

# Introduction

I crouched in the closet in my daughter's bedroom on Easter weekend 2007. It's not exactly where most sports agents do their deals, but that is where I found myself trying to negotiate to keep a big client, Michigan State head basketball coach Tom Izzo.

Tom and I are good friends today, but in that moment you would not have known it. News travels like lightning in the small universe of college basketball's elite coaches, and his future and our relationship were on the line.

What unfolded that week of the NCAA Final Four, the pinnacle of Tom's sport, was a chess match. Anything can happen in high-stakes negotiation, and no matter what you're negotiating, no doubt the stakes are high to you.

Izzo is a brilliant college basketball coach, an eight-time national coach of the year, a guy who sends players to the NBA all the time, and someone who—like most at his level—doesn't want to be taken for granted. As a seasoned sports agent, neither did I. However, I knew there were a few agents who could take my place but there was only one Tom Izzo.

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In the middle of the Final Four, Kentucky expressed interest in Tom. If you know anything about college basketball, you know this is one of the most high-profile positions in all of coaching, one that almost every college coach would entertain. But like most negotiations, this one was a delicate dance between Tom's passion for Michigan State and what the folks in the Bluegrass State were looking for in their next head coach.

Some coaches are so hungry for a certain position or university that they will literally beg for the job, but Izzo had told us that under no circumstances would he do that. "We'll interview them as much as they interview you," we agreed.

Kentucky, though, had many choices. First, they offered the job to Billy Donovan, another client of ours, who quickly said no the day after the Final Four. Next, they turned to Rick Barnes, the coach at Texas. When Barnes turned them down, their egos were bruised, and so they moved to a hurry-up offense. They wanted desperately for someone to say yes, someone who would crawl to Lexington to coach.

Athletic directors certainly don't call agents to let them know their next move, and so we try to find out their moves through inside sources as quickly as possible. But the move from Donovan to Barnes surprised us. We thought their next ask would certainly be Tom.

Only it wasn't. The call went to Billy Gillispie. Not Tom Izzo. In my opinion, this was because they knew Gillispie would take it for sure.

I was in bed asleep at 2 a.m. when Izzo called. I had barely answered when Tom launched into me. I had seen him countless times on the sidelines of the court, down to the last seconds of close games, and knew he had this kind of temper, but it had never been unleashed on me. After all, I was the person he counted on

to help him and the reason he hired our firm five years earlier. He knew we delivered.

After an hour of unloading his frustration on me, he hung up. All I had was a dazed “oh my” feeling. What just happened? Trust is everything in my business, and it wasn’t just Izzo I might be losing.

But my oldest daughter, then age five, needed me. When she woke up, I hustled to her room to rub her back so that she could go back to sleep. In five minutes, she was sound asleep, but when she awakened again at 6 a.m., I was still staring at the ceiling.

Word of mouth is everything, and the trust I had carefully nurtured with Izzo was the foundation of our relationship and my ability to reach out to more elite coaches and represent them. Was it all crashing down now?

I knew I needed Izzo, but I didn’t need anyone to speak to me like that. There were serious consequences for tolerating it. Backing down to him could make me a doormat, which would also doom my negotiating position. We and Tom knew that Kentucky’s first ask had been Billy Donovan, and so I paced for two days trying to figure out my next move. Sleepless. Before I could negotiate *for* Izzo, I had to negotiate *with* Izzo and with myself.

As an agent, I work in a tight gap between where elite performers like Izzo shine and where they want to—or could—go next. There are multiple layers of complexity in that space. Time may be the biggest factor. For top athletes, the window to excel is very small, and seizing that moment means everything. Payroll caps, free agency, the threat of arbitration, even trends like “money ball” are some of the many other factors at play. Like the levels of a video game, these challenges and nuances are what make me love what I do, and negotiating is at the heart of everything.

For 20 years I’ve negotiated contracts and branding deals for 300 clients, including top pro athletes, broadcasters, coaches such

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as Izzo, universities, manufacturers, and teams. Together, I've done probably more than \$500 million in deals—from a record-setting “ball, shoe, glove” deal with Nike and appearances after a Hall of Fame induction in Cooperstown to a multimillion-dollar contract for John Smoltz and multiple contracts for Cy Young winners, all-stars, Hall of Famers, and Emmy Award-winning broadcasters. As one client remarked, “You could stack up all the contracts you have negotiated and walk right up 'em to the top of your office building.”

