

## A place where athletes, businesses can connect

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Posted: Sunday, Aug. 03, 2008

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Sports stars and major endorsement deals go together like peanut butter and jelly. But what if you could contact a professional athlete directly about working with your business, using your product or attending your charity event?

That's the idea behind Pro Player Connect, a Web site created by Jason Kyle, a long snapper with the Carolina Panthers.

Developed last fall and launched in February, the site allows companies and organizations to view profiles of athletes and contact them with business offers.

Kyle, 36, says it cuts out the middleman and provides easier access for smaller businesses, while keeping athletes' personal information private and allowing them to find sponsors for their charity events.

For instance, Kyle's profile page notes that he's available for sports clinics, basketball tournaments, children's events and bowling. (His favorite movie: "Braveheart.")

An Arizona native who joined the Panthers in 2001, Kyle said the site also provides social networking for athletes, as well as a way for retired athletes to find job opportunities. Pro Player Connect now has 12 employees.



Jason Kyle, long snapper for the Carolina Panthers, started a Web site that allows businesses and athletes to connect on business opportunities – endorsements, camps, etc. (Staff Photographer)

Comments have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q. Where did the idea for this business come from?

I was aware that there were many athletes looking for additional opportunities to earn money through appearance offers, sponsorships or endorsements. I also knew there needed to be a quick and easy way for retired athletes to reconnect with old teammates.

Q. Was there anything like this out there? What makes this different?

I'm not sure why it hasn't been done yet. The only thing I can guess is it's difficult at first to gain the trust of the athletes. Many are worried about the security of their contact information. Once they see all the athletes who have entered profiles and how the site works, they feel more comfortable.

Q. Why can't people just connect with athletes through teams and agents?

It is sometimes difficult to both find and contact the agent of the athlete, and agents are not necessarily interested in brokering a Saturday afternoon appearance at a dealership for a \$1,000. But I know plenty of athletes who would love to show up for an hour, sign some autographs and make a quick grand. NFL and other sports teams are not in the business of finding outside revenue-generating opportunities for athletes.

Q. What did it take to get this effort going?

I wanted to ensure that the site was intuitive to work with for both athletes and businesses. I also considered all that would make the site so useful, such as the ability to send offers directly to specific athletes, allowing athletes to communicate with other athletes, and never allowing junk offers to make it through our safety net to a player's inbox.

Q. What was the biggest challenge?

Explaining to the athletes there's no "catch." It's free for all athletes to use and completely secure. We do not make a dime from athletes.

Q. How did you keep this project from interfering with your full-time job?

I launched the site around the Super Bowl, so most of my time was spent in the offseason. I'm not a guy who likes to be distracted during the season, so I'm lucky to have several hard-working, creative people working long hours to grow the company.

Q. How do you measure success, and how what has been the early response?

The more athletes we have, the more businesses we have, and therefore more quality offers will be available to our member athletes. As of now, we are 20 percent ahead of our goal.

Q. What's the biggest lesson you've learned?

You can never anticipate everything. We have been solving problems and demands we never thought about in the beginning. The only way to do this is to open the doors to your business to see what your market has to say.

Q. What advice would you give to other people starting unique efforts like this?

Don't take offense to feedback, especially critical feedback, and return calls and e-mails as quickly as possible.

### *More Information*

Since last fall, Pro Player Connect has added more than 560 active and retired athletes as members, and companies and organizations have made more than 14,500 business offers to athletes through [www.proplayerconnect.com](http://www.proplayerconnect.com).

After site creator Jason Kyle, the first athlete to join was Vinny Testaverde, a longtime NFL quarterback who played for the Panthers last year. Most members of Pro Player Connect are football players, including several former or current Panthers, such as Jake Delhomme, Julius Peppers and Steve Smith.

But the site also features athletes from other major sports, as well as the Olympics and X Games. Among the bigger names are NASCAR driver Kasey Kahne, baseball pitcher Curt Schilling and Olympic gold-medalist swimmer Amy Van Dyken-Rouen.

Between major sports and the Olympics, there are about 40,000 active and retired athletes who could be eligible for Pro Player Connect, Kyle said, adding that the site eventually could expand to include international athletes as well.