

# Pivot Perfect

*A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group*

## **Inky Son: Rising from Fashion to Sports – Scoring the Dream Career**

As a key member of the executive leadership team at the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA), Inky Son leverages her extensive expertise in licensing, marketing, and business operations to drive strategic initiatives that empower NBA players and elevate their business pursuits. A graduate of the Georgetown University McDonough School of Business, Inky spent over a decade learning and refining skills in the fashion industry, where she held pivotal roles at esteemed brands such as Donna Karan International, Sweetface Fashion Company, and Calvin Klein. Her journey also took her to Europe, where she gained invaluable experience with Pepe Jeans and Twenty8Twelve, before making a significant pivot to the Major League Baseball Players Association, fulfilling her dream of entering the sports industry as a young professional.

In 2017, Inky joined the NBPA as Vice President of Licensing, where she quickly made her mark before advancing to Chief Strategy Officer and ultimately becoming Chief Administrative Officer. In these roles, she has played a crucial part in shaping the association's vision and strategy, ensuring that athletes are equipped with the tools and resources they need to thrive in their careers and beyond. Inky's unique blend of experiences in both fashion and sports has positioned her as a trailblazer in the industry, and her commitment to empowering players is evident in every initiative she undertakes.

We had the privilege of interviewing Inky Son to delve into her insights on leadership and the evolving landscape of athlete empowerment. Her dedication to championing players' voices and her visionary outlook on the future of sports management offer invaluable lessons for emerging leaders in the industry.

**Timothy Boerkoel (TBB):** You have navigated a unique career path, moving through an interesting variety of global roles within the fashion and sports industries, and with each move, your reputation and strategic know-how have been evident. How have you conveyed to others what you will bring to their team with each

move? Clearly, your work ethic, confidence, and skill for change management shine through, but these qualities cannot be easily captured on a resume. When did those character traits take root for you, and how have you nurtured them throughout your career?



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**Inky Son (IS):** Earlier in my career, I was actually pretty terrible with job interviews – in fact, I *hated* them. My personality is more introverted; I was not born with the gift of gab. Fortunately, today, interview styles have evolved to be more conversational. But when I was coming up, especially early in my career, they made people very nervous, even intimidated. When you are shy like I was, it's the subjective traits that come through and shine. As a reserved introvert, I just needed *one* person to see me. Obviously, I've been very fortunate throughout my career to have had people "see me" and bring me on board.

From that point, once you get that chance, it's up to you to show your worth. It worked in my favor to go through that type of interview process, and I've been able to cultivate amazing relationships with all of my previous bosses. I would call each of them a mentor, and they've become close friends. They took a chance on me, seeing we had the same value system of hard work and caring little about politics. Once I had that opportunity and was able to prove myself, I felt that these mentors had my back and would vouch for me for the rest of my life. As I look back, other than my first couple of jobs, my professional journey has been a result of a past boss or colleague recommending me for a role. They knew my work and character, and these qualities propelled my career without the stress of the formal interview process.

My character traits took root from a very early age. Growing up in this country as an immigrant kid from Korea, moving here without speaking any English – that became my first true lesson in change management. You're forced to adapt to change very quickly when your whole world is upended in a dramatic move; it is very jarring when you are so young. I was eight when we moved, my sister was 12, and my brother was nine. We moved to a small

town in upstate New York where I don't believe they'd ever seen an immigrant. Even the schools had no ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, so my siblings and I taught ourselves English. Fortunately, when you are that young, you naturally absorb everything quickly – we learned to speak fluently in about a year. My brother and I adapted much quicker and are very Americanized. My sister, however, at age 12 did not love living in America; she later moved back to Korea. That four-year age difference between us revealed a huge disparity in adaptability.

Looking back, this experience established the foundation for who I am today and my ability to manage change. I also moved to Europe early in my career; another change I've gone through that reinforced my ability to acclimate quickly and thrive in each new environment. I have a strong work ethic, and often I joke (but it's true) that it's because I was an immigrant, and didn't have a choice other than to excel at school, or at whatever I did.

My upbringing fueled my competitive personality. If someone says I can't do something as an Asian woman, I'm motivated to prove them wrong. When I was young, my mom would question me: "Why are you playing sports?" Typically, back in the day, Asians were not seen often participating in sports; and my reaction was, *Oh, you're challenging me, so now I'm going to go try out for every single sport.* I wasn't very good, but I was good enough to at least get on the teams. I played soccer and ran track, but my favorite was always basketball ... and that was probably my worst sport. But because I was really competitive and I wanted to make the team, I worked really hard – I was the first one in the gym every day and practiced on my own on weekends. The coach saw this, and although I was nowhere near the best player, he made me team captain my senior year. This became a lesson I would take with

me throughout my career; that coach saw *everything* that I would bring to the team, not just the athleticism. As a leader myself now, I try to view everyone wholistically.

