

CASE A REAL (PRIVATE) EYE-OPENER

25 Aug 2013

The Boston Globe

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Investigators say they could have discovered clues about behavior of Hernandez

Last month, with new details about the Aaron Hernandez murder case surfacing almost daily, private detective Jay Groob sent Patriots owner Robert Kraft a sales letter. Groob pitched “investigative and security services,” including “vetting, due diligence, and surveillance of personnel.”

As president of American Investigative Services and a licensed private detective in Massachusetts for 30 years, Groob welcomed “the opportunity to consult with the Patriots and determine whether there is a particular need we can fulfill.”

Following Kraft’s first public comments about the Hernandez case, the offer appeared well-targeted (though to date Kraft has not responded to Groob).

After authorities arrested Hernandez, 23, on first-degree murder charges, Kraft said he had been “duped” by the tight end. Speaking from his office at Gillette Stadium, Kraft said he only knew “what goes on inside this building” and that “we don’t put private eyes on people.”

Groob and other local private investigators found those statements curious, especially in reference to a player such as Hernandez, who had arrived in Foxborough with questions about his past.

“To say Kraft only knows what’s going on in the building, it’s like having blinders and earmuffs on,” said private investigator Bob Long. “Is that all he wants to know?”

Long, a former Massachusetts State Police detective and the first witness called in the James “Whitey” Bulger trial, built a career on the close examination of criminals. Now, he applies his law-enforcement experience to character due diligence and background checks. He counts professional sports franchises among his clients, investigating potential team executives but not athletes.

“Due diligence is not anything new in sports,” said Long, president of Bob Long Investigations Group, LLC. “It’s conducted on athletes because you’re investing millions and millions of dollars in them.

“A lot of teams are willing to take some risk. They keep their fingers crossed that nothing happens and have blinders on and earmuffs on and hope nothing blows up. Well, in this case, it did.”

When asked if they go beyond the basic background screening done by NFL security on draft-eligible players and, if so, what extra investigative measures are taken, the Patriots issued the following statement:

“The Patriots conduct extensive background checks, beyond those provided by the NFL, on every player we draft and acquire. We constantly seek ways to improve the player evaluation process and will continue to invest in ways that allow us to be as diligent as possible in every aspect of the overall evaluations.”

The Patriots would not say whether they would consider hiring private detectives in the future.

Change in procedures?

No one could have predicted there would be murder charges against Hernandez, but private detectives might have changed the risk/reward equation as the Patriots first considered drafting him and then weighed offering him a five-year contract extension worth nearly \$40 million in August 2012.

In the weeks since Hernandez's arrest June 26 for the murder of Odin Lloyd, police have investigated his connection to a 2012 double homicide and uncovered a "flop house" he used in Franklin where they found boxes of ammunition. Other reports have highlighted Hernandez's combative nature inside and outside of Gillette Stadium.

"To be honest with you, I would have him followed," said private investigator Phil Sharkey, president of The Hire Authority, a company that specializes in pre-employment background screening. "This other apartment probably would have surfaced from following this guy around. It would have been a huge red flag.

"It sounds unfathomable that something wasn't done before they re-signed him."

Groob added that he, too, would have done surveillance on Hernandez.

"It's the only way you're going to get the wherewithal to make an informed decision on this person," said Groob.

Background investigations are another tool private detectives use for their corporate clients. Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, investigators have seen a dramatic increase in business-sector demand for thorough background checks. More recently, they've found that interest typically spikes when there is an incidence of workplace violence.

In the wake of the Hernandez murder charge, some private investigators predict that sports teams will reexamine how they conduct background checks on players.

"I think there will be changes, and it won't just happen in the NFL," said Alan Sklar, president and CEO of Creative Services Inc., a global employment screening firm that counts the Celtics as clients for non-player background checks.

"You're going to have the NBA, Major League Baseball, hockey, everyone sit down. If they haven't done it yet, I'm sure they're in the process of saying, 'We don't want this to happen to us. What's the lesson learned here?'

"If there is a risk factor, then they probably will be a little more aggressive in trying to obtain information."

Checking for patterns

The insular sports world can work against thorough, objective player-background checks. According to private detectives, coaches, general managers, and team security may see only what they want when it comes to athletes they know well and who perform well. And some investigators suggest that background checks should involve interviews with people who know the athletes in question but are not invested in their future success.

"Over the years, I have discussed doing background due diligence for certain sports teams," said private investigator and attorney John Nardizzi, whose company, Nardizzi & Associates Inc., has conducted roughly a dozen athlete-background checks for professional teams. "The response from some who say they recognize the value of such research, but decline to do it, is that they believe their contacts on the ground — former coaches, explayers who are with the college or team and 'knew the guy real well' — are in a superior position when assessing character."

