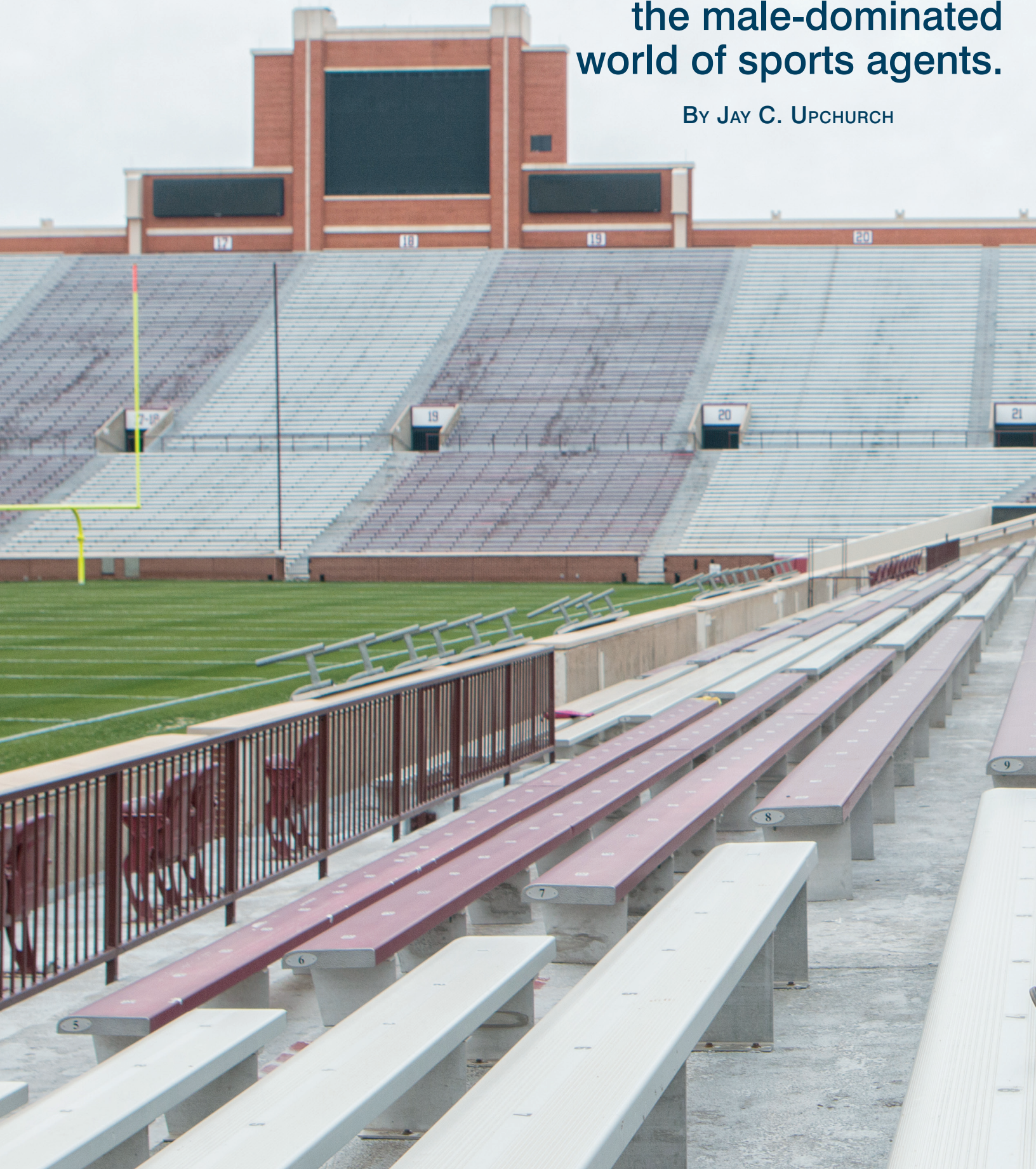


Former OU twirler Kelli Masters has what it takes to succeed in the male-dominated world of sports agents.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



On Her Own Turf



These days, former OU twirler Kelli Masters returns to Owens Field as a spectator with a unique perspective. Masters has been a sports agent for a decade in a job where women represent only five percent of the profession.

Photo by Bill Richards

Do not be fooled by her disarming smile or schoolgirl charm. Beneath that wholesome exterior beats the heart of a lion.

Make that a lioness.