None of the deals are linear, but neither is life. As a mother of three, I've negotiated deals while standing on the sidelines of my kids' soccer games. I've been in the heat of hopscotch when deals were closed, which isn't all that different from sitting at the head of a boardroom table— if you have your head in the right place. I buy pajamas with pockets for my cell phone but figured out how to tuck my phone into my wristband for even easier access. As with parenting or any deep relationship, negotiating well means always being ready. The most rewarding deals for me aren't the ones that are the most lucrative but the ones that change lives. I make 4 to 20 percent of what I negotiate, and so my family and I also benefit in real dollars when I bring a client the best deal possible. I've learned by watching great negotiators, understanding my own thresholds, and creating a systematic approach that pays off with consistent high-level results.

If you learn nothing else from me, know this: *effective negotiation is a conversation, a relationship, a rhythm built over time.* At the heart of my success is managing relationships well so that conversations keep going, stay open, and spark more conversations, because the seeds of your next negotiation are planted in the one you are doing right now. A negotiation is a story, and a good negotiator is like a bestselling novelist who knows the characters so well that nothing they do is surprising.

**DO NOT DUPLICATE.**

A negotiator studies the most important decision makers. He or she finds out their fears and desires, what they will give in to, and what they will not let go of without losing a part of themselves. Negotiating is more important than ever today as traditional business structures are disintegrating. We are more likely to negotiate for our own package deals than ever before. Even if you are with a long-term employer, you may find yourself negotiating to keep that job or for benefits such as flextime. Marriage is an ongoing negotiation, as is parenting. All your relationships are. Negotiations force you to communicate what is most important to you, and we all can be better at it.

No matter what level you are in your negotiations skills—whether you're a rookie or a major leaguer—your ability to have that conversation hinges on your grasp and consistent use of basic tools. These tools play out virtually the same way in every negotiation, and you need to keep them handy and sharp. In baseball, a five-tool player can field, throw, run, and hit for power and consistency. A great negotiator, I have seen time and time again, does these five things well:

1. Sets the Stage
2. Finds Common Ground
3. Asks with Confidence
4. Embraces the Pause
5. Knows When to Leave

As with a top baseball player, a negotiator's tools must become reflexive and instinctive. They have to be because in both worlds the window for action and success is narrow. Winning doesn't wait. Opportunity doesn't come around every day. To leverage and maximize these chances, you've got to be ready with multiple tools and

the confidence to use them well. I wrote this book to share these tools with you so that you can learn from my mistakes and be conversant in the art of negotiation.

Now back to the closet. Why the closet? you ask. I needed to ground myself by finding a quiet spot where I could focus and speak from my heart without little ears to hear me. I ducked in there to collect myself and set the stage for success.

From my standpoint, we had worked hard for Izzo, too. We had set the stage by understanding his desires and motivations as much as possible and gleaning the same type of data from Kentucky. We helped him find common ground with Kentucky by showing him what the next step might look like and giving him information that would help him feel comfortable in that school's culture. That information included everything from the names on the athletic association board, especially its president, to schooling Izzo on all the current players and the team's upcoming schedule. We established what he would discuss and what he wouldn't. We asked with confidence to meet with the Kentucky athletic director after the tournament was over. We embraced the pause, that awkward time, as we waited for the other side to make the next move.

But here's the thing about negotiation: those steps are like waves on a beach. They repeat themselves over and over, especially in a big deal. They repeat between people who are negotiating and within negotiators themselves. The conversation is always going on.

In the closet, I knew that I had to reestablish common ground with Izzo. I had to go back at him after this pause. I had to be prepared to walk away. In our world, the verbal tirade he had just unleashed was a challenge. Was I going to take it? And if I did, would I be able to stand up for him the next time he entered negotiations?

At this crossroads, it wasn't just about me picking up the phone to make amends; it was a strategic move to reestablish respect, to recover the common ground that he had razed. That common ground had a shared language, and it wasn't one I wanted my young daughters to hear.

As soon as Izzo picked up, I started in, only to be interrupted.

"Why haven't you called me?" he said. "I have media calling me asking me what happened!"

"I don't like helping people who talk to me like you did the other night," I replied, practically snarling. "I don't get calls like the one from you the other night. I get thank you notes and flowers. Up and down my client list, there aren't any guys I care more about than you."

I kept going.

"No one has ever talked to me as you did. I'm not an eighteen-year-old in the huddle—I'm a coach that helps you win games, Tom. We were clear on what you wanted. But we both know in no way were you ready to 'walk there' or just say yes. We had more to discuss with them, and other guys didn't. Kentucky has an ego, and they couldn't have it hit the media again that another coach was not diving in. We might have tap-danced around the job for days. Kentucky wasn't about to let that happen."

There came another pause. Embrace it; don't fill it, I told myself. This is the power position, where things happen in negotiations.

Even in the silence, I felt he knew how much I cared.

"You're right," he finally said in a quiet voice. "I wasn't going to position myself like he [Gillispie] did. I didn't want to be in the middle of this. I'm a Spartan."

