

AGENT ZERO\$

The NBA cashes in on the slogan “Where Amazing Happens.” Basketball player agent Ara Vartanian brings the amazing to his client’s lives and paychecks with around the clock work and dedication to the likes of Paul Millsap of the Utah Jazz, Daniel Orton of the Orlando Magic, and countless others overseas.

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On Christmas Day, the NBA officially ended its melodramatic lockout and gave the gift of basketball back to its fans, putting an end to what was once believed to be an inevitable and cold nuclear winter. Although labor negotiations throughout the 149-day standoff drew nationwide comparisons to that of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and United States, the phrase “work stoppage” never existed in Ara Vartanian’s lexicon.

He looks refreshed and alert even though he just came off a cross-country plane ride from a Dwight Howard charity game and was trying to remember the last time he was home. Doing the math, his answer is four days ago and, naturally for a guy that works with numbers, he comes up with some other ones as well; he’s spent a third of 2011 on the road. Out of the 24-hour day, 18 of them revolve around basketball. The other six are for sleep, and everything else he can squeeze into a life that’s often more overwhelming than a full-court trap.

Life on the go and racking up over 50,000 flyer miles this year alone is nothing new for him. Born in Iran, he and his family moved to Los Angeles when he was a one-year old and lived there until he was in first grade. They then moved back to Iran before settling in San Francisco, where he currently lives with his wife Paisley.

Vartanian knew he wanted to be a basketball agent when he first began interning for the Golden State Warriors during the NBA’s previous work stoppage in 1998. Some of his responsibilities included game operations, corporate sales, marketing, events, promotions and a more personal one – making it a point to meet everyone he came across, because, as he says, “the same people you see on the way up, you’re going to see on the way back down.” The idea of working for his favorite team and rubbing shoulders with the players he grew up watching was the dream gig. After all, he used to go to Warriors games with his father George and brothers Armen and Arlen during the Run TMC era of Tim Hardaway, Mitch Richmond and Chris Mullin. With his back touching the wall of the nosebleed seats of the Oakland Coliseum, Vartanian would come back home telling his mother Mary “one day, I’ll be working down there and people are going to know me.” Nowadays, his mother gets choked up recalling his son’s story. ▶

“I know he’s going to get the job done. He’s always looking to do better, just like myself, and when you have two people like that, it’s always going to work out,” says Utah Jazz forward Paul Millsap.

Vartanian's story didn't just happen overnight, or as he quips, "It's not like you go to school, take classes, graduate, apply for a job on Monster and become a sports agent."

While interning, Paisley, his girlfriend at the time, urged him to pursue what she says was his calling. Vartanian quickly realized one little problem: There is no "Dummies Guide to Being a Sports Agent."

Every life and career has a turning point. Vartanian had his at a Gordon Biersch restaurant when his boss at the time with the Warriors, Joe Azzolina, asked him to deliver two tickets to the restaurant manager. The manager, as a token of appreciation for getting his basketball fix satisfied, offered Vartanian lunch on the house. Ara obliged, and grabbed a seat as a 21 year-old San Jose State University political science undergrad on the cusp of graduation, contemplating law school, and looking to make his next move towards becoming a sports agent.

The bartender serving him was Jaha Wilson, a 6 feet 5 former USC and Bay Area basketball standout that was once destined for the NBA. The conversation began, and it turned out that Vartanian had played against Wilson in a couple of tournaments as a member of Homenetmen. He asked, "Why are you here serving beer?" Jaha, which in Swahili means "king of warriors," explained that he had some terrible agents along the way and gave up on the sport. This is where Vartanian had his moment of clarity – just like everyone does at the bar. He said, "I'm looking to be an agent, and I don't think I can do any worse than this. You are serving beer. Why don't you let me get you a job?"

Wilson eventually gave Vartanian a call back and said "let's do this," and there began Vartanian's quest to be an agent and the chain reaction that made it happen. In 2001, he got Wilson a tryout and subsequent roster spot on a Los Angeles pro summer league team, where Long Beach native and current Denver Nuggets center

Chris "Birdman" Andersen was also vying to get his skills noticed. With a strong showing, Vartanian inked his first contract and sent the former bartender from skimming beer to the hardwood floor with a job overseas in Korea. After picking up a few more clients and forming his own summer league team, Vartanian became a National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) certified sports agent and formed Vartanian Sports Management (VSM). "Life throws opportunities at you and you have to take advantage of them, especially in this business," he says. "I'm just glad I took chances and pursued what I always wanted to do." Vartanian soon began to fully invest his time in minor league basketball players who added no value to his wallet, but were an immense one to his future. Through his relationship with Andersen, he was introduced to Georgian basketball player Nikoloz Tskitishvili, the former 2002 fifth overall pick of the Nuggets who had largely been labeled as a bust in every basketball circle. That didn't deter an eager and hungry Vartanian from getting Tskita another chance at proving himself and his doubters wrong. While he was attending Golden Gate University Law School, he inked his first NBA contract with Tskita and the Minnesota Timberwolves. With his feet already wet in the NBA, Vartanian began to build connections in his daily growing Rolodex. One of them was Don Sellers, an NBA scout who had worked out Paul Millsap. The Jazz forward's agent was DeAngelo Simmons, who had no qualifications other than being Paul's uncle and lifetime mentor. In 2009, Millsap became a restricted free agent, and Vartanian fully took over the negotiations. With the dark cloud of the lockout looming ahead, he had the foresight to sign Millsap to a front-loaded \$32 million dollar offer sheet with the Portland Trailblazers. Seven days later, the Jazz matched the contract and agreed to pay \$19.6 million over the first two years of the four-year deal.