“I’m as competitive and fierce as any agent out there when it comes to fighting for and representing my players,” says Kelli Masters. “You have to be or you won’t last very long in this industry.”

Masters works in the sports representation business where only five percent of certified agents are women. And while her



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worked hard to earn respect along the way,” says Masters. “But we’ve only just scratched the surface of what we hope to accomplish. If it takes 20 more years to see all of my dreams come true as an agent, I’m fine with that because I’m blessed to be doing something I enjoy and that I’m 100 percent committed to.”

“Way too many players are leaving the NFL either broke or broken, or both. I realize we can’t change that overnight, but it is my hope to change it **one player at a time...**”

chosen field may, for good reason, be perceived as a good old boys club, the University of Oklahoma graduate is undeterred in following what she believes is her destiny.

“This is where I am supposed to be and what I’m supposed to be doing,” says Masters. “I believe this is my true calling. It’s very demanding with many sacrifices, but I’m all in. I wouldn’t trade my experiences over the last 10 years for anything.”

After a decade in the business, Masters’ Oklahoma City-based company KMM Sports has firmly established itself with more than a dozen clients, most of whom play in the National Football League. But as far Masters is concerned, KMM has many more goals to meet and plenty of room to grow.

“It’s been an interesting journey so far and I feel I have

At the top of Masters’ list of goals is helping her clients not only take full advantage of their success as athletes but also properly plan for life after sports. She points to data that indicates many players are ill-prepared to deal with the real world after their respective careers come to an end.

In 2010, Sports Illustrated estimated that 78 percent of NFL players are either bankrupt or facing serious financial troubles within two years of ending their playing careers.

“I never wanted to be perceived different just because I am a woman. From the beginning, I wanted women actually come in and do things that helped make a difference in the lives of these players,” says Masters, who in 1995 earned an undergraduate degree from OU in journalism. “Way too many



ABOVE - Kelli Masters is known for her complete dedication to the athletes she represents and works to prepare them for life after the stadium lights fade.

OPPOSITE LEFT - OU fans roared their approval when the Masters twins performed in perfect synchronicity as featured baton twirlers with the Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band during the early 1990s. The two also were outstanding students, earning almost every OU honor and leadership position available.

Bill Richards

players are leaving the NFL either broke or broken, or both. I realize we can't change that overnight, but it is my hope to change it one player at a time — to let them know we care about them as people and not just how they are doing on the football field on Sundays.”

Masters knows a little bit about football fields, and especially the ups and downs of intense competition. Growing up in Midwest City, Oklahoma, she and her twin sister Kim regularly attended OU football games with their parents when they weren't performing at twirling competitions.

Kelli earned five world champion baton twirling titles and eventually spent her Saturdays as a college student performing as featured twirler alongside her sister for the Pride of

Oklahoma Marching Band at OU football games.

“It had always been our dream to attend OU and twirl for the Pride. For Kim and I to have the opportunity to do those things together made it that much more special,” says Masters. “And believe it or not, twirling helped prepare me for my life and for what I do now. It taught me about competition and discipline and how to perform under pressure.”

Former Pride of Oklahoma director Gene Thraikill never doubted that Masters would go on to experience great success after college.

“Kelli has always been a very strong woman and a strong-willed person,” says Thraikill, who guided The Pride for 30 years from 1971 to 2001. “She was the type of person who earned the respect of everyone she came into contact with. Even at a young age, I could see that she was going to do very well on whatever path she chose in life.”

While the sisters went their separate ways after college — Kim married and eventually moved to Texas after earning her accounting degree — Kelli went on to become Miss Oklahoma in 1997 before taking the next big step in her life.

That turned out to be law school.

“My father was the reason I ended up going to law school. He was an attorney and my inspiration for choosing that path,” says Masters.

Masters graduated with honors from the OU School of Law in 1999 and soon after, joined the firm of Fellers Snider in Oklahoma City, where she began honing her skills as a litigator and an expert dealing in nonprofit law. During the process of helping form and represent dozens of nonprofit organizations, including several that involved professional athletes, Masters had an epiphany.

“The more I worked with these athletes and saw some of the things they deal with, the more I noticed there was a real need for good, solid counsel for these young men,” says Masters. “They needed someone to represent them who truly had their best interests at heart, someone to work with them and help them make the most of their opportunities, protect them and maximize their platform and their resources.”

continued

“I felt like it was my calling.”

