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Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Baseball Agent Adam Karon helps his clients find their field of dreams

By Peter Crooks

Sports agent Adam Karon has spent more than a decade representing Major League Baseball players as they navigate the challenging course between high school or college and "The Show." It's a job Karon loves — the Santa Cruz native treats his profession more like a personal mission than a 9-to-5 cardpunch — but it isn't the fulfillment of a lifelong career dream.

"When I was little, I wanted to be a garbage man," said Karon, with a laugh. "I'm not really sure when I gave up on that. When I did start thinking of a career, I never imagined it would be in professional sports. I just knew that I did not want to go to a job where I had to go do the same thing day after day. I knew I wanted to visit new places, and try new things, and that every day should be different. I wanted to meet different people every day and use different skill sets. In that sense, I have found the perfect career."

Karon's Santa Cruz childhood was

packed with sports — Little League and Pony League baseball, as well as basketball and soccer, depending on the season.

"We did not specialize the way young athletes do now," said Karon. "We just loved physical activity, and that's why Santa Cruz was such a wonderful place to grow up — there were always sports to play outdoors."

One of Karon's mentors, Cabrillo College baseball coach Bob Kittle, remembers Karon as an excellent athlete who was driven by any challenge that came his way.

"Adam was just an outstanding student. Academically he was dominant," said Kittle, who coached Karon's baseball team at Santa Cruz High. "But he was also driven in everything he did. He had congenital knee damage, but would give a hundred percent and then ice down his knees after every game. It was rare to see a high school player with his dedication."

Karon attended UCLA and received a

history degree with honors before going across Los Angeles to work on a law degree at USC. During law school, he continued to excel academically and was invited to a summer associate position in a powerhouse legal firm in Southern California. Despite the open door to a potentially prosperous career in LA law, Karon reminded himself of the feeling he'd had from a young age about the kind of job he wanted.

"I knew the summer associate position was a great opportunity, but I just wasn't comfortable there," said Karon. He reached out to a trusted mentor — his high school baseball coach, Bob Kittle — and realized that he should turn down the legal gig.

(Above) Sports agent Adam Karon (R), makes a close play in 1998, when he was a team captain for Santa Cruz High School.

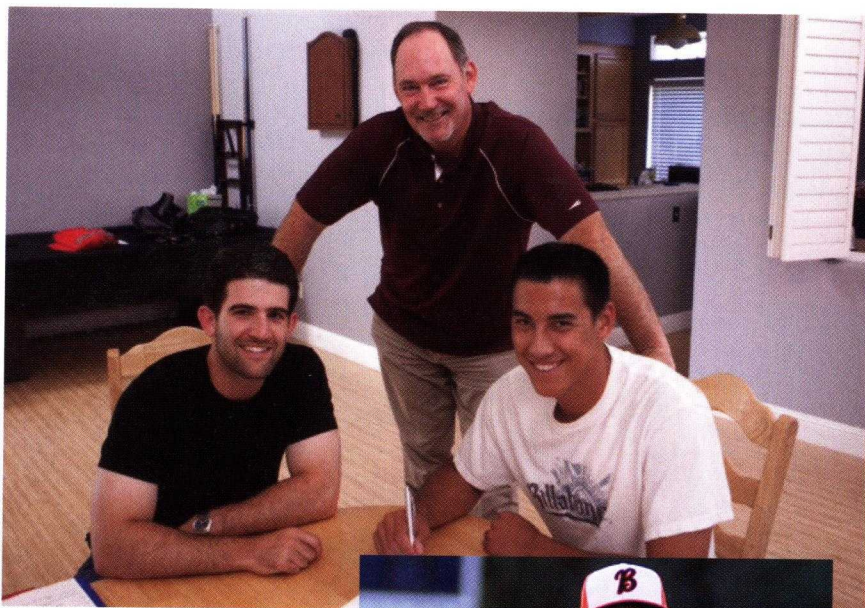
Especially when Kittle introduced him to a contact who was a pro sports agent.

"Kittle set me up with an internship for baseball agent," said Karon, still clearly appreciative nearly two decades later. "I was only 22, but it took off from there. It's all I have done in my career."

