



The Accounting Podcast Series

S03E03: Peter Jess

The interplay between accounting, sport and player management

Transcript

A: Albie Brooks

P: Peter Jess

A: Welcome to TAPS, The Accounting Podcast Series. I'm Albie Brooks and working with me is Abbey Treloar. Today our guest is Peter Jess. Peter is the Principal of [PJA Accountants](#), having started out as a chartered accountant in the late 1970s. Peter has a broad-based exposure to an incredibly wide range of industries covering fields such as primary production, manufacturing, construction, retail, graphic design, sports-related services, and body corporate services, to name a few. Peter has represented clients the world over and is a pioneer in the field of personal representation for sporting identities, actors, and professionals.

Peter was one of the very early player managers in the AFL, VFL, as well as other sports. He was a co-founder of the AFLPA's Education and Training Board and was instrumental in setting up the Agents Accreditation system in the AFL. Peter is highly regarded as a players' advocate across a range of issues such as financial rewards, entitlements, learning and education, and, more recently, safety through his advocacy around sports injury and concussion, all the while continuing to grow his accounting practice. Welcome to TAPS, Peter.

P: Thanks, Albie.

A: So much to talk to you about across such a varied and, might I say, a career of impact. Perhaps we should start at the start. What led you to a career in accounting?

P: Strange as it may seem, I was conscripted into the army in 1969 and I went into the centre to be medically assessed and mentally assessed for the army, and I said to them, "Can you tell me how I get out of this?" and they said, "Well, you'll have to go back to university and we'll give you a three-year exemption before we call you back in." Unfortunately, my time in high school, I spent more time mucking around than actually being a sensible student, so my marks weren't all that flash. The only course I could get into was the Diploma of Accounting and Finance at Caulfield, which was part of the Monash system, so that's how I got into accounting.

A: Did you have any idea what you were getting yourself into at the time? You hadn't studied any accounting previously at all?

P: No, I had no idea. My father was desperate for me to work in the public service, and I was desperate to go surfing. So somewhere in the middle there was going to be a need to think about my long-term plans. My long-term plan at that point in time of my life was the next Saturday.

A: I think that was the case for many, of course. How have you found a career in accounting, from an enrichment perspective? Is it something that you certainly don't regret? It's something that you feel has worked well for you?

P: Look, I've made the accounting field fairly unique because it was a base for me. I also studied law and did a Masters of Law at RMIT, and I then got my Diploma of Real Estate and became a licensed real estate agent. So they're the four pillars of what I needed to conduct the business that I work in. It's fairly unique, because I actually don't consider it a job; it's a way of life for me.

A: Of course. Speaking of way of life, you then found your way to sports and player management. What led you to your initial work as a sports and player manager?

P: Once again, by default. My cousin, Jim Jess, was playing football at Richmond and he said to me, "Look, they have offered me a contract for the next year. What do you think about that?" I didn't have any experience other than reading the newspapers at that time, so I said to him, "Well they've been touting a guy called John Patura for 120,000. What I suggest we do is we ring some other clubs and see whether they think that you have some value." So I rang Ian Collins at Carlton, who I didn't know at the time that I rang him and said, "I've got my cousin, Jim Jess, who plays at Richmond. If there was a possibility of him coming to play at your club, would you sign him up?" He said, "Oh, yes, the Ghost flogged us the other week, so yeah, we'll certainly talk to him." I said, "Well, tell me what sort of money that you're looking at," so Collo mentioned a figure which I was very pleased with. I then went back to Richmond and said, Well, look, this is the offer that we've got from Carlton." I was up front. I'm not sure whether I should have been, but it really didn't matter at that time because it was all new ground.

And I said, "Jim would be prepared to play for a base salary plus bonuses, plus also you'd have to pay him for the use of his name, likeness and image." The response back from the collective gaggle of Richmond people was less than flattering, and I had Octa Wilson try and jump over the desk and strangle me. Graeme Richmond was the heavyweight there, and he asked Jimmy, "Is this what you want?" and Jimmy said, "Yeah." They said, "Well, okay, thanks very much for coming along and we'll see you blokes later." I said, "Good. We're off to Carlton. See you." So we got up and we walked out, and G.R. said, "Okay, come back in here." So we did, we walked back in, and he said, "Listen, Jimmy, we've had a think about it. Yes, we'll sign you up for three years on one condition." Jimmy said, "What's that?" G.R. said, "Never bring this little [expletive] back into this footy club ever again." So that was my initiation into the management of sports people.

