



legal matters

Going to the Big Show Use your last year of residency to train for a major league medical career. Scout your leads, prepare your resume, and you'll hit a home run in your first position.

BY BRUCE D. ARMON



The baseball playoffs are about to begin and another 162-

game baseball regular season is coming to an end. For those of you in the last year of your residency or fellowship, the next nine-month "recruiting season" may seem like an eternity—not unlike the baseball season to my wife who is not a fan of America's pastime. Rest assured, the months will pass by much faster than you expect or desire. This article should help you make the transition from residency to practice easier and perhaps give you a different appreci-

ation for how short and, yes, how long it takes to get through your last year of training and into your first professional position.

Spring [er, summer] training

Just as major league baseball players warm up for their regular season in Florida or Arizona, in these first weeks of your last year of training you'll need to be gearing up for your first trip to the "major league." With each passing week, it

is one less week to go in the "minor league" before you are confronted with the reality of starting your professional career.

As you start your last year of training, you should work to achieve two primary objectives:

First, identify prospective leads. Make sure you find out where all of the residents and fellows who just completed their training in your program are starting their professional careers.

It is never too early to start looking for a job. Some of your best leads can come from your colleagues who went up to the "majors" before you. Not only can these rookies share with you the things they learned while they were pursuing their jobs, you can use them as a source of leads for potential job openings. Depending on the geographical or specialty marketplace you wish to enter, the professional opportunities may be limited. Enlisting the assistance of another set of eyes and ears can be a tremendous benefit. Many of my clients learned of a potential job opportunity in a community from an alumnus of their residency or fellowship

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program.

Second, prepare your resume. If you are like most of your colleagues, you went straight from your undergraduate school to medical school and then residency and perhaps fellowship. The next professional job you accept will be your first (excluding working at a retail job during one of your school breaks). Unlike a minor leaguer who constantly has scouts judging his performance, your resume is the first way a prospective employer will get to learn about you. Just as there is an art to hitting a curve ball (which some baseball players never master), there is an art to effectively presenting your credentials in a resume. Your accomplishments and training should be readily apparent to anyone who glances at your resume. A resume that is too long or cluttered will be strike one against you in the eyes of a potential employer. Take advantage of the perspectives and suggestions of your mentors, attendings, and professional development staff when drafting and refining your resume.

Getting off to a fast start in the regular season can be a harbinger of long-term success. One of the most important decisions you need to make is deciding where you want to practice. This is not exclusively a geographic decision. Deciding whether you want to start your career in academia, private practice, or industry will help you refine your employment search. You can always switch your prospective "position," but you want to be careful about switching too many times before you have fulfilled your potential.

Peanuts, popcorn, and Crackerjack

One recommendation I make to clients is to create a list of the ideal professional priorities and deal-breakers. This may

include: salary and bonus, hospital affiliation, entrepreneurial opportunities, employment benefits, paid vacation, continuing medical education, professional liability insurance, board fees and prep courses, call schedule, and overall compatibility with your short and long-term plans.

Ideally, your first job will contain as many of your priorities as possible with no (or very few) deal breakers. For instance, if one of your long-term goals is to be a partner in a private practice, you should give serious thought before accepting a job offer that explicitly provides no opportunity for partnership. While all of Cal Ripken's backups probably enjoyed their experiences as members of the Baltimore Orioles, none of them got the chance to be a full-time starter until Cal Ripken decided it was time to step aside (Ripken holds the Major League Baseball record for consecutive games played, 2,632, and earned the nickname, "Mr. Iron Man"). Unlike most baseball players, you have the chance to control your professional destiny and you should act accordingly.

The all-star break

Only the best baseball players get a chance to showcase their talent in that mid-summer milestone: the all-star game. All of you in your last year of training will (I hope) get to advertise your talents to a host of employers through interviews. Some of my clients have even interviewed (and accepted) jobs before their last year of training. Most of you will start to aggressively interview in the fall and winter.

A few interview suggestions: First, accept as many interviews as you can, and attempt to do them in person. Any employer can tell you great things about an organization and its staff over

the telephone or in a letter or e-mail. Seeing your prospective employer in person is the best way to see if the practice is really the best fit for you.

