

# Street & Smith's SPORTSBUSINESS JOURNAL®

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## Pitchers opting for charter flights

**D**uring long road trips through multiple cities, baseball teams often will send a starting pitcher ahead to the next town a day early so that he's fully rested, unlike his teammates, who might be sluggish after a charter that typically leaves later than midnight.

But since the pitchers must fly commercial, albeit first class, they still face the same security delays and inconveniences that the general public must endure. A growing number, including **Randy Johnson, Curt Schilling, Tom Glavine** and **Mike Hampton**, believe the hassle defeats the purpose of traveling ahead. They're turning increasingly to private jet providers, mostly at their own expense.

At \$4,000 a flight hour — minus reimbursement from their teams for the equivalent of a first-class ticket — the service does not come cheap. But since such travel is needed only two or three times a season, a \$20,000 to \$40,000 bill is a modest, tax-deductible expense for a player earning more than \$10 million annually.

"They want to be at the top of their game," said **Justin Firestone**, vice president of sports marketing for **Marquis Jet Partners Inc.** "They see it as a way of investing back in themselves both for that game and for the long term."

The popularity of charter jet service among pitchers is the newest wrinkle in a sports travel trend that began three years ago. Firestone went to work for eBizJets, now **Sentient**, and signed up more than 200 athletes who were willing to buy blocks of private air travel on a network of jets throughout the country.

In 2001, Marquis Jet Partners partnered with NetJets, the fractional ownership program of **Executive Jet Inc.**, a Woodbridge, N.J., company owned by **Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway**, and began offering 25-hour blocks for between \$109,000 and \$330,000, depending on aircraft chosen. Firestone moved to Marquis Jet last June and since has signed up more than 100



TRAVEL LOG

PETE  
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sports figures, including **Johnson, Glavine, Hampton, Jason Giambi, Keyshawn Johnson** and **Emmitt Smith**.

It's not just players who are buying the pre-paid travel cards. Agents such as **Scott Boras, Jeff Moorad** and **Leigh Steinberg** use Marquis. SFX's **David Falk** isn't just a client; he's also an in-

vestor in the company, which is chaired by former **SFX Sports Group** President **Bill Allard**. Athletes account for a third of the company's 400 clients.

Companies such as **Adidas, Nike** and **Reebok** have bought airtime to lure new endorsers and handle existing ones. Once athletes get hooked on private jet travel, it's hard to lure them back to commercial.

■ **SMOOTH MOVE:** By moving their spring training site from Port Charlotte, Fla., to a complex they'll share with the Kansas City Royals in Surprise, Ariz., the Texas Rangers will be able to eliminate the routine three-hour bus trips that made spring training a drain for players. The Royals, who were more centrally located, in Haines City, Fla., also will enjoy more convenient travel this spring.

With nine teams based in greater Phoenix and three in Tucson, less than two hours away, travel is much easier in the Cactus League than in the Grapefruit League, where teams are sprawled all over Florida. **Chris Lyngos**, director of travel for the Rangers, said the savings on plane tickets to and from Dallas and bus rentals for spring training will be modest, "but we'll save a lot of wear and tear on the players and staff. You can't put a price on that."

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