

# The Washington Post

Sunday, April 6, 1997

## Giving New Life to Dearly Departed Celebrities

Darci Ross's clients spare her the headaches that afflict a modern-day sports agent. Her clients will never force Ross into damage control by spitting on an umpire or belting a sportswriter. Her clients will never sully their wholesome image by dyeing their hair green or baring their privates.

Of this, Ross can be certain. Because her clients are safely and permanently ensconced in the sports hero firmament. Her clients are dead.

The client list at CMG Worldwide, where Ross is president, includes Jackie Robinson, Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Vince Lombardi, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens and Secretariat, among about 200 sports and entertainment celebrities.

If you're looking for a posthumous endorsement from the likes of Amelia Earhart, Humphrey Bogart, Marlene Dietrich, Malcolm X or Oscar Wilde, you'd better call Ross before you appropriate the celebrity's image.

CMG has cornered the market on dead athletes, signing the families or estates of more than 50 legendary figures ranging from Cy Young to Casey Stengel and on to Thurman Munson.

"That's our niche," Ross said. "You can count on our clients."

For a cut of the receipts ranging from 40 percent to 0 percent, CMG can dramatically boost a family's income from their ancestor's name and image. Until they signed with the agency a decade ago, Babe Ruth's

survivors, for example, saw perhaps \$100 a year from sales of the Sultan of Swat's name. Now, they get annual checks in six figures, Ross said.

Computer photo technology has made possible to bring stars back from the beyond, inserting their faces and voices into TV commercials, pitching beers, cars, even items that hadn't been invented in their day.

"Far and away, the players from another era sell better than the current ones, the Griffey's and the Bonds," said Frank Walsh chief executive of Authentic Images, a San Diego company that makes 24-karat gold trading cards of sports and entertainment figures. "They look better from many years away, even the Babe Ruths of the world, whose behavior we now know all about."

For CMG, it's a \$10 million-a-year business, and the agency has shown it will use copyright and intellectual property laws to protect its clients. A few years ago, CMG took on filmmaker Spike Lee over use of the "X" from Malcolm X's name, eventually making it certain that the slain black leader's widow, Betty Shabazz, won the rights to the T-shirts, hats and other paraphernalia that became popular in the wake of Lee's biographical movie.

While advertisers and merchandisers aren't exactly beating down the door to license the images of Casey Stengel or Oscar Wilde, some previously living celebrities remain in high demand. Lombardi has 11 licensing deals,

including one with Hallmark Cards to use his image on greeting cards, one with a company that puts the former Packers coach on pre-paid phone cards, and the usual array of poser, lithograph and movie contracts.

Among the busiest posthumous packaging deals is that of the great Negro League pitcher, Satchel Paige. Twenty-nine companies have signed to offer Paige products or to use his image in ads. There are Paige plates, ornaments, figurines, boxer shorts, calendars, playing cards and board games. And companies that make beer, computer programs and cereal have contracted to use Paige's picture to boast their sales.

CMG founder Mark Roesler got into the dead celebrity business by marrying the daughter of the publisher of the Saturday Evening Post. Roesler was assigned the task of protecting copyrights on the 300-plus covers that Norman Rockwell had painted for the magazine. That work led to his first real client, when the survivors of Elvis Presley hired Roesler to handle licensing for the late pop singer.

"In the majority of cases, it's a family member who we represent," Ross said. "But it can be whoever handles the estate. For Shoeless Joe Jackson, it's the American Heart Association."

CMG has some living clients too, including former Yankees great Whitey Ford, former Cub Ferguson Jenkins, and football legends Johnny Unitas and Y.A. Tittle.

By Marc Fisher, staff writer