

You Have to Be Bold in Front of New Markets

In 1998 he came back from Argentina where he spent eight years working at the embassy in Buenos Aires and commercial representations. Having liked sport all his life he started his one-man show business as a football agent. After ten years he is Chairman of the Board and CEO of Sport Invest Int. Inc., one of the most influential firms in Czech sport business.



Photo: Pavel Lebeda

Pavel Zíka is a name best-known in football but the portfolio of Sport Invest's sport clients is much more diverse than just football. What lies nowadays behind Pavel Zíka, the football agent?

Today, a whole network of firms that is called Sport Invest. Foremost is Sport Invest International Inc., which is one of the few joint stock companies in the sport business in the Czech Republic. Other companies in the group include Sport Invest Hockey, Sport Invest Marketing, Sport Connecting People and many companies abroad. There is, for instance, Sport Invest United Kingdom. The group includes several firms in Western Europe that are named "Stars and Friends," that we have with our business partners. All those firms represent footballers, ice hockey players and as a matter of fact players of all the major sports. To name just a few of them, our clients are Roman Šebrle (decathlon), Martina Sáblíková (speed skating), Tomáš Verner (figure skating), Lenka Šmídová (yachting), and Tomáš Kraus (skicross). But we do not focus only on representing the sportspeople as agents. We conduct the business of sports in its entire range - from representing the sportspeople, sports clubs, marketing business, sponsoring and organizing events.

What does it take to take care of sportspeople from such different sports backgrounds as Petr Čech (football), Šárka Sudová (acrobatic skiling), Kateřina Emmons (shooting) or Lukáš Konečný (profi box)?

The principal, the skeleton is de facto always the same. And that is our philosophy - let's provide sportspeople with such a service that they will be able, in these fast-moving times, so fast and bustling and eventful - to focus on their sports as such. We provide such services so that they are able to dedicate all their time and energy to training, proper nutrition, relaxation, the competitions, races or matches themselves. What we do is provide them with the best service necessary. We should be the service company and I should be the serviceman who makes their job easier. This should eventually lead to their better focus on the sport performance and their preparation for it. And of course, if they get the best results, they reach the highest prizes that there are in the business connected to it. That means marketing and sponsoring.

If I wanted to use for my company advertising and promotion, let's say Michal Novotný for instance, do I have to come to you? Do you possess exclusivity for all your clients?

Yes, we do. No matter whether it is representing sportspeople as such, that's the case, especially with footballers or ice hockey players when we have actually two contracts. One follows the instructions and rules of FIFA and ČMFS (Czech Football Association) and can be signed only for two years. Besides we have marketing contracts which are long term, sometimes for five, seven or even ten years, but all those ensure exclusivity for us.

Are you looking only for ready-made sportspeople, stars already, or do you also nurture your own hopefuls?

It very much depends, but in general I would say that the main trend of our activity is nurturing of the youth. Even Petr Čech, now FC Chelsea, is licked into shape. I met him when he was sixteen and played for FC Blšany. And we have gone together all the way from his first appearance in the First Division when he was 17 for Blšany, then AC Sparta, the most expensive goalkeeper transfer in the history of Czech football, Rennes, to his present successful engagement in FC Chelsea. This is just to prove that the core is indeed in working with the youth. That's

why we invest a lot of time and finance into our division that deals with young players' development. We have got our scouts in virtually all parts of the Czech Republic. Our chief scout Karel Ledvinka, who oversees our scouts, is a man of some 22 years of experience in working in youth football. We indeed work with the youth, youth, and youth.

Though naturally you can get to a ready player sometimes and this is for the reason that I already mentioned, that the agents' contracts can be signed just for two years. An example of an athlete that switched to us from competitors is David Rozehnal (Lazio Rome), or if we go outside football the decathlete Roman Šebrle.

How old was the youngest client with whom you ever signed a contract?

It's set by rules that football agents are not allowed to sign a contract with a player under 15. And I think that this is a right limitation and a good rule, since it is between the ages 15 and 18 when the young sportspeople begin to form as such. So we do not sign contracts with under 15s, but what we can do is work and cooperate with them. We have got a player with whom we have cooperated since he was 11. We led him through Monaco and currently he is at the football academy of Zinedine Zidane in Cannes.