I love you, man, I thought to myself (heck, I'm a Michigan State alumna). I wasn't about to compromise his positioning or

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any of my clients'. His reputation, players, recruits—all of his stakeholders—would have blown up with the public fiasco that this would have become.

The call wasn't long, but it was powerful. It wasn't so much that I "won" but that we recovered our working relationship. Izzo remained my client. In many ways, what could have been the breaking point for our relationship became the turning point. We'll always be friends with a great respect for and trust in each other in part because of that experience. Each stage of every negotiation is a test of a relationship—and a chance to demonstrate your passion and character.

*Trust is at the heart of negotiation and long-term success as a negotiator.* The five tools are nothing without trust.

Billy Donovan is a great story about trust and misreading signs. We helped him move from a great college job at the University of Florida, where he had just won the national championship, to a great pro job at the Orlando Magic. He was ecstatic. So were we—until things quickly unraveled within just hours of his signing the new contract.

At seven-thirty the morning after announcing his move, Donovan informed us that he couldn't leave.

"I'm staying," he told us flatly, as if we could wave a magic wand and make six contracts go away (which we eventually did without any magic). In combing over my actions to better equip myself for the next deal, I asked myself what my priorities had been. Had we his agents been so focused on the terms of the contract that we hadn't spent any time negotiating with Billy? So often we assume that our clients understand the ramifications of their decisions, but that's not always true.

The trust that was broken when he went back on his decision was eventually recovered. We did a lot of patching up with the team Donovan rejected and resolved to take as much from this “failure” as we could.

We trusted that Donovan knew, beyond the papers and numbers of his contract, what this shift would look like down the road. We didn’t ask, “What happens after two years if you don’t win and you get fired?” In other words, could he reenter the college market and coach against Florida one day? Donovan was “the man” in Gainesville but wouldn’t be in Orlando—and by the way, everyone in Gainesville would feel betrayed. Was he ready for this? We didn’t ask.

We also misread a key relationship (Donovan and his athletic director) that pulled him back from the pro contract. After this fiasco, we made an even more concerted effort to look holistically at all of our clients, to study them as dynamic individuals, and to ask hard questions separate from our own financial interests. We got tougher at *Setting the Stage* and *Finding Common Ground* with our clients even before negotiating for them. Trust is easily broken, and building (and rebuilding) trust requires a lot of intentionality. You never know what you don’t know, and assumptions kill a negotiation faster than anything else.

I take trust seriously even when my clients do not. Young ballplayers making seven-figure salaries are among the worst offenders. They tend to think that they will continue working at their elite level far longer than is possible statistically or otherwise. They often sign contracts without bothering to read the fine print. On some level, they believe nothing will stand in the way of their continued dominance of their field despite statistical and anecdotal evidence to the contrary. They trust me implicitly to give them

a clean contract and help protect them. It's easy to see how these athletes have been taken advantage of in the past, because their default thinking is that nothing will change and they will always be on top of their game. I appreciate the trust on one level, but it's important to remind them that they must read and understand what they sign. Period.

In a space where trust is generally missing, there is a huge upside for the person who can stand in that gap and Find Common Ground. Most general managers, such as John Schuerholz of the Atlanta Braves, don't like agents. Yet when I bumped into him eating alone at a landmark Atlanta restaurant called Houston's, Schuerholz quickly invited me and my colleague to join him.

"I hate most agents," he remarked, "but I like you. I do." That comment helped my confidence and purpose soar. No matter how many times I broker a deal, the next negotiation is like trying the high dive for the first time. You put yourself on the line, and you can't assume that anyone has your back.

His comment also took me back to my days getting started in this business and how the five tools helped me establish trust and break into the field. I felt strongly that my firm needed to tap the deep baseball talent rising from our backyard, the suburbs of Atlanta. Georgia Tech had a good program, with players from Atlanta who seemed to mesh well with my firm's corporate values. The only problem was that I didn't know anyone on the Tech team. I had to meet them and persuade someone to take a chance on me even though I had never represented anyone as an agent.

The stage was set, and my common ground turned out to be the fence line where other agents stood. The difference was that I was there before every other agent and stayed after they all were gone. I literally "leaned in" to the fence, trying not to be too disgusted by the thick chaws of tobacco in the cheeks of other agents and scouts.

After getting to know a couple of players, I made my ask with as much confidence as I could muster. The first clients are the hardest, but with a few Tech players, I was in.

The other big lesson I learned in observing an array of college athletic programs was about the ethical boundaries to which some teams turn a blind eye. I could see what I would never do: illegal gifts such as wooden bats that some corrupt agents would “loan” to players and never request back. Some might have signatures from major leaguers, making those bats trophies that easily impressed college players. Or the wooden bats prepped them for summer ball in “The Cape,” one of the proving grounds before the pro draft. Could I compete ethically in a space where the rules forbid even taking a player to dinner or buying him a Coke? For me, that question was answered with another: How can I not?