There's quite a high level of talent required in the men that I represent, the basketball players. There are 450 roster spots available and considering that there are over eight billion people in the world – that's a very exclusive club. These players don't acquire roster spots solely based on natural talent; they work extremely hard and dedicate their lives to the sport. Their commitment is amazing and exists well beyond the gym. They are constantly thinking about sleep patterns, what they eat and drink, and how it all affects their bodies and performance. It's not at the same level as NBA players, but I think about all the components that affect our work as well. You have to invest time and hard work, and balance that with dedication and intelligence, in order to succeed. And team dynamics are at play, too – you can be the smartest person around, but if you are not able to work with a team, you are not going to be a valuable teammate or resource.

**TBB: We live in a fast-paced culture that often seeks immediate gratification. How do you mentor and lead a generation to “sit in the challenges and learn from them”, knowing these are opportunities for growth, rather than take shortcuts? Was there a pivotal moment when you realized the *value of the journey* and not just the achievement of reaching the “final destination”?**

**IS:** [Laughing] I'm going to date myself here; I'm GenX, and I've been known to roll my eyes from time to time at the younger generation. But with that said, I actually love the GenZ generation. I believe they are often misunderstood – some people think they are lazy or entitled. I think they are very smart and want to get the most out of their time; they want to be out by 5 o'clock. They are different from how we were at that age, where we felt we had to

put in more hours or face time. They're also extremely confident. When I see my GenZ colleagues, I wish I had that same level of confidence when I was their age. I do, however, see that sometimes they have this need to move quickly or take shortcuts in their career – shortcuts to achieve titles or public awards that identify outstanding young executives and entrepreneurs, which is a great opportunity for public acknowledgment for these young people. There is also the issue of *title*, which I don't put much credence to, having worked in Europe where title didn't matter; it seems to be mostly an American thing. When I worked in Europe, it seemed there were only two titles – either a Director or a Managing Director. In America, there are so many titles, like Coordinator, Senior Coordinator, then Manager ... it's crazy. That's where this generation can learn a little, because there is no replacement for experience; and each title achieved represents a unique, solid experience. That is such an important lesson that I would love to mentor and teach.

Earning the experience through the journey is the fun part and I would never skip over any of my years in Europe or working in the fashion industry. I gained so much knowledge from that time, although I probably could have gotten to where I am today faster if I'd stayed in one industry. But it's not about speed, is it? Why does everyone want to “get there” so quickly? It's about the journey, and being present, and enjoying and making the most of each moment.

The pivotal moment in my career, when I began to *value the journey*, was when I moved from the fashion industry to the world of sports. I mentioned earlier that basketball had always been my absolute favorite sport. Growing up, I idolized Michael Jordan and grew up watching the legendary Chicago Bulls in the 90s. When we moved to the U.S., only my dad spoke English, so television offered limited options suitable for all of us. Sports were easy for us to follow, and because Michael Jordan was so well

known (even my mom knows him, and she doesn't know anyone) our family gravitated towards that. This started my love affair with basketball.

My dream from that point on was to work in sports one day. Allen Iverson was one of the reasons I went to Georgetown; he was an alum, and I was such a fan. I actually met him a few years ago and shared that with him; I'm proud of that passion. I worked with the basketball team while I was in college which led me to intern with the Washington Wizards. Then, I landed a full-time position, following an internship, with Donna Karan International in the licensing department. For about 13 years, I worked hard and enjoyed a successful career in the fashion industry with global brands; but sports were always in the back of my mind. I received a random call from a headhunter, not seeking me for the position, but wondering if I knew someone with interest in a role with a baseball association. It was a manager level role in apparel licensing, so they were seeking a candidate with a fashion background. At the time, I was already a director, but quickly said, "I'm interested." I knew I would be taking a step back in title, scope of work, and salary, but I was looking ahead to where this position could lead me as I considered it. From then on, every move I made, I considered how it could lead me to my final, goal destination. I took that job knowing it was my foot in the door to the sports world.

**TBB: In an industry of professional sports where wins and losses exist every day, players have to get really comfortable with not only losing a game, but struggles within a game itself, like missed shots or turnovers. They need to learn from these mistakes, let them go in the moment, and keep playing. Some losses can be particularly heavy, too ... like being cut from a team or suffering a season-ending injury. What losses have weighed you down, or is there one that lifted you up and moved you forward?**

**IS:** I lean toward seeing everything as *glass half full*, so in every loss – whether it's a very difficult work environment or something personal – I've been able to see a learning moment. One of the biggest losses I've experienced in my career to date, and that still makes me sad, was the shutting down of Twenty8Twelve, a startup fashion brand I worked with in Amsterdam. I had worked in Europe first with Pepe Jeans, and then with Sienna Miller and her sister Savannah at Twenty8Twelve, overseeing all operations. Sienna and Savannah were co-creative directors, and very involved in the design work. It was pretty successful for a start-up brand, especially considering it launched in 2007-08, during the global economic meltdown. Twenty8Twelve was sold in all the top stores worldwide, like Harvey Nichols, Selfridges, Nordstrom, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Shopbop, ultimately expanding beyond wholesale to four company-owned retail stores in London.