A: There was so much learning to be done, though, wasn't there, when we think about it, because clubs hadn't experienced the player manager in the past before, so you can understand the shock, if you like, to the management of clubs that this was in many ways the start of a "more professional" movement for the club.

J: Look, the way that I saw it is they were community-based clubs who had decided under the regime of Ross Oakley to become corporates. So I said to them, basically, "If you are corporate you can't pretend to be a community-based club; you've got to be a corporate, which means you've then got to start to look after long service leave, holiday pay, workers compensation, and superannuation," because at the time when I was working with Jim there was none of that. And the Players Association were about as effective as the ashtray on a motorbike, so pretty useless.

A: Well, again, that that hadn't at that time moved, and this was all ground-breaking breaking territory. As you say, the clubs moving to a corporate model, you commencing the representation for players so the players become part of that more professional experience. And I think also, as you say, organisations like the Players Association and the like also found themselves having to move into a completely new era in many ways, which then took many years, of course, to unfold. But that must have been the big start for you to an incredible movement around the player representation model.

P: Yeah. In a very short period of time I became the manager of over a third of every player in the VFL, and that became the platform then to move into other boarding pursuits. With Nick Bideax we then moved into track and field, and in the 90s we set up the Melbourne Track Club, which has become the most successful private track and field club in Australia. We have multiple Olympic medallists, multiple world champions. That that was a

fascinating journey which then took me into a whole range of other sports. I worked with Oakley, the sunglass people, where I said to them, "Shift from the surf into the outdoor sports." I recommended that they go up and meet some guys in cricket. They went up to Lindsay Hassett's sports store and they gave away sudden glasses to Merv Hughes, Dean Jones, and Shane Warne. That set the trend, then, in cricket where everybody who was playing on the field suddenly had these outrageous sunnies that were made by the Oakley sunglass company, which I was part of.

A: So over the course of your career, what are some of the main improvements in outcomes for players, sports people, and others? In other words, how has the existence of the manager, the player, the sports manager improved the lot for athletes and artists?

P: Very, very difficult to say. I mean, look, I think in terms of benchmarks, yes it's raised the overall salary levels of players.

A: Do you think the developments in player and sports management in Australia has matched that from overseas?

P: We've got some of the best sports managers in the world. I consider us to be ahead of the pack in many fields. We developed a range of systems to measure the value of the image of players, which I did in conjunction with Melbourne University with a Professor of computing science there, and also using visual listening which is a technique that then does a deep dive into the metadata to track where each of the athletes we work for is presented in a commercial way for sponsors, and then we measure that value against a standard rate, and we can then articulate to the sponsors generally what the value of the image rights are. Now, my presentations have shown that it is probably the most underrated part of a sportsman's value.

A: The use of images?

P: Yes, by far and away. I mean, they're a walking billboard. People don't understand the scope and extent of what that creates in terms of – last year I was talking to somebody in the States and they said it was the fastest-growing part of sports marketing, the illegal or non-payment of the use of players' images to create a commercial paradigm for themselves.

A: Yeah. Returning to a comment you made earlier, in recent years you've become a really strong advocate around injuries and concussion and, more broadly, welfare. Tell us a little bit about that work, and perhaps a comment on what you think we still need to do.

P: Okay, well, because I've got a longitudinal view of the AFL and other collision-based sports of over 40 years' experience, guys who I worked for at the age of 18 and 19 who were fine young men I'm now dealing with in their 50s and in some cases their 60s. And about 10 to 15 years ago I saw this trend whereby there seemed to be a range of behavioural dysfunctions, a range of other problems that led to a whole range of very disturbing features of their quality of life. I started to travel the world to try and find the answers, because we had a bevy of scientists here who said that there was no long-term damage created by concussion.

Now, in between that, in 2006 I was knocked off my motorbike and I was knocked unconscious for 20 minutes. I had three fractures of vertebrae in my neck, four fractures of vertebrae in my back, nine broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a broken jaw. So what that did was give me an accumulation of all the trauma that some of the sportsmen had had over the previous 10 years or 15 years they had played in a collision-based sport. From that, I then developed post-concussion syndrome which manifested itself in a physical way. My eyes became light-sensitive, I had tinnitus in my ears, I had vestibular problems, I had the onset of Meniere's Disease. I had problems at the frontal lobe cortex with my excitability, so I had increased risk-taking.

That caused problems in my marriage; I subsequently had a divorce. But I could see all these things were real. Now, I went through a whole battery of tests and none of them were able to successfully diagnose or treat what I had. Then I started to read about neuroplasticity. From 2006 through to 2016-17 I engaged on a 10-year plan to

rebuild and re-hardwire my brain, which I have done. So from where I was in 2006 to where I am now I've completely rewired my neuronal pathways using neuroplasticity.