What grew out of this position was a greater resilience, because my sense of self and integrity did not waver with the changes around me. I had my anchor and held it, and my career grew. Resilience, I learned, is cherished by elite performers, because it separates them from the next level. The ability to bounce back from adversity allows you to achieve longevity, and that helps you build respect and trust.

Negotiation is more of an art than a science. Although Setting the Stage and Finding Common Ground can be quantified by numbers and statistics (and no negotiator should be without as much data as possible), the truly gifted negotiators display great intuition and instinct. Data is about the who, when, where, and what; intuition and art are about grasping the how and why. It’s about the story and conversation, the power of intangibles in Asking with Confidence, Embracing the Pause, and Knowing When to Leave. Data gathering is like dating, getting to know someone and seeing if you might be interested. The other tools are more like marriage

and parenting, requiring greater work and commitment but resulting in deep satisfaction.

## **WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?**

What I didn't see much on my journey through the sports world was other women negotiating. This intrigued me, and so did the research about what keeps women from claiming their place at the negotiating table. More than men, women avoid the chaos and ambiguity of negotiation. They buy into beliefs, expectations, and stereotypes of women being ineffective in this arena. One motivation for writing this book is to encourage women to develop 360-Degree Awareness, my term for embracing and observing all the aspects of a new industry, client, or challenge. This awareness builds an appetite for ambiguity and more fluidity in a changing environment. I call this being an authentic chameleon.

You don't have to lose your femininity to negotiate effectively. Every woman should recognize the factors at play for her that most men don't see. That's just smart preparation.

## **ON YOUR OWN TERMS**

Negotiation is most successful when the terms are clear and specific to everyone involved. That's true in the smallest words that we use. When we talk about who we are negotiating with, *the other side* is simply that: another perspective. I prefer *side* to *opponent*. Side suggests a location, which is important as we talk about common ground.

Remember the blind side? The side is one way of looking at the whole. In the old days, baseball teams were called sides; golf rounds were scores of the front side and back side. Sides are part of

a complete shape, and the shape of negotiation is defined by give-and-take, ebb and flow.

If it's all one side, then there is no negotiation. A negotiation has to have sides, but they don't have to be automatically oppositional. Think of a prism having sides and exploding into a rainbow when the light hits it just so. Great negotiators find and grasp as many sides as they can.

## THE FIRE WITHIN

As a society, we like to label and brand people, and so we pigeon-hole them as natural talents or born losers, as if willpower played no part in brain development. I'll share a personal story that I hope will encourage you to keep an open mind about your innate gifts and your ability to work toward being as good a negotiator as you can be.

My mom was a schoolteacher and speech pathologist; my dad, a pharmaceutical rep. I'm not sure if what I have was inherited from them or learned, but from a young age, I saw the way my parents did things and knew I wanted to follow their lead.

We were a middle-class family in Michigan, and Mom and Dad loved getting a deal or discount. They knew which places had "kids eat free night," and when we went out, we knew to order only water; a Sprite or Coke was out of the question as an expensive luxury. On many occasions I watched Mom talk the grocery store cashier into accepting an expired coupon. If she was unsuccessful, I saw the item go back on the shelf. Over time I could see that her method wasn't all that different from the way Dad brokered a deal for Michigan State football tickets from a scalper in the stadium parking lot. He knew the best time to get the best deal (close to kickoff) and when to walk away. Mom and Dad were also big givers, Mom especially. She donated hundreds of hours as a community leader.

What they taught me was what they had learned from their parents. My dad's dad worked on the assembly line at the big Chrysler plant on Detroit's south side. Mom's parents were chicken farmers who were successful enough to have the first car in their town. Margins were slim, and they all had a sense that they never knew what tomorrow would bring. Working hard and saving was a given, and even today Mom can tell you the price of milk at multiple grocery stores. They didn't hire for services my brothers and I could do. I mowed the lawn. My brothers had paper routes.

All their tiny negotiations added up over time and paid off when my parents were able to buy a house in the same neighborhood as couples who had had much more lucrative careers. Izzo lived around the corner, as did professional hockey players, business owners, and retired doctors. I'm immensely proud of what my family stands for and proudly say that the fundamentals of my negotiating skills began with them.

So whether you are haggling over a grocery coupon or a multi-million-dollar contract, you're engaged in a critical conversation. The more comfortable you are with that conversation, the better your results will be. My five tools will build that comfort for success, building trust in yourself and trust from others. They will give you the guts to negotiate.

Let's go!