



## Web site helps pro athletes find sponsors

**Craig Harris**

The Arizona Republic

Jun. 5, 2008 12:00 AM

As Jason Kyle enters his 14th season in the National Football League, his longevity in professional football has produced some fairly healthy paychecks.

Yet, the Scottsdale resident is bothered that so few athletes can land outside sponsorship deals.

So the long snapper for the Carolina Panthers, who was once a walk-on at Arizona State University, has created a Web site called Pro PlayerConnect.com. The site introduces current and former professional athletes to businesses that are willing to offer sponsorships, reduced or free products in exchange for endorsements, or payment for appearances.  
advertisement

"Being in the league for so many years, I saw there was a need for something like this. Before, it (business opportunities) has all been word of mouth," Kyle said in a phone interview. "The site is set up for the average player, but it's not to rule out bigger names."

Launched during Super Bowl XLII, the site currently has 455 athletes registered and others waiting to get approved, he said.

"We don't want five guys saying they are Emmitt Smith," Kyle said.

There are more than 25 athletes with ties to Arizona, including former Phoenix Sun Tom Chambers and former Arizona Cardinal Scott Player. At least 200 businesses have made nearly 15,000 offers, which are all screened by Kyle.

"I'm not going to send out offers where someone is trying to sell a house or trying to raise funds for a business," Kyle said. "I'm the only one who approves every offer that comes through."

One of the registered athletes is Amy Van Dyken, a six-time Olympic gold medalist who lives in Scottsdale.

Van Dyken, a swimmer who has appeared on a Wheaties box, said she wishes the Web site would have been around when she was training for the 1996 and 2000 Olympics because it could have helped her obtain sponsors. So far she has used the site to receive a discount on home-gym equipment, and she accepted an offer to appear in a charity golf tournament.

"It has been really, really fun to see a lot of companies approach the different athletes," said Van Dyken, who was one of the first athletes on the site.

Kyle's business partner in the venture is Arizona Bay, a San Francisco-based technology-consulting firm that invested about \$180,000 in creating the Web site, said Dave Graham, managing partner of Arizona Bay.

Graham said one of his related companies, Arizona Bay Technology Ventures, raised about \$450,000 in venture capital, and its investors include NFL quarterback and Heisman Trophy winner Vinny Testaverde and two-time Daytona 500 winner Michael Waltrip.

Graham said he might seek another round of funding in August or September, and he hopes the business can begin breaking even by the end of this year.

The Web site makes money by charging \$5 for each business offer and a 10 percent fee on appearance deals. For example, if a business offered an athlete \$1,000 to sign autographs at a grand opening, the site would receive \$100 from the business.

Seth Elken, vice president of the Mesa-based Riccardi Collection, said he spent \$1,100 to hire NFL quarterback Jake Delhomme as a consultant for Riccardi's concierge and travel service.

"He is a name everyone will recognize and a well-rounded guy," Elken said. "It was a good experience. He was a really in-depth guy who had a lot of input."

Kyle said ProPlayerConnect.com appeals to small businesses because of the relatively low cost. He said he knew in his gut the Web site would take off.

"I didn't do the math, but I knew it would work," he said. "I wasn't thinking I would make millions on this thing. I wanted to address something that wasn't online."