



# Marc Roberts

# Miami Worldcenter On The Horizon

## THE LEGENDARY SPORTS AGENT TOOK TWO COMPANIES PUBLIC BEFORE SETTING HIS SIGHTS ON REAL ESTATE

WORDS BY DIRK DESOUZA

PERHAPS ONE OF LIFE'S greatest advantages is that of perspective, the ability to see the forest for the trees, from heights one's rivals both envy and fear. Wilt, Dikembe, Kareem and Dirk have each naturally enjoyed perspective, surveying vast hardwood landscapes if only for a moment, towering over opponents to drive the ball forward, gaining ground by literally leaping over the competition. The Incans, too, understood the insulated power of height, as their sacred mountain-clad city Machu Pichu soared towards the heavens leaving mere mortals far more vulnerable on the ground. NFL team owners know a thing or two about height, too, soaking in gridiron formations from the luxurious perspectives of their sky box. Then conventional wisdom and logic should dictate that some of the most exciting sporting event shots originate from the lofty confines of the Goodyear Blimp. They do, because there's power up there.

If one drives across the McArthur Causeway, past the \$20 million homes on Star Island (nodding to Shaquille's palatial waterfront compound if only for a moment), past music producer Scott Storch's home studio, past the dozen or so cruise ships readying the masses for the Caribbean, past former Eagles patriarch Norman Braman's spectacular yacht at the Miami Beach Marina, and toward the sands of South Beach, the gleaming Setai condominium towers above virtually all else in America's most exciting enclave. The Setai is all about height, all about perspective.

Up in the penthouse, past the Bentley Continental GT awaiting valet, past the hushed Zen lobby, stands Marc Roberts, the man with perspective, and he's on a roll.

"OK, do you see those four towers – one, two, three, four," pointing out through a 10 foot high wall of glass, "just across from the American Airlines Arena? Those buildings I don't own, but they're like the gateway to the project. Starting on the next block,



PHOTO BY MICHAEL NEAL

all that land – it's mine." We're standing in Marc's sun drenched, spectacularly opulent living room, towering over South Beach, easily counting and discussing buildings that are six miles away. Six miles. Marc is really starting to get excited, reeling off stats like Bob Costas, "Four years, forty-four owners, forty-four individual transactions, some of it ultimately totaling \$26 million per acre. Most of the lots weren't even for sale! I didn't take no for an answer!"

Marc's controlled euphoria is well deserved; he and his partner have already spent over \$300 million acquiring 25 acres of prime, Kobe beef-grade, downtown Miami real estate. No developer has ever succeeded in assembling such a large chunk of the heart of

Miami. This acquisition spree has suddenly, (a relative term for the long-term investor), made Marc Roberts the pacesetter of what's to become the largest mixed-use, commercial / residential, urban planning project in the US, Miami Worldcenter; bigger than anything in New York, Los Angeles, or Las Vegas. "Miami's version of Times Square" as Marc simply puts it, plus 20 million square feet of restaurants, shopping, clubs and towers of glass.

Marc, at 48, is a long way from his former self; a fledgling but scrappy 19 year-old boxing promoter who dropped out of college as a freshman. He proudly admits now what he rarely admitted to others then, "I had no idea what I was doing. Knew nothing about boxing, but I already had a fight scheduled, so I charged forward." Legendary sports writer Jerry Izenberg jokes on Marc's naiveté, "I told him that being a boxing promoter meant one thing: after his autopsy it would say 'death by suicide!'"

Marc's improbable journey from adolescent promoter to the upper echelons of world-class real estate development, from his decidedly humble familial roots in West Orange, New Jersey, is testament to an insatiable competitive drive, doggedness, and willingness to take profound risks at the most pivotal points in his life. "I never take no for an answer. Most people give up or

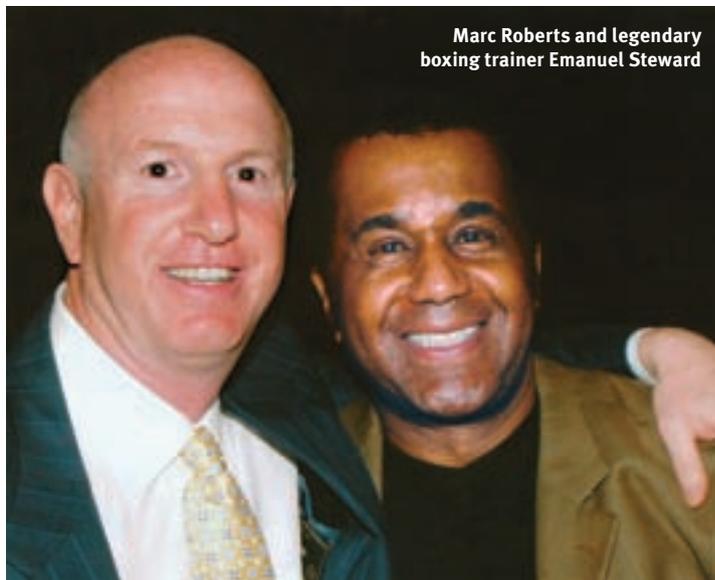
are afraid when they don't know the answers to something; with me, I go figure it out, even at 19. Fearless," Marc says matter of fact, feverishly fielding phone calls and emails on his Blackberry. In repose on a gorgeous leather chaise, he can't stop multitask-

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ing. An autographed photo of Marc and President Bush is angled towards him.

