

# SPORTS

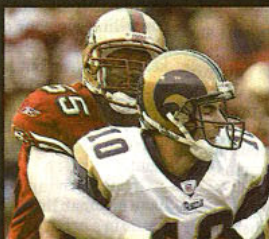
Friday, November 12, 2004

## Mill Valley sports agent Steve Baker juggles family life with his growing list of NFL clients

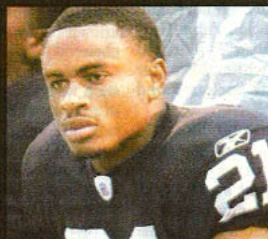
### Some of Baker's high profile clients



**JEFF GARCIA**  
QB, Cleveland Browns



**JAMIE WINBORN**  
LB, San Francisco 49ers



**NNAMDI ASOMUGHA**  
CB, Oakland Raiders



**ERIC JOHNSON**  
TE, San Francisco 49ers

# Balancing act

By Dave Albee  
*IJ reporter*

**T**HE OBJECT in the art of negotiating, it is said, is to reach a win-win proposition. Steve Baker has taken that one step further. He's in a win-twin situation.

The 46-year-old Mill Valley resident is a professional sports agent whose 15 or so NFL clients include Jeff Garcia of the Cleveland Browns, Eric Johnson and Jamie Winborn of the 49ers and Raiders former first-round draft pick Nnamdi Asomugha. It is Baker's job to help them win by getting them a creative contract with their

team and lining them up with imaginative and personal business interests off the field.

Baker's other winning effort in this equation are his twins, 5-year-olds Benjamin and Sabrina. It's his job to help them get to kindergarten in the morning where he might stay to be a teacher's helper, play his guitar or assist in a scavenger hunt before getting back to the bargaining table for his clients. This multi-tasking brings balance to Baker's life, though sometimes it's like balancing spinning plates on a broom stick.

Driving the kids to school then to karate or gymnastics

while talking to someone like 49ers general manager Terry Donahue about the best deal possible for a client can be a circus act.

No problem.

"I thrive on the juggling," Baker said.

Take for instance the day of Feb. 9, 1999. Baker's wife, Fox News reporter Claudia Cowan, was about to give birth to their twins six weeks premature. But first Baker had to be at their home in San Francisco's Marina District to sign papers and close the deal on a house they were buying in Mill Valley. Then, as Baker was heading to the hospital, he took a call on

his cell phone from Raiders executive Bruce Allen, who was in a hurry to sign one of Baker's clients, linebacker Richard Harvey. So, on the 15-minute drive to witness the birth of his children, Baker, working off the top of his head, suggested a contract that included a forfeitable signing bonus that Harvey liked and Allen bought.

Talk about delivering under pressure.

"I'm doing three things at once," Baker said.

Baker is very good at what he does and he may have been born to do it. His parents were his role models. His father,

