

Rising Star: Winston & Strawn's Jonathan Amoona

Law360 (August 27, 2018, 5:53 PM EDT) -- Winston & Strawn LLP partner Jonathan Amoona has turned a passion for playing sports into a career defending pro athletes' collective bargaining rights, including representing NFL stars Tom Brady and Ezekiel Elliott, as well as sports agent Dan Lozano, earning him a spot as one of four sports law practitioners under age 40 honored by Law360 as Rising Stars.

ON HOW HE BECAME A SPORTS ATTORNEY:

Amoona says he has been passionate about sports most of his life. He ran track through college before recurring hamstring injuries forced him to stop running, and was a receiver in sprint football at Cornell University. He was studying to be a sports journalist his junior year in college when he realized he wanted to be an advocate for athletes and changed direction.

"Sports was such a major part of my life growing up, and I just wanted to figure out how I could incorporate that into my career," he said.

A general interest in players' legal issues eventually developed into what Amoona says is the core of his practice: enforcing players' collective bargaining rights.

Using Brady's four-game suspension for his alleged role in Deflategate, a scheme to deflate footballs during a playoff game, as an example, Amoona said that even a star player is the "little guy" when facing disciplinary issues with an employer as powerful as the NFL and that the odds are stacked against them.

"You're one individual player taking on the league," he said.

In regard to Deflategate, in which the Second Circuit affirmed Brady's suspension, Amoona said that not only did NFL Commissioner Roger

RISING
 ★★★★★★
STAR



Jonathan Amoona
 Winston & Strawn

Age: 34

Home base: New York

Position: Partner

Law school: Georgetown University Law Center

First job after law school: Associate at Dewey & LeBoeuf LLP

Goodell maintain his own discipline as an arbitrator in the case, but that the standard for overturning an arbitration award in federal court is incredibly narrow.

“That’s what we do every day,” Amoona said. “We keep chipping away and make sure that these players and their CBA rights are respected,” he said.

WHAT MOTIVATES HIM:

Amoona said he is largely self-motivated, having learned the importance of hard work and discipline from running track in high school, skills he said helped him represent such clients as NFL players Elliott and Brady and sports agent Lozano.

“Track is what taught me discipline in my life,” he said. “You’re not going to succeed in that sport without discipline.”

The long hours and hard work required in college, law school and now as an attorney are manageable because Amoona learned persistence through sports, he said.

“That’s something that I learned from track,” Amoona said. “To have that discipline, to keep going, even when you’re exhausted, even when you feel like you can’t go anymore.”

Amoona said his current practice group operates similarly to a sports team. He credits fellow Winston & Strawn partners Jeffrey L. Kessler and David Greenspan for taking him under their wing when he started and teaching him skills necessary for good case preparation.

Citing the Ezekiel Elliott case, in which the Dallas Cowboys running back challenged a six-game suspension for alleged domestic violence, Amoona said that he and the Winston & Strawn team worked consistently for months on end, but such challenges are made easier when one enjoys what they do.

“At all times you put your best foot forward for the client, for what we’re trying to achieve,” he said. “And that comes with a ton of hard work.”

PROUDEST MOMENT AS AN ATTORNEY:

Amoona said he was most proud of his work for Lozano as he faced off against his former partners at Beverly Hills Sports Council in a \$40 million business dispute. The case started when Lozano left the firm, taking with him star baseball players including Joey Votto and Albert Pujols, news outlets reported.

“It was a make or break case for Danny,” Amoona said.

Amoona most remembers the personal relationship he developed with Lozano over his four-year representation in the dispute, from 2011 to a favorable arbitration decision in 2015, in contrast to other sports cases that last only months.

“Living that case with him, developing a friendship with him,” Amoona said, “and the joy of victory was

something that was great.”

BIGGEST CASE OF HIS CAREER:

Though Elliott ultimately dropped the appeal of his suspension, Amoona says the nonstop pressure of a case spanning several months was essentially about him seeking fairness for his client.

Amoona was fighting for a fairer disciplinary process for Elliott, he said, given that his client was suspended despite being unable to cross-examine the accuser, a woman the NFL investigator Kia Roberts determined was not credible.

Amoona said he was also challenging the inability to talk to Goodell about whether he knew the investigator determined the accuser was not credible when he approved Elliott’s suspension.

“It was just what we felt was a fundamentally unfair process,” he said.

A New York federal court declined to stop the suspension from going into effect, prompting an appeal to the Second Circuit to block the order. Elliott dropped his appeal in November 2017.

Though the courts ultimately did not side with Elliott, Amoona looks back at the case with some sense of accomplishment.

“I think that we did a great job at exposing what was wrong with his disciplinary process,” he said.

The fast-paced litigation of the Elliott case is also part of why Amoona said he’ll never forget the suit.

“You really had to dig deep, I think, on a case like that given the nonstop nature of the case over the course of several months.”

— *As told to McCord Pagan*

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2018 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,200 submissions. This interview has been edited and condensed.

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