

Sports MVP: Skadden's Jeffrey Mishkin

By Benjamin Horney

Law360, New York (November 25, 2015, 1:57 PM ET) -- Between representing the NBA in its ouster of Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling from the league and the NCAA in its continued quest to block players from turning the world of intercollegiate sports on its head, Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP partner Jeffrey Mishkin has spent the past year working on the highest profile of cases, landing him on Law360's list of Sports MVPs.

Mishkin, who has been with Skadden for roughly 15 years now, never intended to become one of the most influential sports attorneys in the world; in fact, he told Law360 that he went through law school "without ever once thinking about a legal career in sports."

But as a young associate at Proskauer Rose LLP in 1973, one of the first people Mishkin met was a fellow associate six years his elder named David Stern. Stern, who would go on to revolutionize the NBA during a three-decade run as commissioner, asked Mishkin one day if he was interested in working on a legal matter for the NBA, which at the time was a small client of Proskauer.

"I have never stopped working on NBA matters since," Mishkin said.

Mishkin worked as a litigator for Proskauer until 1992, at which point Stern, who had already been commissioner of the NBA for about eight years, asked him to come aboard and work for the league. Mishkin thought the gig as head of the NBA's in-house legal department was temporary, but he went on to have a seven-year run, helping the league get through a number of legal matters including collective bargaining negotiations and labor disputes with players, including the 1998 feud that led to a lockout-shortened season.

"David Stern clearly had a profound impact on me and my career, and if you would ask him, he would probably say he taught me everything I know," Mishkin said. "Frankly, that's not far from the truth."

MVP

SPORTS



Jeffrey Mishkin
Skadden

Mishkin ended his reign atop the NBA's legal department in 2000 and joined Skadden but retained the relationship with the NBA, and this year, his title of chief outside counsel to the league came into the public eye moreso than ever, during the NBA's successful attempt to banish Sterling from the league and force him to sell the Clippers after a racist tirade the disgraced ex-owner unleashed on his girlfriend was leaked to the media.

"Nearly all of my cases get attention in media, but in terms of public attention, the Sterling case was really in a class by itself," he said.

The Sterling saga was a long and twisted legal battle, but for Mishkin it is just one of a number of front-page matters he worked on this year. Mishkin is working with the NCAA in its ongoing fight over the organization's amateurism rules and is representing the NCAA, NBA, NFL, NHL and MLB collectively in their suit to block New Jersey from allowing sports betting.

Don Remy, chief legal officer for the NCAA, told Law360 that Mishkin has been "terrific" as the organization's outside counsel.

"Not only does he have impeccable judgment, instincts, and litigation skill, he is a terrific person to work with," Remy said. "He constantly offers practical solutions to complex problems in a manner that generates my utmost confidence.

"And he's the kind of person that when all the hard work is done, I enjoy joining for a ballgame," he added.

Mishkin's work this past year also extends to the sport of golf, where he has represented PGA Tour Inc. in a number of legal matters, including a still-in-progress class action brought by professional caddies accusing the pro-golf tour of using them as "glorified billboards" for sponsors. He also successfully persuaded sunglasses maker Oakley Inc. to drop claims against Rory McIlroy that could have undone a lucrative endorsement deal the golfer has with Nike.

Len Brown, chief legal officer for the PGA Tour, told Law360 that Mishkin's counsel is "invaluable."

"Not only is he a brilliant lawyer, but he has made his priority to understand our business," Brown said. "Knowing our overall objectives makes his advice that much more trustworthy and relevant."

-- Additional reporting by Jenna Ebersole, Jeff Zalesin and Beth Winegarner. Editing by Patricia K. Cole.