

Young Enough: The story of NFL agent Alvin Keels

by MARK GREY 7.1.09

The year was 1999. The place was Hampton University and the event was a celebrity basketball game for charity. Everyone has seen charity events with a long list of celebrities scheduled to appear, but this one was different. At this one, they were actually all there. Allen Iverson, the biggest name in basketball, was there. Joe Smith and Jerry Stackhouse were there, along with several other well-known Tar Heels. The fans got way more than they expected. The biggest surprise of all was that the entire game was put together by a 20-year-old college student. The game marked the first time that an unknown kid from Chesapeake, VA named Alvin Keels would deliver more than expected for his clients. However, it certainly would not be the last.

It's been almost ten years since that charity basketball game and the NFL agent and CEO of Global Management, Alvin Keels, still remembers it like it was yesterday "I still look at that game as one of my proudest accomplishments." That's a pretty high honor from a man who has negotiated some of the biggest contracts in NFL history. "After that game, I kind of just fell into being an agent and the rest is history." And history it is.

It's 9am on the fifth rainy day in a row in Portsmouth, Virginia, but by the smile and the energy Keels has, one would think it was 3pm in Hawaii. As he pulls away from his 6,500 square ft waterfront home in his luxury SUV, with one phone in hand, a blackberry in the cup holder, and a third phone charging, Keels runs down the list of duties for the remainder of the day. He has been up since 7 and has already seen the kids off to school, read and replied to over a dozen emails, and spent an hour on the phone...and this is all before he even gets to his office. "As an agent, you're always working. My phone is always on I haven't had a vacation since I got into this business." Keels's commitment to his job, along with his persistence, has made him one of the hottest up and coming agents in the industry.

While the fans at that charity basketball game 10 years ago never thought twice about who had organized such a game, one person who did was Lawrence Woodard. Woodard, a very high profile attorney who represents many of today's top athletes, saw promise in the young Keels. After some brainstorming between the two, they agreed to do some work together and Keels started his first company at the age of 20.

Keels, a college athlete himself at Elizabeth City State University at the time, had a decision to make. "I was a pretty good baseball player in college and even had a chance to pursue it professionally, but I had to decide if I wanted to chase a dream around the minor leagues for years or get a head start on my professional career." Keels chose the latter of the two and never looked back.

By age 21, Keels had his first client, Renard Cox, out of the University of Maryland. Cox went undrafted but did play two years in the NFL. The following year, he landed another Terp, preseason Heisman candidate running back Lamont Jordan. Shortly after signing Jordan, Keels was introduced to standout wide receiver Koren Robinson, whom he would soon also sign. Robinson would go on to be the ninth player drafted overall in 2001, and Jordan the 49th. There were many who questioned if the inexperienced Keels would be able to handle the contract demands of such high picks, but those questions were answered in no time. Both Robinson's and Jordan's contracts were done with no problems, as Keels had negotiated his first multimillion dollar contracts before he even turned 23.

Even with his first two contracts under his belt, Keels still had a lot to prove. "A lot of the families of the players I recruited didn't believe in me, which I could understand because I was the same age as their sons. They really didn't trust me to handle their kids's careers, but I didn't let that stop me." One of Keels's closest friends wasn't even sold on his ability to get the job done at such a young age. "I knew DeAngelo Hall since he was in high school. He used to run track for my dad and was friends with my younger brother." When the talented Hall's time came to pick an agent, he passed on Keels but did retain him as a business manager. However, Keels wasn't bothered "that was fine with me because by being his manager, it gave me a chance to prove what I can do."

Every draft following 2001, Keels added rookies like Kelly Washington, Sam Aiken, and Julian Battle to his client list, but there were still questions about his ability to land his players that coveted big second contract. In 2005, Keels made the most of his first opportunity to answer his critics. In his first crack at free agency, Keels negotiated the largest contract ever by a back-up running back in NFL history when Jordan signed his 5-year, 28-million dollar deal with the Oakland Raiders. "When Alvin told me how much he thought he could get me, I thought he was crazy at first," Jordan says. "I remember wondering if he knew what he was doing, but I had been with him for four years and he hadn't let me down yet so I trusted him, and it paid off." Paid off it did. Jordan received more money than anyone expected, and once again Keels had proved himself.