When the idea began to take shape, Masters went to former OU and Dallas Cowboys coach Barry Switzer to get his thoughts on what she might expect as a female agent. She also reached out to Kristen Kuliga, the first woman agent to negotiate an NFL deal for a player (Doug Flutie in 2001).

“I respect Coach Switzer’s opinion and just wanted to get his thoughts on the subject. And the same with Kristen, who was already breaking ground as an agent,” says Masters. “They were both very encouraging but also warned me that it was a tough business for anybody to succeed in, not just a woman.”

In 2005, Masters moved forward with her dream and began a balancing act that includes her work as an attorney for Fellers Snider and as a sports agent for her company KMM. After getting her certification from the National Football League Players Association and officially becoming a registered agent, she sent letters to every NFL franchise introducing herself and setting the tone for future dealings.

“Kelli is so committed to being the best sports agent in the business, she literally works 24/7 to make that a reality,” says law associate Terry Tippins. “I’m not sure I’ve ever seen someone work so hard or be so dedicated to being successful. She is extremely loyal to the players and clients that she represents. She takes her job very personally.”

Of course, there are some aspects of the job — including sexism and a handful of unscrupulous agents — that have forced Masters to work much harder and be much better than her competition.

“It is a very competitive and cutthroat business, so you have to stay strong and not let any of that stuff throw you off of your game. I stay the course. I am not going to revert to any sort of tactics that are questionable or deceitful,” says Masters. “I am driven by the fact that I believe I am the best person to represent and advocate for my clients, no matter what the situation is or who I am dealing with.”

In 2010, OU defensive end Gerald McCoy hired Masters and Ben Dogra of Creative Artists Agency to co-represent him. When Tampa Bay took McCoy with the No. 3 overall pick, Masters became the first female agent to represent a first-round NFL draft selection.

“It confirmed in my heart that I was supposed to be here and that I really could be successful in this business,” says Masters.

Unfortunately, when it came time for McCoy to renew his contract with Tampa Bay — a deal worth up to \$98 million that made him the highest paid defensive end in NFL history — Masters was not there to share in the celebration. Speculation was that Dogra had talked McCoy into firing KMM prior to the 2014 negotiations, but that was never verified.

“There are a lot of unsavory people working in that busi-

ness and Kelli’s biggest disadvantage might be her honesty and sincerity,” says Tippins. “I know it’s a tough battle for her every day because she’s not always dealing with a level playing field, especially when it comes to competing agents.

“But that sort of thing is not going to defeat her. She’ll win her battles the right way.”

Masters expressed her disappointment in McCoy’s decision that ultimately cost her more than \$1 million in agent commission fees. But she declined to comment on the circumstances surrounding the decision. However, it is important to note that Dogra was fired by CAA shortly after the McCoy deal was finalized and he is currently under investigation by the NFLPA for alleged league policy violations.

One player who won’t be leaving Masters any time soon is former OU linebacker Corey Nelson, currently a member of the Denver Broncos. After suffering a career-threatening injury during his senior season with the Sooners, Nelson thought his playing days might be over. Not a single NFL agent reached out to him at the end of the season, except Masters.

“When my future was in doubt, Kelli was the only agent willing to take a chance on me and believe in me,” says Nelson, who was taken in the seventh round of the 2014 NFL Draft. “That speaks to what kind of heart she has and her ability to see the big picture. She treats you like you are family and I like the fact that she always puts God into everything she does in life. She is not afraid to mix it up with the big boys. She has no fear.”

Meanwhile, Masters realizes that there are going to be disappointments to go along with the successes. It’s simply part of the job.

“Even on my bad days when something may go wrong or I’m dealing with a difficult issue, I always fall back on my faith and the fact that this is what I truly believe I’m meant to do,” says Masters. “For the most part, my experiences as an agent have been positive. I just know to succeed, I have to bring my ‘A’ game to every situation.”

Masters says the favorite part of her job is sitting down with players and their families and mapping out the possibilities for their futures.

“Convincing a young person that you are the best steward of his interests and the best guide to get him through the process for his ultimate success — gaining that trust is always a major challenge,” says Masters. “When we are finished, hopefully he doesn’t see me for my gender, but as an agent who is going to represent him to the best of my ability.

“They have to know that I am going to fight for what’s best for them in every situation.”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor of Sooner Spectator and writes sports articles for Sooner Magazine.