But the ascendancy of Marc Roberts involves a story, and quite a Cinderella story it is. Roberts' sporting career began on a whim at American University in Washington DC, where he played basketball on a scholarship. His teammate, Russell Bowers, was their Division's leading scorer, sending sports agents clamoring to his doorstep all hours of the day and night. "The school banned the agents from campus, so I decided right there to be Russell's agent. Why not? I dropped out after three semesters." So began the transition from lanky boy athlete to sports agent businessman. But things weren't completely fortuitous; Bowers blew out his knee driving to the basket, essentially squashing his NBA dreams, but Roberts, shaken but not stirred, ultimately brokered a deal sending Bowers to the European Basketball League. Money started flowing in as other players began knocking on Roberts' door – a sports agent was born.

The magnetic, visceral force of boxing was too great to ignore, and New Jersey beckoned. Legendary boxer, trainer and HBO Sports figurehead Emanuel Steward puts it this way, "Marc Roberts? The Boy Wonder! I'll never forget the day I met him in Newark. All black neighborhood, and here's a skinny white kid, completely crazy, selling candy and promoting fights in the hallway



Marc Roberts and legendary boxing trainer Emanuel Steward

of the gym." In retrospect, he adds, "Unbelievable. That kid came from nothing, and did it all on his own."

Promoting fights proved to be a hardscrabble living, Darwinian for both fighters and fightmakers, but luck and serendipity finally brought Roberts, then 20, local fame and fortune via Thomas "Hitman" Hearns, for whom he negotiated a multi-million dollar endorsement deal. That deal was a turning point, illustrating, far beyond a particular prize fight at hand, that Roberts had a new perspective; he saw the bigger picture.

Other fighters followed on Hearns' coattails; amateur fighters Ray Mercer, Charles Murray and Al Cole all joined Roberts' roster of talent, prompting Marc to launch Triple Threat Enterprises, a management company which promoted over 100 boxing events, from Madison Square Garden to the casinos of Las Vegas. Two PT Barnum-like years later – Marc acting as ringmaster and puppeteer, expertly working fighters, investors, media and crowds – Triple Threat became the first boxing management firm in history to go public, netting him millions and giving the impresario Don King serious competition. NASCAR superagent Jay Schulthess of Mercury Sports Management, who's career he



credits Roberts as kickstarting, adds insight to Roberts' secret sauce, "I have never met a stronger networker. I've seen Marc walk into a room and instantly change the dynamic of the entire crowd to be a more positive place." Roberts protégé, NFL player agent Joel Segal, who just signed Andre Woodson and Glenn Dorsey and represents Reggie Bush, Michael Vick, Jason Campbell and Muhsin Muhammad adds, "Marc is called The King for a reason."

But the stamp Roberts wished to place on sports wasn't yet sealed. Just five years after Triple Threat, Roberts took his next sports management venture, Worldwide Entertainment, pub-

lic onto NASDAQ in 1995. His client roster included fighter Shannon Briggs, the NFL's Antonio Freeman, and the NBA's Derek Anderson. The securities markets wanted a piece of Roberts' gold, and the intrigue of investing in hundreds of fighters, NBA and NFL players in Worldwide's talent roster was too sexy, too show business to resist. The offering made Roberts a very rich man. His friend Charles Koppelman, now Chairman of Martha Stewart Omnimedia, is succinct in his description of how Roberts achieved such success, "He is incredibly smart, he has great instincts and he's a rainmaker."



MIAMI WORLDCENTER PROJECT RENDERING



Along the way, Roberts was smartly toiling in real estate. His first deal? One hundred acres of prime New Jersey land that netted him and two partners \$500,000. He was 21 years old, flush with \$175,000 cash, and the experience was sublime. “That was a LOT of money back then. It’s a lot of money now. But I learned two lessons I always kept with me: it’s a great idea to have an attorney as a partner; and limited partnership structures are key,” he says. Over the next 20 years came a real estate acquisition and development spree, with Roberts initiating scores of projects coast to coast. But those projects pale in comparison to Miami Worldcenter.

Back at the sun drenched Setai (where he at one point owned eight oceanfront units), Roberts works his home automation touchpad to adjust the window coverings. It’s also from here he controls his almost billion dollar empire. “Miami Worldcenter is going to be a city within a city,” he explains.” There will be high rises and low buildings just like a cityscape. Middle market condominium housing, 5-Star hotels, Class A office towers, a World Trade Center complex, shopping, nightlife and entertainment over multiple blocks.” Leaving nothing to chance, Roberts and his partner, Art Falcone of the Falcone Group, have a hired

master planner extraordinaire – Boston’s Elkus|Manfredi, whose work on New York’s Time Warner Center, Los Angeles’ The Grove and West Palm Beach’s CityPlace is widely renowned. Strategically located within blocks of the intracoastal waterway and cruise ship turning basin, Miami Worldcenter will be within walking distance of American Airlines Arena, Miami Art Museum, Bayside Marketplace and Miami’s new \$500 million Performing Arts Center. “We foresee, four to five years from now when the real estate market calms down, that we’re sitting on a \$10 billion project.” Falcone knows the B-word; he sold his previous homebuilding company, the largest private residential concern of its type in the US, for about \$2 billion. What Roberts and Falcone envision is unprecedented for Miami, but seems a fitting milestone for Roberts’ not-quite-Horatio-Alger but superlative life trajectory.

Does Roberts miss sports? He lights up like a kid in a candy store, “I made a lot of really great friends over the years. I just came back from an invitation to watch the Steelers play and it was great – 50 yard line skybox, field passes for my kids, that’s what it’s about...I’m still in the game.” ■



PHOTO BY MICHAEL NEAL