
New Books

Donald Dell, John Boswell. *Never Make the First Offer (Except When You Should): Wisdom from a Master Dealmaker.* New York: Portfolio Trade, 2009/2011. 224 pages. \$16.00 (paperback), ISBN: 1591843464.

Don't judge a book by its title — certainly not until you've read the subtitle. In the eyes of some prospective readers, Donald Dell, a high-profile sports agent, may already have two strikes against him. First, books by agents tend to be self-promoting and shallow, Exhibit A being *The Power of Nice* by Ronald Shapiro. And, at first glance, Dell's title about never making the first offer looks to promise more of the same, until you catch the small print *Except When You Should*. For every negotiation rule, Dell suggests with this subtitle, you will find plenty of exceptions.

Dell represents champion tennis and basketball players and events such as the French Open. His book is a refreshing departure from standard fare. He recounts both his successes and failures, in the process painting a more nuanced picture of negotiation as a dynamic process, often full of surprises. A lawyer by training and an athlete himself, Dell prides himself on being well prepared but admits there have been countless times when something unexpected upset his plans. He writes that the only hedge against such surprises is to assume that there must be things that you still don't know. "This advice will not only keep your mind up to speed with the deal and force you to consider the other party's motivations," he says, "but it will also keep your ego in check."

Dell acknowledges the role that luck has played in his career. He happened to graduate from law school just when professional tennis went big time. His tennis friend Arthur Ashe asked for representation and Stan Smith soon followed. Having those two clients attracted others to him.

Dell has been lucky in specific negotiations, too. In the mid-1980s, he represented basketball player Patrick Ewing, the New York Knicks number one draft choice. Although there had been no contract discussions yet, the team's public relations representative called to ask if they could put Ewing's picture on the brochure for season tickets. Dell said yes immediately, realizing that by locking themselves in, the Knicks wouldn't be able to play hardball. Ewing became — by far — the highest paid player in the National Basketball Association.

Dell comes across as an affable, engaging guy. He attributes much of his professional success to networking. He leaps to do favors for people, figuring that they may be returned in the long run, but he warns against keeping a ledger of what's given and what's repaid: rewards may be a long time coming if they are received at all.

For example, Dell tells how Arthur Ashe introduced him to an untutored thirteen-year-old boy in Cameroon who had extraordinary natural gifts. After seeing him, Dell called the head of the French Tennis Federation, which provided training and an education for him. As readers who are tennis fans might guess, this was Yannick Noah, who went on to win the French Open and has since become a huge singing star. Dell represented him, of course, and more recently his son, Joakim Noah, who now plays basketball with the Chicago Bulls.

Never Make the First Offer (Except When You Should) is packed with such stories, many of which illuminate key tactical and strategic principles. Taken as a whole, they also give us a feel for a professional negotiator who relishes his work and still learns from it.