Second, let your "agent" work for you. At some point during the interview process with a practice, bring a spouse, significant other, or trusted colleague along to give you an independent perspective of the practice. This is commonly done and will show a prospective employer your sincere interest in joining the group.

While most people hope the owner of their practice is more like Jerry Colangelo (the player-friendly owner of the Arizona Diamondbacks) than George Steinbrenner (the New York Yankees' owner who outspends his fellow owners to field the best team but is not at all reluctant to trade a player or fire a manager who does not perform as expected), it is always preferable to know in advance what type of person you would be interacting with on a daily basis.

Having a person you trust available to explicitly protect your interests is like having a good bullpen to protect the effort of the starting pitcher. In preparation for and during your interview cycle, identify the professional advisers who are a part of your team. Your attorney should be a good bench player who can play multiple roles—understanding physician employment contracts, identifying contract strengths and weaknesses, drafting alternative language to accomplish your goals, and, if you prefer, negotiating a positive outcome on your behalf.

A good accountant can help you identify the financial strengths and weaknesses of a practice. This is particularly important if you will be purchasing an interest in the practice either prior to or within a few years of joining the prac-

tice. You do not want to get into a long-term deal with your employer if your financial future is not protected.

The trading deadline

Before getting ready for the post-season, teams must decide on their final roster. At some point, you must decide at which job you will commence your professional career. The decision will likely not be an easy one. While very few jobs are the “perfect opportunity,” hopefully you have positioned yourself well for both short-term and long-term success.

Once you have executed your initial employment contract, give careful consideration before accepting a different job and revoking your first contract before you have even started working in the first job. Depending on the provisions in the contract and the expenses an employer incurred to recruit you (e.g., travel expenses, headhunter fee, attorney fees), the employer may pursue legal recourse against you to recover these costs.

The rest of the regular season

Take advantage of all of the opportunities presented to you during your last year of training. Many major league players often remark that it is actually harder to remain in the major leagues than it was to get there in the first place. This year may be your last opportunity to learn and ask multiple questions from excellent academicians and mentors in a (relatively) low pressure environment where your professional future is not being evaluated by your peers on a daily basis.

You should attempt to master the fundamentals of medicine in your particular discipline before completing your training. Do not take the short cut

of corking your baseball bat or scuffing the baseball with an illegal substance to get ahead. Attend all of the grand rounds lectures and other speaking engagements set up by your department, chief resident, or GME office. More often than not, these lectures serve the

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micro purpose of reinforcing a particular skill set you should have and in the macro sense making you a more well-informed and better physician.

The playoffs and the world series

The end of your formal training and the beginning of your career will be focused on the essentials of the practice you are joining: getting your professional license(s), obtaining hospital privilege(s), seeking third-party payer participation numbers, and filling out reams of benefit information. If you are moving to a new location, all of your and your family’s housekeeping arrangements will need to be accomplished in a timely manner. This may also be the last time you can take a vacation without having to juggle schedules among your professional colleagues to ensure there is adequate patient coverage. If you can take some time off, you should seriously consider doing so.

Unlike many baseball players who

never get a chance to be in a world series (e.g., Ernie Banks of the Cubs) or others who have made their reputation in part because of their post-season play (Reggie Jackson, a.k.a. Mr. October), all of you will go to the post-season once you have completed your training and begin your professional career.

The baseball post-season can be a wild and exhilarating trip. Your professional career will likely not include the dramatic ups and downs of a tense baseball game between two playoff teams—nor the attention of a national audience. This should not diminish its importance in your eyes or of the patients or your colleagues who come to you for assistance.

Unlike a baseball player, a long and successful medical career does not guarantee your enshrinement in Cooperstown, New York (site of the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame). However, such a career can provide you with emotional, moral, and yes, financial stability.

Your last year of training is an important first step in your professional career. Take advantage of this year and the opportunities it presents. Don’t let anyone accuse you of gambling with your career like Pete Rose, jeopardizing all of your hard work and compromising your ability to successfully practice medicine for years to come. ■

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