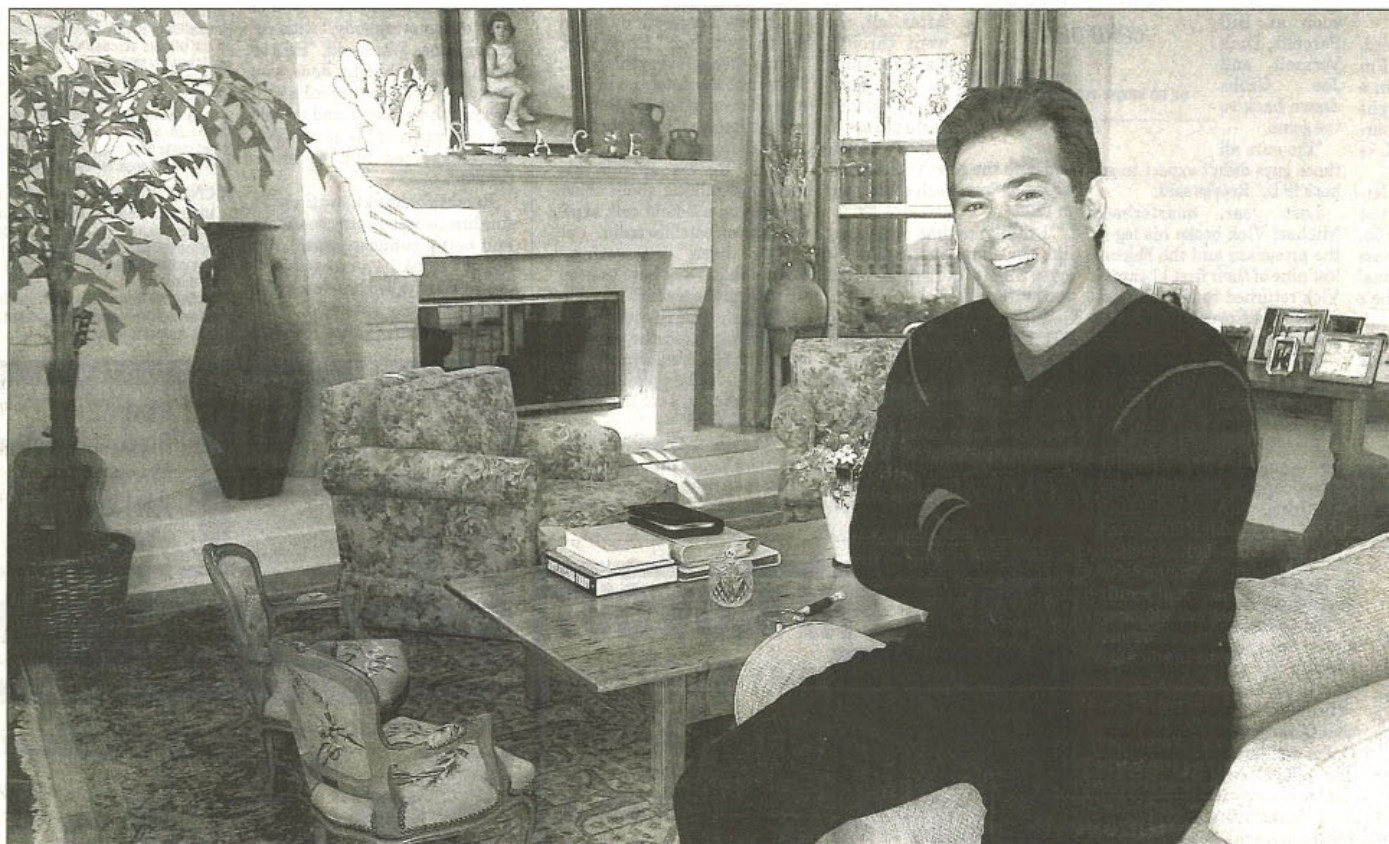
See Baker, page B4



**MARIN STYLE:** Player agent Steve Baker stands on the deck of his Mill Valley home.

IJ photo/Frankie Frost





U photos/Frankie Frost

**REPRESENTATION WITH CARE:** Steve Baker, sitting in the living room of his Mill Valley home, does his best to treat his clients in the manner he would like to be treated. 49ers linebacker Jamie Winborn and Eagles fullback Jon Ritchie, a former Raider, were both touched by poignant calls they received from Baker after sustaining serious injuries.

## Baker

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Edwin Baker, is a prominent tax attorney in New York who once represented John Lennon and Ed Sullivan. When his late mother, Doris, was a teen she interviewed John Fitzgerald Kennedy for a high school newspaper article.

### Hollywood dreams

Baker's big break, however, came when he went Hollywood. He was a first-year law student at Cornell University. A number of his classmates got summer jobs as interns at law firms. Baker wound up on the corner of Hollywood and Vine, holding a large photo of Jack Parr, asking 100 random passers-by if they could identify the former "Tonight Show" host.

Baker had taken a job writing game show questions for game show creator Mark Goodman, a client of Baker's dad. Baker was a behind-the-scenes researcher for "Card Sharks," "Family Feud," and "The Price Is Right."

Though he had aspirations of being a trial lawyer, Baker also wanted to be an entertainment attorney. He was in the right place and, as it turned out, the right time. Though a mutual friend at a party, Baker ran into prominent sports agent Leigh Steinberg, who eventually hired Baker and brought him to his office in Berkeley.

That's where Baker met his future wife. Cowan was a news anchor at a Monterey TV station and she walked into Steinberg's

*"He evaluates the players just as much as they evaluate the agents. The thing with him is Steve is a good person and so he only looks for good people."*

— Oakland Raider Nnamdi Asomugha

office looking for representation.

"I did a double take," Baker said. "We didn't represent her but I stayed in touch."

Baker wound up marrying Cowan and his life took on an even higher profile. His father-in-law is Warren Cowan, whose clients include Paul Newman and Merv Griffin. His mother-in-law is actress Barbara Rush, who co-starred in films with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Rock Hudson and has had a recurring role as Stephen Collins' mother "Grandma Ruth Camden" on the hit WB television show "7th Heaven."

It's evolved into The Six Degrees of Steve Baker. Through his many connections, acquaintances and circumstances, Baker has become a rising star in his own right. In 1990, he left Steinberg and started his own business.

"The lucky thing I had from my experience with Steinberg is I developed a great number of relationships without, frankly, having to sacrifice anything morally," Baker said. "This business is a very dirty business and I didn't have to do any of that."