Forward Paul Millsap of the Utah Jazz is just one of Ara Vartanian's clients.

With the contract, two dreams became true at once. Millsap's in the form of millions of dollars, as his mother no longer had to drive a beat-up 1980s Buick LeSabre. Vartanian's changed because he officially moved in as a player in the realm of sports agents. The star power of Millsap, along with Vartanian's negotiating power, opened doors to new clients and now his growing list of players feel more comfortable working with him knowing that he could land deals of any magnitude. "Paul went from living in an apartment to what I like to call a compound. In a sense, I had a part to do with that and that's the part of the business that I love," he says. Aside from bringing lucrative deals and financial security to a stable of players in 30 leagues across 15 countries, Vartanian also brings hands-on, around the clock work to his clients, which includes anything from advising against shady business ventures to negotiating cars and dealing with family and entourages. It can sometimes be a thankless job, and one he doesn't get compensated for, but it doesn't mean it goes forever unnoticed. He always protects the best interests of his players, including those he's never even met. He has four players from the Jordanian national team. Not too shabby for a guy who's never seen them in person, or even been to Jordan. "I give all of my guys full and personal attention," he says. "I want them to trust me with their careers. With that comes a lot of responsibility to do the best I can for them, and that's exactly the way I want it."

Vartanian works for the players, so his negotiations with teams and general managers mirror that of a trained salesman/poker player. His commission ranges anywhere from zero-to-four percent in the NBA, paid by the player, and 10 percent overseas, paid by the team. While cash-strapped teams crying uncle are looking to minimize, he's only interested to maximize.

"I'm on call 24 hours a day for my players, and they know it. I have a phone specifically for them. I take it everywhere, even to the shower. If you talk to any of them, they'll say 'I just talked to Ara.'" As if planned, seconds after that statement, Tskita sends him a message through Skype: "What's up Ara?" A barrage of text messages infiltrates his phone, but he's multitasking just fine in between calls, lunch and an interview. "At my wedding, the phone was in my hand to the point where the photographer said 'you're going to date yourself by having it in every picture.'" His personal touch in business matters never goes unnoticed and his relationships go beyond basketball. When Daniel Orton called, he needed advice after just getting into a car accident 3,000 miles away in Florida. Ara talked him through it. "Both our personal and business relationship together is great," Orton, the 2010 first round selection who signed with Vartanian after leaving the University of Kentucky, tells *Yerevan Magazine*. "We stay in contact at least once a week. He puts in the extra mile when he normally doesn't have to, and that means a lot."

When Tskita needed an apartment in Phoenix, Ara took it upon himself to negotiate with the realtor who had a special NBA player lease package with inflated rates. "I don't get paid for that," Vartanian says. "My motto is 'if you need something, you call me.' I spend a majority of my time looking out for them. I talk to Paul's mom more than I talk with him." He knows the hard work pays off. "When you get one player and do a great job, it turns into two. And then it trickles, and then they tend to flock over. My clients stick around because they know I have their back."



Millsap echoes much of the same sentiment, telling *Yerevan Magazine*, "Loyalty is very important to me. You can't have a good relationship without loyalty. Based on Ara's business background, his personality and him being a family man, we made a family decision to have him as the guy for the job protecting my best interests. I know he's going to get the job done. He's always looking to do better, just like myself, and when you have two people like that, it's always going to work out."

The player/agent relationship has been a complex one to the public eye, especially in recent years when it seems that almost every other day, wins, awards and everything negotiated under the table have been vacated and returned. Vartanian is a far cry from the world of sports agents who have been represented through the scandalous likes of Josh Luchs, who publically admitted to providing cash and numerous benefits to players in hopes of signing them as clients.

"From the beginning, I tell them, 'If you're expecting someone to pay you, you're talking to the wrong agent,'" Vartanian tells his players. "Because, the time that I'm going to be putting into your career is worth way more than any kind of denomination. And if all the things you can buy yourself is what you want, we're not a good match anyways."

His motto is simple when it comes to what he brings to the table during the recruitment process. No money. No diamond necklaces. No cars, or even rims or stereo systems. Nothing for free. "If the only reason a player is signing with an agent is because they paid them, I guarantee that person is not going to stay (with the agent) for long because once they get that money, they don't need you anymore. It is logic," he says. Vartanian is vocal and the antithesis of a yes-man. The focal ingredients to his business foundation are true loyalty, trust and respect.

"At the end of the day, what do you have an agent for? To be on the lookout for you, and watch your back. I love my guys, and love doing the job for them, and they know that." ■