I'd developed a wonderful relationship with the owner/investor of the brand, Nish Soneji. Actually, at one point, I'd made the personal decision to move back to the states and get my MBA. But after several conversations, Nish proposed that I stay in Europe and get involved in every aspect of the start-up and gain some real-life experience rather than go to school for an MBA – I agreed to the offer.

We had a really great run, but after six years, decisions were made to pause investing further into the company. That was a tough time for me. I gained so much from the time and effort I put into the Twenty8Twelve brand – this is what made it so difficult to watch it shut down. Now, as I look back, I see that's when my career really began to accelerate. That start-up experience allowed me to touch every single aspect of the company and every element of business, giving me a broad and real-life business "degree." It was a pivotal point for me. That loss was sad momentarily, but it led to the industry shift in my career to sports and then basketball – and that had always been my dream.

My next move was to Calvin Klein, Inc. as their global licensing director, thanks to Karina Spar. She was my former boss at Donna Karan, and she has been instrumental in my career moves. Karina had recommended me for the position with Pepe Jeans that took me to Europe initially, and then with almost perfect timing, called me about this opportunity with Calvin Klein, taking me back to the US. She has been a common thread woven throughout much of my career, shining light on the value of relationships and reputation.

**TBB: Finding a balance in life is becoming a priority for many. Most recently, this was heard from athletes throughout the Olympics who are now more comfortable openly sharing their struggles and efforts to create a healthy work/life balance while pursuing success. You have shared some of your other passions outside of work, including cooking, recently receiving certification from the International Culinary Center in New York. How does your own personal work/life balance influence your leadership ethos, or does it simply create “a better you” and offer relaxation and joy?**

**IS:** As I keep referring back to my time in Europe, you can tell it was a very transformational era for me. Living in the Netherlands, I experienced the value of spending time away from work to be with friends and family; really re-energizing yourself to return to work as your best self. Now here at the NBPA, I encourage my team to take their PTO and assure them that when they're on PTO, we're not going to contact them. Everyone needs a break – and the support around them to *enjoy* that break. It serves the individual and as a result, the company. I don't embrace the common American mentality that *you always have to be on or connected*. It seems to create so much anxiety in people, and they become too fearful to remove themselves for a week or two; there should be a separation of work and home. Naturally, as I've progressed in my career and position, the two begin to blend together

somewhat, especially in my role now, as Chief Administrative Officer at the NBPA. I'm so personally passionate about basketball that I'm constantly watching games and keeping up with media throughout the season. But overall, the European mentality has really influenced how I lead my team, and how I manage my own life.

My personal work/life balance is shaped by the desire to continue learning; I'm one of those people who gets really bored if I'm not discovering new things ... so I'm constantly feeding that part of me. Right before the COVID pandemic began (perfect timing), I completed an intensive two-month course with the International Culinary Center in New York that included five hours almost every day after work; I was fortunate to have an amazing boss who let me out a little early to accomplish this. I had no intention of quitting my job and becoming a chef; I just love cooking and wanted to hone my culinary skills. Then during the pandemic, with a lot of extra time on my hands and no commute, I completed a six-month Columbia Data Analytics Bootcamp where you learn to code Python. (My brother is an amazing coder and inspired me!)

Now I need something new again ... which may be to continue re-learning and sharpening my Korean language skills. I recently went back to Korea to celebrate my parents' 50th wedding anniversary; they moved back after my dad retired. I realized I'd lost a lot of my Korean fluency over the years, so before going back, I took a couple of refresher courses, and I want to continue working on that goal.

