

VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

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The Cutting Edge

An ex-ice skater with Olympic ties, neutral Jeffrey Benz focuses on sports

By Meghann M. Cuniff
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — As a veteran of worldwide arbitrators, Jeffrey G. Benz brings an international touch to dispute resolution that includes broad experience in China and England as well as five years as general counsel for the U.S. Olympic Committee.

His work in sports and entertainment includes anti-doping cases, intellectual property, failed investments and contract and selection disputes. He also worked in maritime insurance liability defense, and he's a former champion figure skater who dabbled in a career as a professional boxing promoter.

Benz is interested in a wide range of business disputes, and he prides himself on an active yet relaxed approach that bucks traditional judging in favor of efficiency and effectiveness.

"The promise of arbitration is its flexibility," Benz said in an interview from the JAMS office in Century City. "I have a stock speech. I tell them: 'I've never been a judge. I don't want to be a judge. I want to be paid more than judges. I'm not honorable; ask my ex-wife. Don't call me your honor; this is not court.'"

As a neutral with JAMS, Benz has a reputation that matches his approach.

"He's a bright guy, but more than that, he runs the arbitration very respectfully," said Vincent H. Chieffo, co-chair of Greenberg Traurig LLP's national media and entertainment litigation group. "He's also very knowledgeable



Sam Diephuis / Special to the Daily Journal

about not only domestic but the special aspects of international arbitrations."

He has a useful sense of humor, Chieffo added.

"The stressful situations can be lightened every once in a while with timely sense of humor, and I think he displayed that," Chieffo said.

Benz grew up in Pittsburgh, where he enjoyed a successful amateur ice skating career that included winning the 1987 U.S. Junior Champions in Ice Dancing with his sister. He attended the University of Texas School of Law.

Coming from a family of professionals, law was "a natural path after it looked like a medical doctor wasn't going to work out."

He knew he wanted something more cosmopolitan, and he found it as an intern in the claims office at Lloyd's of London in 1992, then spent three years at Boughley, Garvie and Bushner in San Francisco, which handled

maritime issues in the London market. The job "taught me to be a litigator, and how to negotiate," he said.

"It was totally trial by fire learning," Benz said. "There was a lot of inspirational hollering and not a ton of education aside from self-direction."

He joined the now-dissolved Coudert Brothers in 1996, where former partner Ronald S. Katz, now with GCA Law Partners LLP, remembers him as "a very enterprising and zealous advocate." Together they earned a jury verdict against Major League Baseball. The trial took place at the same time as the Winter Olympics in Japan in 1998, when he handled the firm's Olympics-related cases.

"That just gives you an idea of how broad his skills are," Katz said.

Benz formed the firm's worldwide sports practice group, and he represented the U.S. Olympic Committee in trademark enforcement and registration work. That

Jeffrey G. Benz

JAMS
Los Angeles

Areas of Specialty: sports, entertainment, media, international arbitration, general business disputes

led to his next move: He became the committee's general counsel in 2001. That led to a daily hodgepodge of issues that included the planning and management of the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City in 2002.

"He's practical because he's done this stuff," Katz said. "If you're general counsel of the U.S. Olympic Committee, you have to deal with a lot of practical problems every day. You can't wait for the U.S. Supreme Court to resolve them. You have to resolve them."

Benz earned a master's degree in business from University of Michigan in 2006. About that same time, he left to help billionaire Michael King, the late CEO of King World Productions, in his effort "to find the great American heavyweight." They raised \$66 million, but their relationship with a third partner soured, so they returned it to investors and moved on.

He spent 18 months as general counsel and chief operating officer for the Pro Beach Volleyball tour then worked for a startup technology company in China. He then decided to pursue a full-time career as a neutral.

"I started really trying to figure this out in 2007 or 2008 and was full-time by 2011. I didn't retire

into it. My goal was to do it and make it my profession,” Benz said.

He spent nearly five years with the Agency for Dispute Resolution Inc. before joining JAMS in May 2016.

“Arbitration is a more flexible forum for technology than the courts,” Benz said.

Attorney Howard L. Jacobs said Benz is “a very active arbitrator.”

“He really does a very good job of cutting through to what the important issues are,” Jacobs said.

“He is not hesitant to ask questions of the witnesses or even interrupt parties during closing arguments or even opening statements to understand or make it clear there’s certain areas he’s interested in hearing about.”

Jacobs, who represents athletes, estimates he’s had Benz as an arbitrator in at least 30 cases, most of them anti-doping cases and team

selection cases. Benz is highly skilled in both specialties, Jacobs said, and he “knows sports from all sides.”

“To me, that’s super-valuable as an arbitrator,” Jacobs said.

Benz said he strives to help manage the process as an arbitrator. He said he’s not “big on discovery” — there’s no such thing in international arbitrations — and instead focuses on the actual arbitration.

“I personally like it when lawyers collaborate with me in defining the process,” Benz said. “It’s my role to help the parties manage the process as efficiently as possible.”

He takes a slightly different approach as a mediator.

“I may be evaluative on discrete issues at the end, or I may be evaluative if the sides demand I be evaluative, but for the most

part, I’m trying to help them solve their problem, and I’m not sure evaluation always work that way.”

Jacobs said Benz’s expertise was obvious during an international arbitration where they were dealing with parties “that usually works in judicial systems that aren’t based on common law.”

“There really is a need for some specialized knowledge by the arbitrator and the attorneys, and he certainly displayed great knowledge and understanding of the special nature,” Jacobs said.

Benz is licensed to practice in California, Hawaii, Colorado and New York, and he recently was sworn in as a barrister in England and Wales.

He served on the Court of Arbitration for Sport’s FIFA World Cup Arbitration Panel this year, and he recently was appointed to panel of neutrals that will tackle

technology, media, entertainment and sports disputes between United States and Chinese companies, part of JAMS’ new partnership with Shenzhen Court of International Arbitration. Benz also teaches at Pepperdine University School of Law.

Here are some attorneys who have used Benz’s services: Howard L. Jacobs, Law Offices of Howard Jacobs; Vincent H. Chieffo, Greenberg Traurig LLP; Gregory A. Fayer, Fayer Gibson LLP; Michael E. Williams, Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan LLP; Vincent H. Chieffo, Greenberg Traurig LLP; Mathew S. Rosengart, Greenberg Traurig LLP; Morgan E. Pietz, Gerard Fox Law P.C.; Gregory A. Fayer, Fayer Gipson LLP; Paul J. Greene, Global Sports Advocates; Steven J. Thompson, Nixon Peabody LLP