

JOHN BRANCA

UCLA ATHLETICS, ROCK & ROLL, AND BRANCA FAMILY FIELD

by EMILY LERNER

Somebody better find a six-pack of Dos Equis, because it's quite possible that we have found the most interesting man in the world.

John Branca is an entertainment lawyer and manager by trade, and a sportsman by design. While in high school, John would watch the Bruins play basketball on TV. Coached by John Wooden, those were the games of Lew Alcindor, Mike Warren, Lucius Allen, Lynn Shackelford, and Sidney Wicks, where just about every year brought UCLA a national championship. If told at that time that he would one day have a close relationship to UCLA basketball, he would have been as surprised as anyone.

Growing up, John split his time between Los Angeles and Mount Vernon, New York. His mother was an actress, singer, and dancer, while his father was an undefeated pitcher in his senior year of high school, being named the New York State Player of the Year and leading his team to the New York State Championship. His father later served as the New York State Athletic Commissioner, so it is only fitting that John has strong ties to both the entertainment industry and the sports world; it's practically part of his DNA.

John started out as a musician at a young age, fronting a band who opened for The Doors, that signed a record deal when he was just in high school. He majored in music at Los Angeles City College but began to second-guess his choice of major.

"I started as a music major at LA City College and I looked around at the other students in the music department and saw how good they were," said John. "I realized then that I needed to be doing something else, and started thinking about a career that I would be good at."

John transferred to Occidental College, and was then accepted into UCLA School of Law. After graduating from law school, he started working at a downtown corporate firm where he worked as an estate planner. While there, something quite innocuous occurred that completely changed his life and sent him on his true career path.

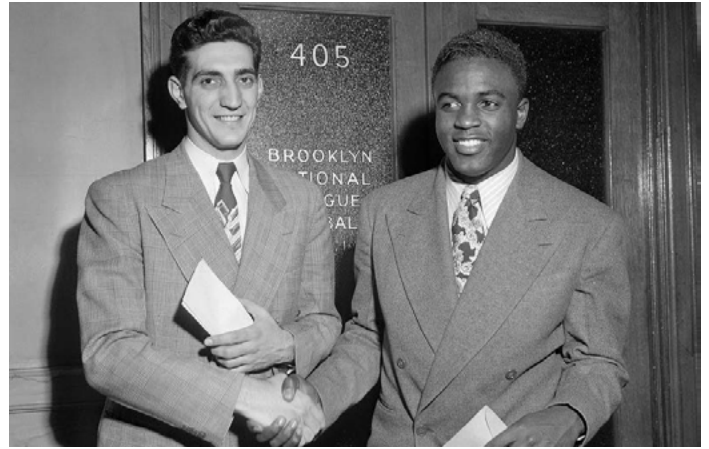
"While I was doing estate planning I read an article in Time Magazine," said John. "The article was about Elton John, whose lawyer was quoted about the work he did. You can say a light bulb went off; it made me realize that this kind of work was possible and that was what I should be doing."

This "kind of work" encompassed representing musicians and negotiating contracts for them, and this epiphany sent John on a trajectory that even he couldn't have fathomed. He began working at one of the top music law firms and from there turned one of his earliest life passions into a lucrative career. But he didn't exactly start off small.

"My first clients I worked with as a young lawyer were Bob Dylan, Neil Diamond, and George Harrison," said John. "But my first client that I signed was The Beach Boys. