



Brandon Steiner on the cover of his latest book

Brilliant on the Basics

An Interview with
Brandon Steiner, Steiner Sports Memorabilia

EDITORS' NOTE Steiner is a regular on ESPN Radio 1050 on Sunday mornings, along with his co-hosting duties on the YES Network. In 2003, he published his first book, *The Business Playbook: Leadership Lessons from the World of Sports*. He has guest lectured at Harvard Business School, the Kellogg School of Management, Columbia, and Yale. In 2004, Steiner announced the launch of *Yankees-Steiner Collectibles* to provide fans with access to Yankees memorabilia and experiences at Yankee Stadium. He has since cultivated team partnerships with the Dallas Cowboys, the Boston Red Sox, the Chicago Cubs, the University of Notre Dame, The University of Alabama, and Syracuse University. He earned an undergraduate degree in accounting at the Martin J. Whitman School of Management from Syracuse in 1981. He also helped cultivate *Syracuse-Steiner*, a program where Syracuse students play a part in actually running the company. He sits on the board of Camp Sussex as well as PAL. Steiner's latest book is titled *You Gotta Have Balls*.

COMPANY BRIEF Established in 1987, Steiner Sports (www.steinersports.com) has been a leader in sports memorabilia and sports marketing for over two decades. The company has evolved from procuring athletes for endorsements and speaking engagements to the world's foremost provider of authenticated, hand-signed, and game-used sports collectibles. Steiner Sports is owned by Omnicom Group Inc.

Steiner has consistently led in this space. What makes it so special?

For starters, you have to be brilliant on the basics, so in our business, everything has to be real – the difference between 99 percent and 100 percent is 100 percent. So you can't have a bad moment or bad day. And we take our brand and the products we create for people very seriously.

You also have to deliver what people want. In order to do that, you have to get out there and maintain your silliness. As much as being a leader comes from strength and a vision, you

also have to see sometimes what you're in the middle of and make sure you're listening.

You can't feel like you've arrived – once you do that, you're done. I'm still trying to prove myself, particularly to the people in New York. We want New Yorkers' respect.

Have you brought on additional distribution channels? How have you built the recognition and awareness for the brand?

Our distribution is probably my best accomplishment because creating a market and distribution for that market is not always easy. I always saw the gifts and collectibles business differently than most people – I saw it as a corporate vehicle. I thought our stuff could be used for B-to-B, customer loyalty, and customer rewards.

So we have used companies like American Express Rewards, partnering up with SkyMall – most people wouldn't think of selling our stuff on an airplane but we've been building our brand that way.

I've been close with ESPN radio and YES network. This past year, we also announced our relationship with Madison Square Garden.

Yankees-Steiner Collectibles was a great distribution credibility vehicle, but Madison Square Garden is one of the greatest buildings on the planet; it's extremely well-known for its moments, so to create a full-blown partnership with them was a boost for 2012 and will expand our distribution, as well as giving us more credibility with hockey and basketball.

Do you have to be careful not to grow too quickly?

It's more guarded growth than anything. The past few years, my leadership has been more about saying no and cutting out things that have not been up to Steiner's level.

In terms of teams that dismantle and rebuild quickly, is it tough to forecast those that will achieve success and can you tell based on management?

I base more on management. Organizations like the Cowboys and the Red Sox are smart – and in addition to who they put on the field, the Yankees are probably one of the smartest business organizations in all of sports.

So I'm betting strictly on management and a bit on the building they're in; if they're in a special stadium and have a special management team, that pushes me toward the team.

But I'm doing the same thing in terms of investing in players. I'm looking not only at stats but the quality of the player, what he's going to

do off the field and, more now than ever, what kind of morals and ethics he has because we have gotten snakebitten with steroids or a guy getting in trouble. We don't want to put up posters of those guys.

Is baseball still the lead sport for you?

Baseball is the lead sport in terms of people collecting and sports gifts – it's natural and instinctive in this country.

It comes down to numbers – and there has to be more organization in the NBA, NHL, and particularly in the NFL. There are a lot of stats that can come into play in the other leagues but they haven't stuck so that we can define what greatness is.

But there are lines in the sand we draw for baseball players and when they cross them, they're great.

Is it tougher today to find players who have the characteristics you seek?

It's more confusing because they're coming at you at a younger age and you're not really sure. It has been extremely difficult to know whether to invest in a Kobe Bryant, a LeBron or a Tiger.

It's complicated but doable. There are good young players out there. The NBA has a lot of promise for our industry – players that are starting to stick; hockey has been underachieving over the past 10 years and it's not building its sport around players, towns, and personalities; and the NFL is in a lot of trouble – it's getting tougher to bank on some of these players and take the risks unless you have an Eli or Peyton Manning, who have been amazing.

It's tricky with free agency and players moving around but you have to navigate that and that's where leadership in our business comes in. A lot of times you say no because it's not clear where a player may end up.

Are you frustrated by competitors that might not have similarly high standards? Do you feel responsible for elevating the industry?

In every industry, you have people who don't understand the difference between right and wrong. When you start meshing your name with teams like the Yankees, you want to extend those brands and you have to take the accountability that comes with that. You have to have products that match up to the greatness of players like Derek Jeter. I've supported some dimensions of control in the industry by strengthening my brand and product education, and teaming up with MLB Authentication. It's also about getting customers educated on the importance of buying the right items. ●