### Earning his rep

Baker earned a reputation by establishing a small list of clients,

mostly Cal and Stanford players, and giving them more personal attention, similar to an approach used in the Tom Cruise movie "Jerry Maguire." A friend, Stanford track coach Brooks Johnson, recommended Baker's first client, Stanford tight end Charlie Young. He signed for the league minimum wage with the Raiders, less than \$100,000.

Now Baker is considered a big-time player in his line of work. He does million-dollar deals.

"I certainly have the connections and the resumé," Baker said. "My guiding principal of my business is I represent people the way I would want to be represented if I were in their situation. I've done the largest linebacker deal (Ken Harvey with the Washington Redskins) in the league. I've done the largest quarterback deal (Jeff Garcia with the 49ers) in the league. I've done the largest special teams deal (Brian Mitchell with the Redskins). At the same time, I've deliberately limited the number of clients I take."

### Client loyalty

Baker is productive, persistent and picky. His clients don't seem to mind one bit.

"Steve takes the business of representing a client to a new

level of service and intimacy and time given on his part," said injured Philadelphia Eagles fullback Jon Ritchie, who played with the Raiders and at Stanford.

Ritchie said Baker called and consoled him like a family member after the Eagles fullback suffered a season-ending left knee injury on Oct. 3. Winborn said he experienced the same sort of compassion and care last year after he learned he would need surgery on his neck. Baker immediately did his homework and found the best possible surgeon for Winborn then put Winborn's mind at ease by putting a positive spin on the future.

"My first day in the hospital he already had a game plan. It made me feel comfortable," Winborn said. "He has the ability to make all of his clients feel like they're the most important clients."

Baker leaves an impression with his clients that he's as much a big brother as a big-time agent.

"He likes filling the role of the pro agent and filling the role as best friend and mentor," said Johnson, who through Week 9 of the NFL season was leading all NFC tight ends in pass receptions. "He always takes clients he likes and that inspires him, too."

They must be special to fit into Baker's special life. He doesn't need to take on any potential head cases, clients likely to create more trouble than it's worth.

"He evaluates the players just as much as they evaluate the agents," Asomugha said. "The thing with him is Steve is a good person and so he only looks for good people."

### One busy family

The results have been very good because Baker has stayed very busy. His children are always on the move and his wife is busy these days covering the Scott Peterson case for Fox. Baker is spinning plates in his personal and business life yet Baker's clients are satisfied. They love his family Christmas cards.

"We have that respect for him. He has his priorities and values in order," Asomugha said.

Baker flourishes with this balancing act. He's giving it his best effort, whether he's at home with his family or at the league meetings looking out for the best interests of his clients, all the while showing off photos of his wife and kids back home.

At this stage of his life and career, Baker can afford to be selective.

"I'm not going to live in a bigger house. I'm not going to buy another car," Baker said. "I live a good life."

At the end of each day, it's all the same. A win-twin proposition.

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# Following the six degrees of Steve Baker

Positive word of mouth works well to build list of talented clientele for veteran sports agent

By Dave Albee  
IJ reporter

To compile his impressive list of NFL clients, professional sports agent Steve Baker of Mill Valley didn't have to do anything corporately complicated.

All he had to do was work hard, talk a lot and wait for referrals.

"My business," Baker said, "is almost completely word of mouth."

It's created a domino effect. For example, Baker signed quarterback Jeff Garcia as a client after Garcia joined the 49ers as a free agent in 1999. Coming from Calgary of the Canadian Football League, Garcia was looking for an agent and new 49ers teammates Greg Clark and Mark Harris, a pair of ex-Stanford players, suggested the quarterback call their agent: Baker.

Two years later, 49ers linebacker Jamie Winborn, a rookie out of Vanderbilt, was searching for an agent and 49ers guard Ray Brown, another Baker client, recommended he seek out Baker.

"He (Brown) told me Steve's a guy who's going to look out for you," Winborn said. "He's going to work as hard for you off the field as you work on the field."

Brown originally heard about Baker through running back/kick returner Brian Mitchell when he was with the Redskins. Mitchell was directed to Baker by Redskins teammate Ken Harvey, who was Baker's first big-name client.

Baker's clientele was initially built from his associations with Cal and Stanford players, but it's taken on a life of its own. Eric Johnson was a seventh-round draft



**WORD OF MOUTH:** Steve Baker, beginning his morning with a cup of juice at his Mill Valley home, has a simple and highly-successful formula: Work hard, talk a lot and wait for referrals.

choice in 2001 out of Yale yet he came to Baker after they met at a fashion show and cultural event to benefit Garcia's Hispanic Scholarship Fund that, to date, has raised half a million dollars.

