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## Search firms vary in styles, approaches

By Bruce Schoenfeld, Correspondent

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You could sense the conflict inside Joe Bailey. The RSR Partners sports recruiter wanted to explain what made his firm more effective than its competitors. He had a story to tell, and he was eager to tell it. But like Ernest Hemingway, he knew he'd have to leave off the ending.

"We evaluate all our candidates based on the 67 basic skills that we've identified to gauge whether someone is going to be an effective leader," crowed Bailey, RSR's managing director and head of its sports practice. Then he paused.

"But I can't tell you what they are."

That's the executive search category, in a nutshell. Part science and part intuition, using a dizzying range of proprietary metrics and evaluative tools and almost as many different areas of specialization and philosophical approaches. It's a murky world that's difficult to penetrate.

Bailey, who in Dick Cheney fashion once conducted a search to find someone to run the Miami Dolphins and ended up recommending himself, leans heavily on the evaluative techniques he has devised to identify candidates who will "have an enormous impact." Across several firms — including Heidrick & Struggles, his own Global Sport 360, and the old Russell Reynolds & Associates, the precursor to RSR — he's had great success. But if that's not the approach you're looking for, there are too many others to count waiting for you in the marketplace.



One after another, each firm takes a unique approach, specializes in a different segment, offers potential clients a different perspective. There's a fit for every client, and for each particular search.

Photo by: MARC BRYAN-BROWN

Believe in personality profiling and psychological assessment? Try Jed Hughes of Korn/Ferry International, who's educated in those disciplines. Feel that connections are the key? If your field is football, longtime College Football Association head Chuck Neinas knows more potential candidates than anyone. Sometimes a firm's advantages are a synthesis with other businesses. Turnkey's Len Perna (**see related story**) touts a market-research arm that tracks rising talent in the industry.

Large firms such as Eastman & Beaudine or Parker Executive Search typically trumpet their unique methods of evaluating candidates, techniques designed to work across various disciplines. That fits particularly well in C-level searches, for which the best candidate might be employed in a different industry. The smaller and narrower the firm, like those that specialize in human resources positions or others that are sport-specific, the more weight it typically puts on contacts, confidentiality and knowledge of the industry. Those are often a good choice for coaching or athletic director/general manager positions in which the field of candidates is relatively finite.

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A few major firms, notably Korn/Ferry, are publicly traded, with the inherent benefits and pressures that entails. Like many firms in an industry that tends to operate in near-obsessive secrecy, Korn/Ferry wouldn't make on-the-record comments for this story. CMO and senior vice president searches, the fastest-growing industry segment by most accounts, are often under Korn/Ferry's radar. But it was Hughes, a former assistant coach under Bo Schembechler and Chuck Noll, who in January was given the unusual mandate to find a general manager for an NFL team, the New York Jets. That search made countless fans aware of sports recruiters for the first time.

Neinas served as executive director of the CFA from 1980 to 1997, rubbing shoulders with just about every college football coach in America. Since then, he has helped place coaches and ADs with 12 SEC schools, 10 of the old Big 12 schools, even North Carolina and North Carolina State in the same year — some 70 to 75 placements in all. Nearly everyone up for consideration as a head football coach at a major-college program is someone Neinas knows personally. If not, he knows someone they've worked for. But forget college basketball, let alone anything in the pros. "I just don't have the contacts," he said.

A few firms operate internationally. Over the past eight years, venerable London-based Odgers Berndtson has built up an international sports practice of a scale unique in the field. "We've grown every year," said Joe Becher, who oversees the day-to-day business of the sports arm under partner Simon Cummins.

As many sports entities are now asking to have executives working in other sectors considered, Becher's European clients often want a North American candidate to be included on their shortlists. His placements include Tom Glick, formerly the CMO of the New Jersey Nets (via Derby County, where he did strategic

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planning), as the COO of Manchester City, and Michael Bolingbroke, who had been a senior vice president at Cirque du Soleil in Montreal, as the COO of Manchester United. “But not at the same time,” Becher stressed about working for the bitter crosstown rivals.

Some firms cross-pollinate between sports and entertainment. Sean Scanlon of Caldwell Partners has recruited for the New York Jets, but also Tennis Channel, MTV, Lifetime, Comedy Central and Univision. In either sector, he believes success hinges on matching a management style to the potential candidates. “Some are bureaucratic, others reward mavericks,” he said. “It’s not off-the-rack.”