But appearances can be deceptive. When Hernandez greeted Kraft, it was often with a kiss on the cheek. Also, before he was drafted, Hernandez wrote a letter to Patriots player personnel director Nick Caserio addressing allegations of past drug use and offering to forfeit salary or reimburse the team if he failed any drug tests. And after he got his extension, Hernandez donated \$50,000 to the Myra Kraft Giving Back Fund, a charity established in honor of the owner's late wife.

To a private detective, these are not the important details.

With a name and a Social Security number, private detectives can locate records of any

criminal or civil cases, driving records, financial histories, and past residences, among other pieces of intelligence. These days, it's also easy to scan social media for clues to a person's character. From there, investigators can see red flags, whether it's an obvious problem such as run-ins with law enforcement or more subtle issues such as living beyond your means.

Private detectives look for patterns of behavior that can reveal character and perhaps predict future conduct.

Whether or not red flags emerge, some employers might be satisfied with database searches. But if there are problematic patterns, the followup work could involve interviewing witnesses in dismissed criminal cases, talking to former teachers, or visiting bars that the prospective employee frequents. Groob sometimes uses handwriting analysis as a screening tool because it's something he believes people cannot manipulate.

Investigations can range from a few hundred dollars for a basic database search to \$30,000 or more for surveillance by a team of private detectives. They can take a few days at a computer screen to a few weeks or more with neighborhood canvasses, witness interviews, and surveillance. For an investigation that includes interviews and surveillance on someone who arrives with a questionable past or raises red flags during detective work, Sklar said the process could stretch into months and approach \$100,000.

Had the Patriots hired Groob to investigate Hernandez before the contract extension, he said, he would have watched Hernandez at different times during the day and night, during the week and weekends, and followed him to night spots and wherever else he went outside Gillette Stadium.

"With professional athletes, generally these guys are out," said Groob. "So, I'd think within a couple of weeks we'd have some good information."

Groob said he would have conducted background checks on the people Hernandez socialized with regularly, and interviewed Hernandez's neighbors from his childhood home in Bristol, Conn., to his college years in Gainesville, Fla., to his time living at his \$1.3 million home in North Attleborough.

Other private detectives said they would have employed similar strategies.

"I'd be shocked from all the information that's come out if people in the neighborhood did not have complaints in the past about him," said Sharkey. "I would like to know what the neighbors would have said."

"If you showed up there and went door to door, I guarantee there would have been some comments about the type of behavior that was going on 24/7. That would have been valuable information."

'Still a little bit of a guess'

Prior to the draft every year, NFL security provides teams with background reports on draft-eligible players. NFL spokesman Greg Aiello described the reports as "a basic pre-employment background check conducted within the laws" that reviews publicly available documents, including court and financial records. In other words, the league and private detectives take very similar first steps.

In the NFL, teams then decide what additional information they need.

Asked if he anticipated any changes to the system after the Hernandez case, Aiello said, "Any time something like this happens, you always evaluate and look for ways to improve your procedures."

In his first comments about the Hernandez case, Patriots coach Bill Belichick said last month that the team will "continue to try to look at ourselves in the mirror and see where we can do a better job" when it comes to player evaluation. Belichick said the team considers a player's performance, intelligence, work ethic, motivation, and maturity, as well as personal history and "how we think he will be in our environment." And he repeatedly stated that they look at players on a case-by-case basis.

Every team has different evaluation procedures and different standards for player character.

With experience in the Secret Service, FBI, state and local police, NFL team security staff can expand upon the league's background reports and examine players with questionable pasts more closely.

"We would do an enhanced background on players who we had an interest in," said Steve Champlin, who was involved in player evaluations as an executive for three NFL franchises, most recently as the Indianapolis Colts' director of player development. "We would use the league's background check as a starting point, then drill down as far as we could.

"We included psychological testing, just to get a better picture of what makes the athlete tick. It would give us a good idea if a player had the mental toughness and football temperament to play at the NFL level and handle all the pressures that went with it.

"At best, it's still a little bit of a guess, but you want to take as much of the guesswork out of it as you can."

Ultimately, the effectiveness of background investigations can come down to how much employers really want to know.

"If pro teams really believe that good character guys lead to wins, then they're going to make the decision that it's worth doing a background check and looking into potential problems before they bring these guys onto the teams," said Nardizzi.

"I don't think it's a question of [giving them] advice. Some of them I just don't think believe it's really important, so they're not going to do it. They're willing to take a risk with cowboys, villains, and gamblers and say, 'This is the team that we're going to field.' They're not too worried about everything else."