It's in Baker's job description to look out for his clients off the field as well. He sets goals for his clients conducive to their personal interests. Winborn is currently working on a program to mentor high school students. Brian Mitchell's Sports Math Science program educates youth. When he was playing for the Minnesota Vikings, Kailee Wong authored a book

with his mother, Linda, entitled "Mom's Pocket Guide To Watching Football."

When he first met with Ken Harvey, Baker learned they both had a childhood fixation with Spider-Man. Baker, in fact, contacted comic book creator Stan Lee to see if Harvey could be in the 2002 film.

Speaking of spooky characters, Johnson and Nnamdi Asomugha, another Baker client, were honorary chairpersons for "Halloween Heroes," a kids trick-or-trick party at Zeum, a children's museum in San Francisco, on Oct. 26 that benefited the Junior Giants program.

When Baker did Asomugha's contract, it included a condition that Asomugha's high school football and basketball teams in Harbor City outside L.A. be outfitted in Nike athletic footwear. Baker negotiated Asomugha's contract with the Raiders over dinner at a restaurant with then team executive Bruce Allen. They wrote out contract details on a table cloth. Baker has it framed at his home in Mill Valley.

"They didn't have anything to write on but that's Steve. It was a by-any-means-necessary type of thing," Asomugha said.

Baker's best work may have been with Garcia. He arranged for the quarterback to appear as a pitchman in a national Lincoln Navigator television ad. He helped produce a My Best Completion Was My College Degree poster with Garcia's father, Bob. He put Garcia on the cover of Atari Backyard Football 2004 and helped him secure an endorsement pact with Good Guys. Baker, too, is featured in a Good Guys ad campaign entitled Experts Behind The Experts. Baker is pictured sitting at an office desk in the front window of the Walnut Creek Good Guys store.

Of course, a deal like this usually comes about from Baker's ability to talk. He's good at that.

When Baker was seeking out Asomugha as a potential client after the defensive back's senior year at Cal, the agent contacted Asomugha's mother, Lillian. He evidently impressed her, though she tried not to influence her son's decision.

"She said, 'I really think you need to talk to him.' That's all she kept saying," Asomugha said.

## Baker's clients

Steve Baker of Mill Valley has been a sports agent since 1986. He established his own business — Baker Sports Management — in 1990. He represents six former NFL first-round draft picks and four Pro Bowl players. Here is a partial list of his prominent clients — present and past — and the some significant deals Baker struck for them.

### JEFF GARCIA

Quarterback, Cleveland Browns. The former San Jose State standout in 2002 became one of the highest paid QBs in NFL history, the first to make \$20 million over two years.

### KEN HARVEY

Linebacker, Washington Redskins (retired). A first-round draft in 1988, he became the highest paid outside linebacker in NFL history at the time in 1998.

### BRIAN MITCHELL

Kick returner, New York Giants. In 1998 with the Redskins, he became the highest paid special teams player in the NFL.

### NNAMDI ASOMUGHA

Cornerback, Oakland Raiders. An arranged specialized pre-draft program with Alonzo Carter helped the former Cal star rise to a first-round draft pick in 2003.

### KAILEE WONG

Outside linebacker, Houston Texans. He had a unique contract escalator after signing as a second-round draft pick in 1998 out of Stanford then signed a \$13.2 million deal in 2002.

### COY WIRE

Safety, Buffalo Bills. An undersized linebacker at Stanford, he became a starter with the Bills at a new position and has a contract that, with an escalator, made him more money than 12 players selected ahead of him in the third round of the 2002 NFL draft.

### JAMIE WINBORN

Linebacker, San Francisco 49ers. Coming off a neck injury that ended his season last year, he signed a creative contract extension this year based on the number of games he suited up.

### ERIC JOHNSON

Tight end, San Francisco 49ers. A wide receiver at Yale, he signed a contract with an escalator this season that could make him one of the highest paid tight ends in the NFL.

### JON RITCHIE

Fullback, Philadelphia Eagles. He joined the Raiders in 1998 out of Stanford and, with a performance bonus in his contract, became the highest paid third-round pick in NFL history at the time. He also has had his own TV show, column in The Sporting News and clothing line.

### RAY BROWN

Offensive guard, Detroit Lions. In 1996 with the 49ers, he became one of the highest paid offensive guards in NFL history then, in 2001, he renegotiated his contract through the creation of a new salary cap exception to remain with the team.

### GREG CLARK

Tight end, San Francisco 49ers (retired). A playing time clause in his contract in 2000 made him one of the highest paid tight ends in NFL history.

### MIKE CROEL

Linebacker, Seattle Seahawks (retired). The AFC Rookie of the Year in 1991, he was cut from the NFL as an outside linebacker, but then was sent to NFL Europe to learn a new position — defensive end. He helped lead the Rhein Fire to the World Bowl championship in '98 then returned to the United States and signed with the Seahawks as a defensive end.