Yet sports comes with its own challenges. “If you own a plastic bag company, nobody outside the industry renders an opinion as to how you made that plastic bag, or who you chose to run the company,” Scanlon said. “But everyone has an opinion as to how you run your team. No other industry in the world has that degree of public scrutiny.”

As a result, searches often take place in secrecy. There’s plenty of potential embarrassment on all sides, including media and fan incredulity that a team owner would need outside help to hire a coach or even a president. Search firms provide plausible deniability in case a candidate contacted for a high-profile position turns out not to want it. And they keep the process confidential.

“Jeremy Foley didn’t need help finding a football coach,” said Neinas, who helped deliver Urban Meyer to the Florida AD in 2005. “But in his previous search, when he’d hired Ron Zook, he talked to Bob Stoops and Mike Shanahan, and the whole world knew about it. To this day, nobody knows who else was interviewed when Meyer ended up getting the job. That’s why I was hired.”

Neinas, and consultants like him, can keep the secret because they have no accountability to anyone but their clients. They answer no questions from fans, constituents or the media, and seldom do they even put themselves in a position to be asked — one reason why the field remains mysterious. In other disciplines, firms shout their successes from the rooftops.



Chuck Neinas (left) filled in at the Big 12, but his specialty is finding football coaches.

Photo by: GETTY IMAGES

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As more and more firms are placing more and more candidates, however, that is starting to change. Following the recent NCAA men’s basketball tournament, Eastman & Beaudine sent a blast email congratulating clients on their successes. The firm had put coach Gregg Marshall at Wichita State, AD Tom Jurich at national champion Louisville, AD Ian McCaw and head coach Scott Drew at NIT champion Baylor. It wanted the world to know.

But its clients evidently didn’t get the memo. The Wichita State AD who had hired Marshall — Jim Schaus, now at Ohio University — steadfastly ignored calls and emails inquiring about help he’d received finding Marshall. Harry Jones, the three-time chair of Louisville’s board of trustees who’d overseen the search for an AD after Bill Olsen resigned, had no recollection of Eastman & Beaudine playing a role in the process. Instead, he recalled a far more collegial scenario. “I had a friend in Laramie who said, ‘Tom Jurich of Colorado State is out here playing golf and you need to talk to him,’” he said.

Only Robert Sloan, who had been relieved of his duties as president at Baylor and landed at Houston Baptist, conceded that Beaudine had been involved in the process — and then only because of the circumstances. Baylor's basketball program had dissolved in a mess of NCAA violations and criminal acts, including murder. The outcry was so loud, the necessity of choosing the right candidates at both AD and coach so great, that it was important to make the impression that no stone was being left unturned, as well as to actually overturn all those stones.

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**SEAN SCANLON**  
CALDWELL PARTNERS

Even when teams believe they have the perfect candidate in mind, some turn to search firms to validate that they're not being overly swayed by familiarity or proximity. Earlier this year, Turnkey's Perna was hired by a pro franchise that wanted help choosing between three candidates for an important position. As the search evolved, an array of more suitable names was identified. "Ten days into the search, their three candidates weren't in the mix," Perna said. "No shame on the client, by the way. They're just not in the talent market like we are."

That makes sense. If you're an owner of a pro franchise, or an AD or president at a major university, you rarely need to go through the process of hiring an AD or CEO. "You need help,"

Bailey said. "Help to evaluate the fit, to make sure you're making the right decision." Hiring a search firm is the equivalent of taking out an expensive insurance policy.

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"When you think about it," Bailey said, "it's risk management."

Not that using a search firm makes the process failproof. It was Parker Executive Search that identified Julie Hermann as a top candidate for the Rutgers AD job following the dismissal of Tim Perneti — though a 28-person committee, not Parker, signed off on Hermann, who was later alleged to have used abusive language when she was the women's volleyball coach at Tennessee.

As of this writing, Hermann remains the Rutgers AD, and is still being touted on the Parker website under "recent placements." If she ends up leaving the job within a year, though, and Rutgers' contract with the firm follows the industry standard, Parker will repeat the search process — for free.

*Bruce Schoenfeld is a writer in Colorado.*

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