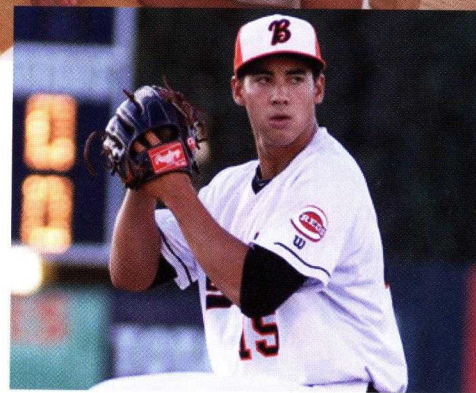
Karon spent the next decade working for a Los Angeles-based agency, representing dozens of baseball players as they worked to achieve the dream of a Major League career. The gig, though packed with intense competition and constant travel, has been a perfect fit for Karon's personality.

"I love that an agent has to wear a different hat almost every day," said Karon. "One minute you are an attorney — just last week I was working on a deal for Jesse Chavez, so I was a litigator." Karon helped the Toronto Blue Jays pitcher win a \$4 million arbitration settlement for the 2016 season. "The very next day," Karon continued, "a player might be calling you because he has been having a tough time breaking up with his girlfriend, so you might be a friend. Some guys need positive reinforcement; some need a kick in the butt."

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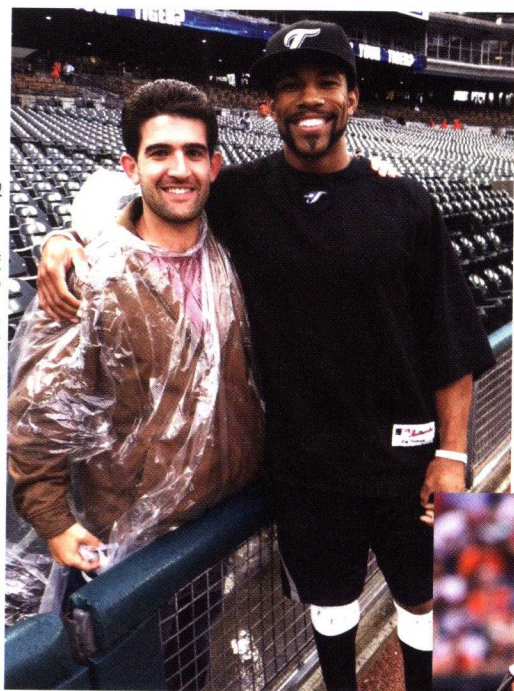
(Above) Karon with client Robert Stephenson (R) and Reds scout Rich Bordi (standing). Stephenson was selected in the first round in 2011 and is shown here signing his \$2,000,000 contract. (Right) Robert Stephenson pitching for Cincinnati's minor league team.



The personal connection Karon develops with athletes isn't about being a pal or a therapist; it's about helping them to triumph against enormous odds.

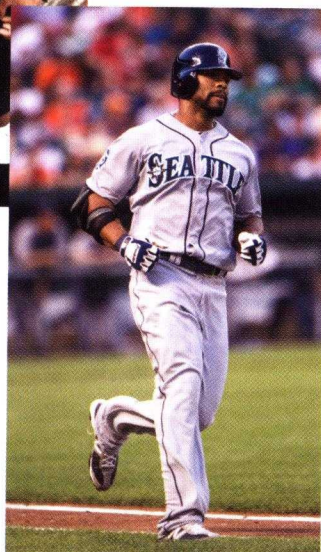
"I've been doing this for fifteen years, and I am still learning every day, but I can say that the number one most important part of my job is mentorship. It's all about learning about your client and what pushes them to succeed," Karon said. "These guys come from such a range of backgrounds, but they are all trying to accomplish something that is infinitely more difficult than what most of us try to achieve. Certainly less than five percent (of players who are drafted) ever get to the Major Leagues. Learning to be emotionally intelligent — that is the key to all of this."

As Karon developed his skills as an agent, counselor, mentor, and friend, he spent a decade working for a Los Angeles-based agency. Though generally happy with life in LA, Karon and his wife, South Bay native Shira Lipton, always wanted to move back to Northern California with their two young daughters. When Lipton, now a Palo Alto-based dermatologist who has been together with Karon since the couple were teenagers, received a medical residency at UC San Francisco, Karon and his wife jumped at the opportunity to move north. Karon found a spot at the Bay Area-based agency started by Matt Sosnick






(Above) Adam Karon and Eric Thames at his MLB Debut in Detroit. Thames went on to play for Toronto and Seattle, and is now playing professionally in Korea, last year being named MVP of the league.