One person who took special interest in Jordan's record breaking deal was Larry Johnson Sr., father of Chiefs

running back Larry Johnson. At the time Johnson was a back-up running back looking to get a big pay day on his next contract, similar to Jordan. Keels recruited Johnson out of Penn State, but Larry and his father wanted a more experienced agent at the time. Despite going with another agent, Larry Sr. stayed in contact with Keels and when the family was ready to change agents, Keels got the nod this time around. Keels got the chance and once again delivered as he negotiated a 5-year, 43.2-million dollar contract that made Johnson the highest paid running back in NFL history.

With the Johnson deal, Keels made his mark in the NFL. General Managers all across the league knew his name and he still wasn't even 30. Shortly after that, he took over as Hall's full time agent and negotiated a 7- year, 70-million dollar deal for him in Oakland, adding one more mega-deal to his resume. Even with a track record that speaks for itself, Keels still gets funny looks from the parents of recruits. "I still have to prove myself to the families," Keels laughs. "They see me and say, 'You're young. Are you sure you can handle this?'" While others see his age as a problem, Keels sees it as a plus. "Because of my age, I am able to relate much better to my clients than other agents."

It's now 1 pm and Keels is at his desk at his downtown office talking about his life as an agent. "Everyone thinks agents are all snakes or crooks. That's not the case at all. I'm a family man, a man of God, and I believe in being honest." He pauses as his receptionist lets him know he has a phone call from the Jets about his client, Leon Washington. After 10 minutes on the phone, he picks right back up mid sentence as if nothing happened. "I love my job. I love the competition and I love getting my clients what they deserve," he finishes.

If the true test of an agent is getting his clients the money they deserve, Keels is no doubt up there with the best. While other agents may have a more impressive list of clients, few have more impressive contracts. Any agent can get the Tom Bradys and LeBron Jameses of the world the top dollar, but it's getting the other 98 percent of the athletes paid that sets agents apart. Many of today's so-called "top agents" have a list of superstars, but many of their clients are unhappy with their contracts. At Global Management, you will be hard pressed to find a client unhappy with his contract. In fact, many of Keels's clients are regarded as some of the most overpaid players in the NFL. Gibril Wilson's and Hall's new deals this off-season left local papers questioning if their teams had overpaid for Keels's clients.

As he glances at the autographed jerseys from his clients and the awards for involvement in the community that hang on his office walls, he thinks about his journey to where he is today and laughs. "The road was far from easy. I was told 'no' so many times I can't even remember. As a 20-year-old kid, I went after Lavar Arrington, Michael Vick, Courtney Brown, and some I can't even remember. I went after the biggest names in college football and I didn't even have one client." Even he laughs when he thinks about how crazy that sounds. Just when he starts to look like he is finally comfortable with what he has accomplished, he doesn't allow himself to bask in his own success even for a second. He jumps up, grabs his blackberry, and is out of the door in less than a minute.

As he gets in the SUV to head to a speaking engagement at a local school, he makes a quick call to one of his newest clients, the 2009 sixth overall pick Andre Smith, just to check on him because "this job never stops...I work for my clients around the clock." After he speaks to the kids, it's back on the road...which means back on the phone. He calls the Denver Broncos to check to see how Jordan is doing after hearing the team had brought in another running back. After getting the answer he is looking for, he pulls into his driveway. One more phone call to his mother to confirm that they are still on for dinner tomorrow, a kiss for his kids, and he ducks into his home office. It's almost 7pm now and Keels knows his day isn't even close to done. "It's not even 4 o'clock on the West Coast yet; I have clients all over the country."

The clock strikes 11 pm before Keels finally takes the Bluetooth out of his ear. "That should be it for the night," he says, looking no more tired than he did when the day started. With 15-hour days as routine, most can only wonder how he does it and looks stress-free. It is now midnight and what his client's parents once saw as his biggest downside now looks like his biggest asset: he is young, hungry, and still wide awake.

Follow Alvin Keels on twitter @ALVINKEELS