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The splendid son? John-Henry Williams seen as protector, exploiter

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As legendary Red Sox hitter Ted Williams entered a conference room at the Ramada Plaza Hotel last weekend, several in the crowd of autograph-seekers gasped.

The man who once smashed baseballs and baseball records was in a wheelchair, pale and sickly looking. Helped into a chair on a raised platform in a corner of the room, Williams spent the next two hours signing his name to cards and posters. At the age of 79, Williams has such poor eyesight that he no longer signs round objects like bats and balls.

Fans and collectors who paid a minimum of \$ 225 for the privilege of getting his autograph crowded the room.

During the event, which was cut short because Williams got tired, his 29-year-old son John-Henry Williams stood behind his father, arms folded, surveying the scene.

John-Henry Williams, controller of all things Ted Williams. John-Henry Williams, manager of his father's affairs, marketer of his father's legend.

"I don't know why they put this man through this," a fan said as he strained his neck for a glimpse of the elder Williams. A couple nearby pointed to the son and glared.

The younger Williams is used to the finger-pointing, for his reputation is a contradiction. To some, he is a caring son who came to his father's rescue after three strokes and many more bad business deals. To others, he is an opportunist exploiting his aging father, living off his marketability.

Williams blames much of the criticism on his campaign to clean up fraud in the sports memorabilia business, and his habit of publicly and loudly confronting dealers selling items bearing forged signatures of his father.

"A guy told me this the other day, 'If you are not making waves, you are not kicking hard enough,' " Williams said. "I am trying very, very hard to clean up . . . this business. I make people aware they have bad autographs."

For the last five years, John-Henry has been responsible for everything related to Ted Williams. He is the most important voice in deciding what his father signs, how it is marketed and sold, and who the family does business with.

Last month, John-Henry Williams traveled to Boston to help the FBI set up a sting to recover two Ted Williams championship rings he says were stolen. It was a case that generated headlines across the region, and resurrected talk about the younger Williams's role.

John-Henry Williams has been involved with at least six different corporations, one of which went bankrupt and two

others that no longer exist. He also opened and closed a Ted Williams Store at the Atrium Mall in Newton.

In one respect, the results of Williams's efforts on his father's behalf are impressive: The value of Ted Williams memorabilia today is tops in baseball. A bat signed by Ted Williams, for example, sells for as much as \$ 2,000. Williams, in several interviews during the past few years, has spoken of how happy his son has made him, and of his support for his son's business efforts.

But the success has not come without controversy:

- At least three legendary sports figures - Bobby Orr, Larry Bird, and Charles Barkley - were dissatisfied with business deals they entered into with John-Henry Williams or companies he was affiliated with, according to sources familiar with the deals.

Sources say the athletes entered into the deals largely because they involved Ted Williams or his name.

Orr is angry he was given copies of a limited edition photograph of a 1992 appearance by him, Bird, and Ted Williams, instead of cash as he was promised by John-Henry, sources said. Bird did receive cash, the sources said.

"It is hard for me to believe Bobby Orr is not happy," Williams said. "He was treated fairly and got more out of the deal than some of the others involved."

Bird, the former Celtic great, and NBA star Charles Barkley signed contracts five years ago with Grand Slam Marketing, a now-defunct company formed by Williams and two partners.

Those contracts were later transferred to the Ted Williams Card Co., which produced a card set with a series titled "Larry's Hardcourt Legends" and "Sir Charles Royal Court."

Sources said the Ted Williams Card Co. went bankrupt before Bird and Barkley received royalties they had expected.

Barkley's agent, Glen Guthrie, would not discuss specifics of the deal, but said he and Barkley "are evaluating all of our options." A representative of Bird said he had no comment.

Williams said he was aware of the deals with Bird and Barkley, but said they were negotiated by Brian Interland, one of his partners. He also said he had little to do with the day-to-day operation of the Ted Williams Card Co., which was the entity that actually produced the cards.

"I was a minority investor with others and lost money on the deal," he said. "It is unfortunate the company went into bankruptcy."

- A Marblehead man, Lane Forman, said he was supposed to receive royalties for helping Grand Slam Marketing gain access to Bird and Barkley. He has copies of contracts signed by Interland and another Grand Slam Marketing employee. Williams, however, said Forman was paid whatever he was owed.

