

LOURIE

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■ In 2005, Lourie helped craft a plea agreement for receiver David Smith, who pleaded guilty to third-degree burglary after breaking into a former girlfriend's house and allegedly choking her. Smith was sentenced to one year probation and ordered to pay \$550 for kicking out a police cruiser's rear window during his arrest.

■ Garcia is waiting to see if he can avoid sentencing by acceptance into a pre-trial intervention program. He is accused, in separate incidents, of public drunkenness and malicious injury to personal property for keying a car.

Lourie, who decorates his office with framed newspaper articles about his days in court with USC players, said it's business as usual when he has an athlete referred to him.

"They've got to drink from the same cup of justice as everyone else," said Lourie, who graduated from Tulane University and the USC School of Law. "We treat them like every other client."

SPREADING THE WORD

A season ticket holder for USC football, basketball and baseball, Lourie traces his popularity among athletes to Mitchell, who worked as a courier for the Lourie Law Firm in the summer of 2004.

"We knew Blake; he called me, and I was there for him," said Lourie, whose firm does the bulk of its work on civil cases and workers' compensation claims.

From there, he guesses, his reputation has spread by word of mouth. The university does not refer players to any lawyer.

"We don't give them a list of attorneys," said athletics director Eric Hyman. "I don't know anybody that does."

Lately, Lourie's association with arrested USC athletes has put him in a media spotlight previously trained on other members of his family:

■ His late father, Isadore, was a champion of civil rights and represented Richland County for 28 years as a state representative and state senator.

■ His older brother, Joel, has been a state representative and state senator since 1999.

Lourie works in the same Pickens Street law office his father opened in 1956. Father and son practiced together for two years before Isadore Lourie's death in 2003.

Civil cases might be his bread and butter, but Lourie's recent high-profile clients have him being stopped at athletics events by fans. Many people wish him good luck

NEAL LOURIE

Job: Lawyer, Lourie Law Firm

Education: Bachelor of arts, Tulane University, 1990; law degree, University of South Carolina School of Law, 1993

Quick hit: In large part because of major back surgery that prevents him from driving long distances, Lourie has a chauffeur taxi him and clients to and from court in his black Lexus SUV.

presents more challenges than a typical case, said Columbia lawyer Joe McCulloch, who represented USC athletes in the 1980s, as well as the university during an investigation beginning in 1988 into steroid use among football players.

Student-athletes are under a microscope, he said, and a good lawyer manages not only the case but publicity and the emotional well-being of the client.

"It frequently makes the lawyer work harder to get the thing back to be dealt with in a way proportionate to other students," McCulloch said. "You have to anticipate that the incident the student is involved in is going to be the subject of lots of gossip."

It's imperative to make a fee agreement with athletes and collect, he said, otherwise a lawyer risks running afoul of NCAA regulations.

Still, athletes' lawyers often are accused of getting them undeserved breaks.

In an e-mail to Lourie and to sports writers across the state, Thomas Dukes of Lexington calls Lourie a magician.

"As a USC (School of Law) graduate and having worked for Barney Giese, Richland County solicitor and son of former head football coach Warren Giese, wink, wink, you get these guys off with either charges dropped or (pre-trial intervention)," Dukes wrote.

Dukes, a Clemson fan and graduate, asked whether other arrested USC students receive the same treatment.

"It seems like every time an athlete gets in trouble they call Neal Lourie," Dukes said. "I think they're getting special treatment, yeah."

Lourie said he brushes those comments off.

"I'm doing my job," he said. "I'm not doing anything unethical."

As McCulloch noted, part of that job is counseling the student athletes.

"We're also talking about these kids' overall lives and not just this specific incident," Lourie said. "I sort of explain to them their careers are at stake."

His latest USC client is former

USC baseball team in March after being charged with six felony counts stemming from the alleged theft of \$9,600 of property — including three desktop computers and \$3,100 in cash — from an assistant coach's locker.

His next hearing is in August.

NEW RULES

In decades past, McCulloch said, an athlete caught driving drunk was as likely to be given a ride home by the police as to be arrested.

Not anymore.

With intense media attention, the possibility of jail time and professional careers at stake, McCulloch said that, if anything, student-athletes are treated more harshly than a non-student-athlete who is arrested.

McCulloch pointed to the Duke University lacrosse team scandal, where three players were accused of rape by an exotic dancer hired to perform at a house party.

After an uproar tinged with racial tension and politics, the charges were dropped by authorities after the accuser's credibility eroded.

"It would not be accurate to say athletes get red-carpet treatment today," McCulloch said.

Columbia lawyer Hemphill Pride, who has represented five USC athletes in the past two years, said the biggest disparity is the amount of publicity an athlete receives.

"If he is really an outstanding athlete, it will be front page news," said Pride. "It subjects him to a great deal of public attention for or against."

Athletes are advised by their lawyers not to speak to the media or in public about their legal troubles, Pride said, leaving no answer to the public chatter.

Pride represented senior tailback Cory Boyd in April after police said he was involved in gunfire at an off-campus party.

He noted there were many news articles about Boyd, but no charges have been filed.

Pride said a member of the Richland County Sheriff's office leaked Boyd's name to the media.

IN THE LOOP

As much business as Lourie gets from athletes, he doesn't get it all.

He's not representing either of the two freshman swimmers arrested in April on charges relating to a streaking incident through Olympia. Adam Middleton and Ciro Sauaia were dismissed from the swim team.

But those who do use him seem happy with his performance.

Despite no word on Garcia's acceptance into a pre-trial intervention program, his father, Gary Garcia, has been pleased with Lourie's work.

Gary Garcia said he asked a handful of friends in Columbia to recommend a lawyer. Lourie was mentioned several times.

"He's kept us informed and in the loop," said Gary Garcia, of Tampa, Fla. "He's been candid with us about the risks and rewards of every decision we make."

Efforts to reach the arrested athletes through the USC athletics department were unsuccessful.

The athletes aren't the only ones in the USC sports world who might need his help, either.

Former football coach Lou Holtz autographed a cartoon hanging in Lourie's office that shows the coach holding a flapping gamecock.

"When I need the best lawyer in the country," Holtz wrote to Lourie, "I will call you."

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