



**Nic Couchman** (above right) and **Mark Whitehead**, Chairman, and Chief Executive, respectively, of specialist sports law firm Couchmans LLP on the challenge of working for clients as varied as Wayne Rooney and Bernie Ecclestone and the 'gold standard' for sports law.

**What was your introduction to the sports business?**

**NC:** Very fortunately for me, I rather fell into it. I originally planned to become an intellectual property and media lawyer, but completed my legal training at Townleys - the pioneering former sports law firm - and could see that the sector was only just opening up commercially. My first major project was Rugby World Cup 1991 which transformed the sport. It was a huge learning curve in all aspects of sports rights.

**MW:** I joined Townleys in 1997 after working as a corporate finance lawyer in the City. Looking back it was the best decision I could have made. Townleys was at the centre of the sports industry at that time and working there was the closest thing to a crash-course in the business.

**Who has been the biggest influence on your career?**

**NC:** Steven Townley has been the biggest personal influence. As the founder of Townleys his 'no limits' approach and the level of responsibility we were given early on at the firm meant we learned and grew quickly. Steve undoubtedly gave us 'wings'.

**MW:** Steven Townley was a huge influence as were World Sport Group Chairman, Seamus O'Brien and Newscorp broadcasting legend, Ian Frykberg. Together they gave me the opportunity

to transition from lawyer to the business side of sport. Harish Thawani Chairman of Nimbus Communications in India is a great strategist as well as a good friend.

**Who do you admire most in the industry?**

**NC:** It depends on whether one is looking at achievements or personal qualities. You cannot ignore the colossal achievements and impact of individuals like Bernie Ecclestone and Rupert Murdoch. But personally I admire those who do their utmost to maintain integrity at all times in challenging conditions. They know who they are!

**MW:** Obviously, I admire all of our clients! In the legal business..." I am a great admirer of how Keith Schilling has made his firm synonymous with the reputation management of the famous. As a model for niche law firms, Schillings is pretty tough to beat.

**What have been the best moments in your career in the sport industry?**

**NC:** Setting up Couchmans was immensely liberating and exciting, and it is very fulfilling to see it grow into a business in which great people can earn a living doing what they enjoy in a fascinating industry. On the client side: successfully representing Formula One

Management in litigation in five countries against Sony over a computer games infringement. It posed the question - what 'rights' are there in Formula One?

Fortunately this was answered positively in our clients favour. Also, working on behalf of Wayne Rooney in his transfer to Manchester United was a highlight - at the time he was undoubtedly the hottest property in football.

**MW:** Helping transform Couchmans from what was still a start-up when I joined five years ago to the market-leading business it is today has been consistently memorable. The Rugby World Cup in 1999 was the first major event where I had a senior role so that also holds fond memories.

**What is on the horizon for you next?**

**NC & MW:** Continued growth and expansion. Domestically, we have just taken on two new partners with fantastic reputations and blue-chip sports clients and we have more acquisition plans in the pipeline. Internationally, around 35 per cent of our turnover came from outside the UK last year with clients in 15 countries.

The world increasingly views the UK as one of the key expertise hubs for global sport and the barriers to using UK law firms outside the UK are disappearing everywhere so we think the opportunities to grow the business further afield are huge. We believe we can eventually become the 'gold standard' for sports law internationally.

**What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities your sector faces?**

**NC:** The recession has accelerated the migration away from the bigger, more 'traditional' City firms towards more focused specialist expertise and of course value for money services. The challenge for all lawyers working in sport, especially in the current economic climate, is to be perceived as advisers who genuinely add value and achieve solutions - with decades of collective experience in the sports industry and a senior team which is second to none, we believe this is one of our major strengths.

**MW:** Law firms also need to continually modernise their offerings and be flexible in the way they do business with their clients. The traditional model employed by most firms of simply quoting high hourly rates for a generic, non-specialised service has less and less relevance to most sports clients in today's world.

We have been successful by positioning our business as part of the sports industry, breathing the same air as our clients and listening to what they tell us rather than blindly following 'accepted' law firm behavioural norms.

So we work hard to maintain that closeness to the marketplace whilst always striving to improve the quality of our service - do this and the business will follow. As business owners, we are also excited by the opportunities presented by the Legal Services Act which will shortly allow external investment and the general involvement of non-lawyers in law firms, both of which are frankly long overdue.