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Walters, Swartz target esports with new agency

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Former Relativity Sports executives Happy Walters and Josh Swartz are launching a new venture, Catalyst Sports & Media, that will focus on the business of three global, growing sports: basketball, soccer and esports.

Silicon Valley entrepreneur and Novo Construction CEO Jim Fowler is backing the new agency, which has hired some young executives, including Bryce Blum, an attorney who has carved a niche as an expert in esports. Blum will oversee esports as executive vice president.



The company, which is based in Santa Monica in the Los Angeles area and has a staff of 15, also hired former ESPN director of multimedia sales and marketing Brad Sive as its chief revenue officer, and Charles Jackson, son of New York Knicks President Phil Jackson, as an executive vice president, responsible for business development, investment and recruitment efforts.

Walters launched the former Relativity Sports, which was part-owned by film studio Relativity Media, in 2012 and grew it into one of the biggest agencies in sports. He started out in the music and entertainment industries and also represents NBA and NFL players.

Walters built Relativity Sports with the help of Swartz, who was hired as president in 2013 after working at Wasserman.

Walters left the firm in October 2015 and Swartz in January of this year after Relativity Media filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Relativity Sports, meanwhile, which did not have the financial problems that the movie studio had and never filed for bankruptcy protection, was relaunched as Independent Sports & Entertainment after receiving a cash infusion from investor and Pittsburgh Penguins co-owner Ron Burkle.



WALTERS

Catalyst will target basketball and soccer. Walters already has about a dozen NBA clients, including Iman Shumpert, Moe Harkless and Corey Brewer. Catalyst is in discussions about European acquisitions in the

soccer business and announcements are expected soon, Walters said.

But since the pair left Relativity Sports, both Walters and Swartz have been planning a new-generation agency.

“We’re veterans. We’ve been around a long time,” Walters said. “We are still going to represent clients and athletes, but we both feel, and I think that it’s been proven, that esports is going to be a major part of the landscape of sports.”

Swartz said, “Fundamentally, we are going to follow the eyes and the brands, the dollars,” Swartz said. “It’s easy to say that now with ratings slipping ... but younger consumers are not watching traditional sports the way they have in the past, and I think the most interesting and exciting space is esports.”

In recent months, owners of the 76ers, Warriors and Wizards, as well as Dodgers co-owner Magic Johnson, have made investments in esports teams. But Walters and Swartz have been eyeing the space for about a year and worked with Blum as a consultant before hiring him to oversee the division. Walters and Swartz also helped lead Relativity’s investment and partnership with Major League Gaming in 2012, and both said they are starting to learn and play the games as well, noting “Clash Royale” and “Smite” as some of their favorites.

Blum will continue to work at the Seattle-based law firm he co-founded, Interactive Media & Entertainment Law. Blum began representing esports players but now represents a variety of esports participants, including teams and businesses in the space.

As more esports teams and properties have become acquisition targets, Blum has become a hot commodity. “I have talked to so many people from traditional sports, investors and VCs, who are out there and see the opportunities in esports, and that’s great,” Blum said. “But Happy and Josh, they genuinely fell in love with the esports industry. They love the competitions. They love the games.”

Blum will join with Sive to help brands find opportunities in esports; connecting prospective investors to esports teams and businesses; and investing the firm’s money in esports-related businesses.

Catalyst has an investment with Super League Gaming, a recreational league played in movie theaters that just raised \$5 million in a Series C round of funding, and a partnership with GumGum, which provides in-image online advertising.

Catalyst has not yet decided whether it will represent esports players.

“This will be a comprehensive vertical around esports for a sports agency, which, to my understanding, will be



SWARTZ



BLUM



JACKSON



SIVE

the first," Blum said.

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