**TBB: The core role of the NBPA is to serve as a union for current NBA players, and its overall mission (I'm summarizing here) is to support their rights, heighten their collective power, and enhance their leadership platform globally through their sport. This seems to mirror the focus of many businesses aiming to position their organization for collective success. Yours,**

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**however, must do this *and* amplify hundreds of players' "personal" brands. How do you strike that balance?**

**IS:** At the core of any union's purpose, and the NBPA is no different, is being all about the collective. Whether we are supporting LeBron James or the 12th man on the bench, we treat them equally; they are each a part of the brotherhood. A couple of months ago, we had an all-staff, offsite meeting that included an amazing fireside chat. I'm going to take this quote direct from Ravi Gupta (the former CFO and COO of Instacart) because I love it and now use it all the time. He said, "You should play for the front of the jersey." The front of the jersey bears the team's name and logo; the back holds the individual player's name. I realize this may sound weird because we represent the players, not the team, but my point is related to what we are trying to accomplish at the union, employee-wise. If you are "playing" for the union as a whole, and working toward its success in becoming the BEST union ... that is playing for the "front of the jersey." We not only want the NBPA to be the best union, but to be seen as one of the best companies to work for; one that people actively seek out to be part of. When you apply for a job, it's not your title that stands out on your resume as much as it is the names of highly regarded companies. For me, my title "Chief Administrative Officer" is not what draws the most attention – it's NBPA, and that's why we want it to be a top-tier, well-respected company.

As I think back over my career, I started at two of the top global brands in the fashion industry, Donna Karan and Calvin Klein. These experiences played a key role in me being looked at for future opportunities, which is why that conversation at our team meeting really resonated with me. That's exactly what we're trying to foster here at the NBPA – to work as a team, build this union, and be the best of the best. *Team success yields individual glory.* Think of the people recruited from Apple or

Amazon, companies known and respected for innovation.

My main purpose, and the primary goal of the union, is to represent the collective of current players from every aspect – bargaining agreements that affect their salaries and game, their overall mental health, and the for-profit arm which yields revenue from sales from the players' likenesses. All of this effort is centered on a collective basis, not on the individual players. It's all about "the front of the jersey."

**TBB: The NBPA is a unique environment where so much must be accomplished: building up and driving transformation, cultivating solidarity amidst growing individuality, and simultaneously supporting the present moment while envisioning a future NBPA. What are a few key executive focus points that allow you to trust that everything will play out successfully? How does your team work together to achieve this?**

**IS:** These points have actually been a huge focus of mine and the union this year. Referring back to the amazing offsite company experience I had mentioned – we planned this time as an investment in building our future, knowing that our success has to start with the team. You may have selected amazing and high-performing people, but if they can't work together as a team, then it defeats the purpose of bringing them on board, and you'll never function as a high-performing company. At our offsite meeting, we began with several exercises around building psychological safety; a topic many leaders are currently talking about – feeling safe enough to take risks and encouraging ideas and concerns to be shared openly must be built into the culture in order for the team to trust each other and function at a high level.

We recently performed an exercise called the "user manual" where we each shared how we believe we can perform at the highest level; how each of us works best. For example, one question was "how do you best receive feedback" – knowing everyone

works differently and wanting to meet people where they are. I'm the type of person (maybe because I lived in the Netherlands) who is very direct and wants to receive direct feedback – you don't need to sugarcoat anything for me. Not a lot of people are like that; they may want the "sandwich method" of hearing critical feedback in between two more positive statements, or maybe "tone" is important to them. It's really all about understanding how people work best and taking the steps to meet them there. In order to foster that respect, we talk about how to fabricate that mindset within each different department and at every level of the NBPA. This has always been my thing – being open to the many different paths people can take to perform their best.

It's also important to talk about THINK450. About seven years ago, our members – NBA players – decided to take their rights back from the league, and that's why THINK450 started. This is our for-profit arm, where we monetize on group licensing. It's an opportunity for us to be more innovative while the primary function still remains to safeguard the collective. This is important with the NBPA because the NBA players are virtually the first "movers" of anything trending new – technology, fashion, music and culture – and we want to respect who we're representing on and off the court.

Josh Goodstadt, who oversees THINK450, was the person who hired me when we first launched – he

was my first boss here at the NBPA, and I think he's absolutely incredible. He knows so much about licensing, but his knowledge base is even broader than that. Much of our revenue comes from licensing initiatives, but there's so much untapped potential to explore for other areas, and that's what Josh and the team are focused on.

Andre Iguodala, an NBA champion, is now our Executive Director, and it's the first time our union has had a former player in this position. It's been great to have him, because he was an active NBA player for 19 seasons, and also served on the Executive Committee (the Board for our players) for many years. He came into the role with a great understanding of the union already, and having him here, with his knowledge of the basketball world, and with him being such a natural leader ... it's been amazing to see and for me to work alongside. I've already learned so much about leadership from him.

With leadership change comes organizational change, so this is our crucible moment as we pressure test our new strategy. We've been breaking everything down and building it back up. Everyone is intimately involved and a critical part of the process. Our hope is to lead the union like a Fortune 500 organization, constantly changing and innovating to meet the needs of our ever-evolving players, while continuing to protect and serve their needs.

## About The Brownstone Group

*The Brownstone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting, and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 25 years of retail, consumer, hospitality, and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for startups and global corporations alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members and C-Suite talent. Brownstone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.*

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