(Right) Eric Thames circles the bases while with Seattle.



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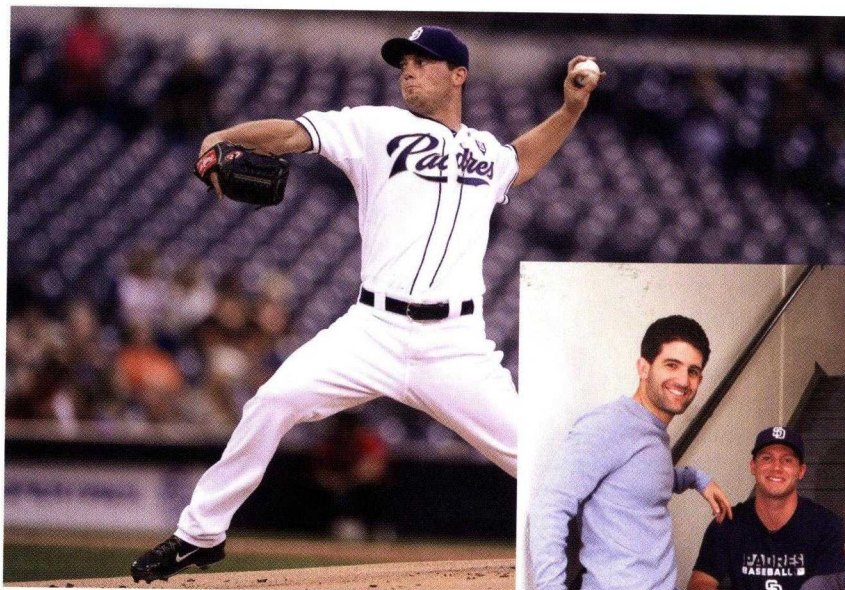




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(Above) San Diego Padres pitcher, Robbie Erlin.
(Right) (Clockwise) Adam Karon, Robbie Erlin,
and Colorado Rockies' pitcher, Shane Carle.



and Paul Kobbe. The upstart firm was profiled in the 2005 book, "License to Deal: A Season on the Run with a Maverick Baseball Agent."

The agency was a perfect fit, and the Santa Cruz native quickly became a partner at Sosnick, Kobbe and Karon. The agency currently represents about 25 Major League players, 11 Americans and Canadians playing in Asia, and 45 minor leaguers. The partnership has been a peak in a wildly successful career that still thrills Karon as much as it did when he was a 22-year-old law school student who was relieved that he wasn't going to have to spend his life crunching numbers and billing hours.

"It is incredibly satisfying to have a job where I can work with a player from high school or college all the way to their draft, to their shot in the big leagues," said Karon. "During that time they get married and have kids, and you get to be a part of all that. It's all about the relationships."

Karon speaks proudly about a range of clients. Reds outfielder Jay Bruce may have delivered one of the biggest paydays when he signed a \$51 million contract extension, but Karon is just as excited to discuss his client Mario Holland, a relief pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies, who earned a degree in fashion design from the Art Institute of San Francisco in his spare time during his rookie season.

And in a case of Santa Cruz serendipity, one of Karon's best friends in the baseball business is Robbie Erlin, a starting pitcher for the San Diego Padres. Erlin is another area native, who appreciates Karon's friendship just as much as his outstanding professionalism.

"Adam is just so honest and genuine, and has been since I met him," said Erlin, who was named Player of the Year in Santa Cruz County in 2009 before being drafted by the Texas Rangers. "Throughout every stage of my career, he has sent me text messages between starts to see how I'm feeling and how I'm doing."

Erlin added that he and Karon have an off-season tradition of playing a round of golf at the public Santa Cruz course, Valley Gardens, every Christmas Eve.

"If it's raining, we make our way over to Neptune's Garden and play mini-golf," said Erlin. This represents the perfect business relationship for Karon—one where the trust and friendship outweighs and outlives the contract negotiations and signing bonuses.

"I would never represent someone who I do not feel comfortable bringing up to have dinner with my wife and girls," said Karon. "That's the part of this career that is living the dream. This job is all about the relationships that I have formed. Of course, you can make a lot of money, and I have been fortunate and have done well. But if it was just about the money, I would have gone to work for one of those law firms, and made a lot more money — and, most significantly, I would have been a lot more miserable." ☛