Forman's attorney, Kelley Landolphi, sees it differently. He said his client is considering legal action.

"One wonders what has taken place here," he said. "We want some kind of accounting."

- A Winchester doctor friendly with the Williams family for many years sued John-Henry's company, contending that he was not paid \$ 140,000 he was owed for brokering the purchase and production of rare Ted Williams photographs taken in the 1930s. John-Henry Williams denied the claims in the lawsuit, but settled the case by paying what his lawyer called a "nuisance" fee.

There is no question the memorabilia business is big business, and that because of it, John-Henry Williams enjoys a comfortable lifestyle.

He is listed as the owner of two homes: One is at the Black Diamond Ranch, an exclusive golf community in Florida. The other is a new house in Franklin, the hometown of his girlfriend.

There are cars, including a BMW 740iL, and until recently, a 1978 Porsche 930.

Williams hears the talk that he is exploiting his father. He says comments like those at the recent New York autograph session bother him. He knows people question why a 79-year-old is signing posters when he should be kicking back and relaxing.

But he says those comments come from people who don't know him or his father. In fact, he said, his father looks forward to the signing sessions, even if he finds it more and more difficult these days to get around and to travel.

"My father only does what he wants," he said. His father actually does very few autograph sessions, he said, but the ones he does do, he likes. "He loves seeing the fans and talking with them."

Ted Williams is a huge draw at any card show, and promoters are willing to pay large sums to land him. Before New York, the last show he did was in Atlantic City in 1996, reportedly for a fee of \$ 500,000. But some say the son's business drive goes too far.

Joseph Lemieux, former director of the Ted Williams Museum in Hernando, Fla., said he was disturbed that the museum bought memorabilia from Williams, who is on the museum board, and worried that the facility was becoming too commercial.

"I felt like John-Henry wanted to turn this into his own little retail store," Lemieux said.

Williams aggressively defends his business record, and wonders why no one talks of his successes.

George Katis, a New Hampshire businessman who worked with Williams to produce a CD-ROM history of his father's career, said the younger Williams often gets a bad rap.

"I think John-Henry is a professional, and I enjoy my business relationship and friendship with him immensely," said Katis, who says the CD-ROM project has yet to make any money.

Bruce Siegal, who was the treasurer of Williams's first company, said the cutthroat memorabilia business can breed resentment. "John-Henry has good looks, brains and access to a lot of money," Siegal said. "He has unlimited potential."

Others are not so sure.

"This is a real shame because of his father's reputation and standing," said Landolphi.

An unmatched hitting record

Ted Williams, who played his entire Major League career for the Boston Red Sox, has often been called the greatest hitter in the history of the game.

His most notable achievement was batting .406 in 1941, in his third season. No ballplayer has hit even .400 in the 56 years since.

Williams was a lifetime .344 hitter whose season's average was under .316 just once. He had a slugging percentage of .634 (the statistic measures a hitter's power at the plate by dividing his total bases by his at-bats). Those stats are all the more remarkable because he missed three seasons at the peak of his career (ages 24 to 26) to fight in World War II and most of three more seasons because of his participation in the Korean conflict, and injuries.

He hit 521 home runs, won six batting titles, two Most Valuable Player awards, and two Triple Crowns (signifying the highest batting average, most home runs and most runs batted in). He led the American League in home runs four times, in RBIs four times, in runs scored six times, in doubles twice, in walks eight times, and in annual slugging average nine times.

He won his last batting title in 1958, at the age of 40. In his last at-bat - at Fenway Park on Sept. 28, 1960 - he hit a home run.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO, 1. John-Henry Williams (left) and his famous father at the Ted Williams office in Citrus Hills, Fla. The younger Williams's business dealings in sports memorabilia have drawn criticism from some fans and sports stars. / GLOBE FILE PHOTO / JOHN TLUMACKI 2. Ted Williams, pictured at left with his son John-Henry at training camp in Florida in earlier times. The younger Williams, who has had control of his father's business dealings for the past five years, has taken heat for his tactics in cleaning up the sports memorabilia business. / GLOBE PHOTO / JOHN TLUMACKI 3. A photo, from Sportsworld in Everett, shows sports legends Bobby Orr, Ted Williams, and Larry Bird, with signatures under each. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / BILL BRETT

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