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Law students keep their passion for baseball alive

Two former rivals team up to create arbitration competition, network in sports business world

BY ROY STROM

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As college baseball players, Mike Rohde and Barret Arthur took the field for rival Big Ten teams.

Today, as John Marshall Law School students, they work together to try to start a baseball arbitration competition at their law school and, in the process, pave career paths into the tough-to-crack sports business world.

Despite playing against each other in college, the two ended up in the same incoming class last spring — as complete strangers.

Rohde, a corner infielder from the University of Illinois, said he noticed Arthur, an outfielder from Purdue University, wearing a Purdue baseball sweatshirt in class and said to himself, “Man, that guy seems like a baseball player.”

After the two started talking, they realized they shared more in common than being former players.

“When Mike came to me our first semester, he asked, ‘What are you doing here? What do you want to do in law?’” Arthur said. “I said I want to be a sports agent.”

Rohde wanted to work in the sports business, too, and he came up with an idea to help the former on-field foes make inroads into the tight-knit industry.

Rohde heard about a baseball arbitration competition at Tulane University Law School where students went through the process that decides a yearly salary for a young Major League Baseball player.

“I started thinking about the competition, and thought it would be great to go and compete,” Rohde said. “But at the same time, we have something like six or seven law schools in the city and in the Midwest there are tons more.”

Couple those law schools with the amount of nearby baseball teams and executives, and Rohde said it makes sense to host a similar competition at John Marshall.

“So many people say, ‘You should do this, you should do that,’ but this was the first time a student came and said, ‘I want to do something about baseball arbitration, what



(From left to right) John Marshall Law School students Barret Arthur and Mike Rohde played Big Ten baseball and have hopes of using their eventual law degrees in the sports business world. *Natalie Battaglia*

do I need to do?” said Bernadette Savarese Coppola, president of the Entertainment, Media & Sports Law Society at John Marshall.

Coppola, noting the society’s \$500 budget, said the pair should first focus on organizing a panel discussion about baseball arbitration as a way to promote the idea of hosting a full-blown arbitration competition that could cost about \$30,000.

The panel discussion occurred April 13 and included Lester E. Munson Jr., a senior writer for ESPN.

“This is the best (panel on arbitration) I’ve seen,” Munson said. “They got into details and issues and the kind of things you never hear about salary arbitration.”

For Arthur and Rohde, the panel and competition represent ways to learn about the arbitration process. It also helps expand their network in the sports business.

“We’re both aware that these jobs are very rare and very difficult to come by,” Rohde said. “Working as an agent is tough to get into anywhere. Same with on the team side in the front office.”

Arthur said networking, important in any field, becomes even more so as a sports agent.

Arthur connected with Bob Lisanti, an agent on the panel, when he interned at Octagon, the sports agency where Lisanti works.

“He’s an ex-player, I’m an ex-player, and we

kind of clicked that way,” Lisanti said. “But it’s hard to set a specific blueprint for how to get into the industry.”

A law degree “is an accepted method of preparation to get into this industry,” Lisanti said.

But whatever qualifications a hopeful agent might have, success depends on whether he or she can land talented clients, he said.

Rohde said a law degree, coupled with his experience as a player, should make him stand out in the minds of players and executives.

“I haven’t come across any former players with law degrees, and I think in talking to some front office people that I’ve gotten to know, the sentiment is: ‘Your resume is unique,’” Rohde said. “It will get you at least a second look, and that’s kind of all we would like.”

Arthur plans to pursue a more traditional legal career while trying to find players he can represent as an agent. He currently works at a personal injury firm in Chicago.

Rohde plays professional baseball for the Gary South Shore RailCats, where he won a league rookie of the year award in 2008. He said the arbitration competition, currently in its infancy, will add to his resume and network.

“If it doesn’t work out, at least we stepped up to the plate,” Rohde said.