- A: So that brought to your attention, of course, the problems for the participants in these in collision-based sports like AFL and so on?
- P: Look, the first thing that I found was that the contemporary view of concussion didn't match the science and medicine, that it was transitory and you had no long-term problems. And also the rapid point of care diagnostic tools were not sophisticated enough to actually find subclinical concussions, which is our biggest problem in our sport, and also the treatment regimes post the determination of post-concussion syndrome just weren't there. I then decided well I'm going to deconstruct the contemporary model of the diagnosis and treatment of concussion. I have been pursuing the proper diagnosis techniques and the proper treatment techniques.
- A: There's always an interesting dilemma here, because it does need the authorities, of course, as you're indicating, to take the stance because the players individual on an individual basis are not necessarily going to do that, because a young sportsperson just wants to play sport.
- P: Well, nor are the organisations as well. My view is that every national sporting organisation that is attached to collision-based sports should not have a role in the management, the detection of concussion, nor the treatment. It needs to be a separate independent body that can then be free of conflicts of interest. As it stands now, the concussion management and treatment is predicated on the basis of cost, so it's about the timing of getting people back on the pitch rather than their health.
- A: I understand. Just returning to the role of the sports artist manager, how do you define it these days? Has it changed dramatically, the nature of the role?
- P: I'm probably unique because I take a total person view, right, and a number of my clients long-term – I manage them off-field in their retirement and also on-field to a certain extent, but the young ones I've got now I'm much more vigilant in terms of their mental and physical welfare, the management of their training regimes, the management of their return to play protocols if they've suffered a clinical concussion, and also the fact that they should have proper testing techniques using biomarkers and science rather than subjectivity that they now use.
- A: Yeah. So for someone with an interest in sports and player management as a career, what advice would you offer them in terms of getting started?
- P: The pathway is really a sort of closed shop. It's very difficult to set up the shingle. I was lucky because I already had a group of sports people. So unless you have a unique network of sporting connections it's extremely difficult.
- A: We've just had the Olympics. You've been involved in a lot of athletics, as you mentioned, in the past and now and have been involved heavily with individual athletes as well as the Melbourne sports club, as you said, but when you're watching something like the Olympics as they've just completed, what sorts of things go through your mind for the individuals who have – you know, do you look at athletes in the conduct of their sport as their marketability? Do you look at them and think, "Well, I could I could really represent that person," or, "I could do this," or, "That person needs to do this"? Without naming anybody, but what –
- P: I've been extremely lucky because I've acted for Cathy Freeman and I've acted for Steve Hooker, both world champions and gold medallists. We had a couple of our clients who have done exceedingly well in these current track and field events who we are working for, so yeah. My first thing with Nick Bideau is to ensure some sort of continuity through getting contracts with sporting groups and sporting manufacturers, so that requires us to have very close contacts with Nike, Adidas, New Balance, and others, which we've nurtured over 40 years. They know us and they know that our roster is very strong, so they support us when we say that these are the guys coming through. That's one of the critical things, and then in terms of exploiting the image, it's still very difficult. It's still a new concept except that the very elite level.

A: Yeah, good point. Well I've thoroughly enjoyed this. We started with your accounting practice, so perhaps we can finish there as well, if you don't mind.

P: Yeah.

A: Outside of the sport issue, what are you finding to be the main demands and queries from your clients in an accounting sense, I guess, during these particularly troubled times that we find ourselves at the moment? Is accounting helping?

P: Really, once again, it's about creating networks and contacts. We have very close networks with the major banks and also the second- and third- tier banks. We find where you have clients who are transactional-based, cash flow is so important. We've got to look and see and be creative about how we can support them during these tough times.

A: I think, no doubt, cash flow for many organisations and businesses has simply stopped. Certainly the inflow has stopped; the outflows that don't. That's the problem, of course, that we find ourselves in. I'm sure that your clients benefit from the expertise of yourself and those with within your practice. Peter, it's been a pleasure. We'd like to thank you so much for joining us here at TAPS. We wish you well in your continued accounting practice and the sports management field, and to continue your advocacy for sportspeople in Australia and around the world. Thank you so much for joining us.

P: Thanks, Albie.

A: Well, thanks for joining us here at TAPS. If you'd like to be part of an episode or recommend a potential guest, then please drop us an email at taps-podcast@unimelb.edu.au. We look forward to hearing from you. Thanks, and take care.