How do you approach parents of the young athletes? How do you persuade them to go with you? What do you offer them?

What I tell them is, look at us, we are no bandits. Look at our company; look at our offices, and the number of people who sit quietly behind their desktops doing their job. Take us as a service company and let's create together with you the family for the young athlete, a family like team that will support your kid and will ensure that they can well develop in what they are talented for. We can bring to the team our professional experience. We have a person that is a personal fitness trainer who is also an expert in nutrition and fluid balance. We have our own physiotherapists and our own physicians with whom we cooperate. We can provide your kid with international traineeships. It can be highly motivating for the youth to get for an internship for two weeks to FC Chelsea, Newcastle United, or U.C. Sampdoria Genoa. We can help with the promotion, and we can prepare DVDs. For all this service we do not ask the parents for any money. We are a financially strong group that makes its money with the adult sport stars when we organize their transfers or fix better and better extensions of their present contracts. So we do not ask for money for the service to the youth; we sign the contract for two years and then both sides can reconsider the cooperation - whether or not they feel happy in the relationship. And when everything goes well we can make together a transfer to AC Sparta and from there abroad and the club that buys the player pays us some bonus, which is normal and that's where we get money from. But the key philosophy is that the relationship must be perceived from both sides as pleasant and good-fellowship like.

You represent also Jiří Bouška, a disabled cyclist. Is this also about business or this is more a way of helping the handicap sport?

Definitely it is not about business! I deeply admire all those athletes and I strongly believe that we will have more of those athletes and that it won't end up only with Jiří Bouška. The performances and results that they are able to reach despite their handicaps are on the same level as those of the healthy athletes. But indeed this is

not about business. I would feel embarrassed if it was. We try to help with our facilities, expertise and the structure of our firm. We help with publicity and promotion in the media; we can help with some event be it with services or financially or we can offer just a comfortable environment. I would really like to further extend this side of our company.

To go back to your core business, football: In recent years we have witnessed a trend of transfers to Russia or Turkey. What has been behind it?

What has been behind it? Us! Here in Czech football we operate in an environment which suffers from a discrepancy between the income of clubs and their spending. One must ask the question, 'how can clubs survive?' The stands are deserted, no developed merchandising, TV rights are negligible. In a situation when a Czech club gets 4 million CZK, the German Bundesliga club gets 40 million Euros from TV rights, how is it then possible that the clubs still pay every month some 22 players' salaries, four coaches' etc? Czech football was, is and always will be export orientated. We will be always dependent on foreign markets to buy our players.

Our firm thus finds itself under constant pressure from the clubs to sell their players abroad. The pressure is immense and we have in the last five years carried out three-quarters of all the Czech transfers abroad. So the pressure comes from the clubs; it comes also from the players, but not everyone is Petr Čech or Tomáš Rosický. So that when we as agents want to do something for them, we have to look for new markets. I just cannot simply bombard the German market, buy more players from me! Or I cannot promise the players that they will all go to England. The market there is often more exacting than their football capability. I have put out much effort in order to create an international network. When we meet bi-monthly we are more than 20 people and we go through club by club, together discussing who the clubs want and whether we have such players on offer. We have to be bold in front of the clubs and to the market in general. And this was the case with Turkey and Russia. Take for instance the case of Russia, when we were successful with two players, one of them Erich Brabec (SK Slavia Prague) in Dynamo Moscow. We offered manager Vlastimil Petržela to Zenit Petersburg, and we succeeded as well. By the way, besides Turkey and Russia, we also discovered Scottish league for Czech players.

The other part of the business, sponsoring: What sports want to connect with Czech businesses? To what sports do Czech businesses aim their budgets for advertising?

Again, it is not so much that they would be active that much. We have to go and talk to them. Even with the most shining top stars you have to go and offer them to the business. Otherwise it is rather individual. Some executives or business owners do not want collective sports; they require an individual. On the other side, some say no individual, we want a team sport. In general, the most attractive are football and hockey, but there are indeed real big companies disposing with huge budgets for their promotion and still they go with individuals. Such case is, for example, Metrostav with Martina Sáblíková.

By Filip Hubáček ■

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