

LAW

# An attorney with a feel for the game

*Lonnie Ritzer mixes sports with corporate and real estate work*

ELIZABETH HEUBECK | CONTRIBUTOR

Lonnie Ritzer's resume reads like that of an accomplished sports attorney.

Fresh out of law school in 1979, he helped broker the sale of the Orioles to Edward Bennett Williams. That same year, he worked on the syndication of the stud rights to racehorse Spectacular Bid, which fetched a then-record fee of \$22 million.

He's also been the behind-the-scenes legal architect for many of the winning plays made by Cal Ripken Jr. off the field.

Yet he's not a sports lawyer but rather a business attorney who heads up the tax law practice of Shapiro Sher Guinot & Sandler.

Ritzer credits the path his career took to a business relationship struck up when he was still in law school. Colleagues and clients say his broad expertise, combined with a focused and fair style of doing business, broadened his reputation. Throughout the journey, Ritzer has retained a zeal for sports that goes back to his baseball-playing days as a kid growing up in Brooklyn.

He turned his attention to law school when he realized he wasn't going to live his dream of becoming a professional baseball player.

"I was 5 feet seven [inches tall] coming out of high school, and I stayed that way. In college, people kept growing on me," said Ritzer, 52.

The dream of playing pro ball didn't seem unrealistic to Ritzer, as several players from or near his Brooklyn neighborhood — including Lee Mazzilli and Willie Randolph — debuted in the major leagues at about the time he was preparing for the bar exam.



## Taking the field

**An avid baseball player as a kid growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y., Lonnie Ritzer today handles complex tax and real estate cases for Shapiro Sher Guinot & Sandler. He is the legal architect behind many of the off-the-field winning plays by Cal Ripken Jr. and other sports clients.**

Ritzer credits his call to the big leagues to a relationship he struck with Ron Shapiro.

Shapiro, who in 1976 founded the sports and entertainment management firm Shapiro, Robinson & Associates, has negotiated more than \$500 million in contracts for a list of legendary sports figures that includes Ripken and Jim Palmer. Ritzer first met

Shapiro while taking a business planning seminar he conducted. Shortly afterward, Shapiro asked Ritzer to help him work on an endorsement deal for Ripken.

Though Ritzer makes his career path sound somewhat serendipitous, colleagues and clients tell another story.

"When I bring Lonnie in on a deal, it's like sending in a tank. We know he's

coming out with a deal,” said Joel Sher, senior partner at Shapiro Sher Guinot & Sandler.

But that’s not to say he bulldozes the opposition.

“Lonnie at heart is a very good transaction-based lawyer,” said Chris Flannery, chief operating officer of Ripken Baseball Inc. “He’s very fair in understanding both sides.”

Richard Alter, president and CEO of Manekin LLC, agreed. “Lonnie’s thorough, but not in an adversarial way,” he said. Ritzer counseled Manekin through the commercial real estate company’s development of Bulle Rock, the world-class golf course in Harford County. According to Alter, Ritzer’s combination of skills helped steer Manekin through zoning hurdles, finance challenges and contracts.

Coupled with his professional style, Ritzer’s core knowledge of tax and real estate law continues to land him complex sports transactions.

Ritzer calls his work on Ripken’s Aberdeen baseball complex “a dream.” Of the project’s multiple components — youth baseball fields, the minor league home of the Aberdeen Ironbirds — he gets most animated when discussing the work of Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation. That’s the charitable arm of Ripken’s company that teaches the game to kids from disadvantaged backgrounds.

“You take a kid who has basically never had anything in his life and give him this few-day stint. It’s just something that’s so heartwarming,” Ritzer said.

Involved from the conception of the



### **A tax lawyer, Lonnie Ritzer also handles complex sports transactions for Cal Ripken Jr. and other clients.**

Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation, Ritzer helped establish it as a tax-exempt organization and is an active board member on the foundation.

While sports-related transactions comprise about a third of his workload — the remaining percentage includes a mix of corporate, real estate and tax projects — Ritzer admits they’re what he enjoys most.

“I don’t want to say that building shopping centers and office parks isn’t creation, but it

doesn’t touch human beings directly, as the involvement in sports does,” Ritzer said.

Count Ritzer in that group. Even as someone lucky enough to make sports an integral part of his professional life, the love of the game still tugs at him.

“I can’t go to a baseball game without fantasizing about being the pitcher,” he said.

**ELIZABETH HEUBECK** is a contributing writer in Baltimore.