaborative in nature, adding, “Johnny will be in a meeting, and he will ask everyone, ‘What do you think about this? What do you think about that?’ It’s not like we are in silos.”

Beckworth stressed that Manziel has been in charge of picking the people around him throughout the process.

“Johnny’s not about, ‘Hey, how do I market myself?’” Beckworth said. “He is not about, ‘Oooh, I have a cool name for an agent.’ That is not what he is about.”

Beckworth did not rule out Manziel signing any marketing deals in the next few months, but he said they were in no rush to do so. “This is a kid that is looking at the rest of his life,” Beckworth said.

Manziel has been training for the NFL combine with quarterbacks coach George Whitfield in San Diego and did not attend the Super Bowl or any of the surrounding events. That strategy to avoid media attention was by design, with the focus instead being on working with Whitfield.

Gil Brandt, the former head of player personnel for the Dallas Cowboys and now a writer for NFL.com, expects Manziel to draw more attention at the combine in Indianapolis later this month than Tim Tebow did in 2010 or Andrew Luck did in 2012, when he ended up as the No. 1 overall pick.

“If there was a way to count lines [written about him in the press], Manziel has more lines written about him than Tebow,” Brandt said. “I am not saying he is better than Andrew Luck, but he is more anticipated than Andrew Luck.”

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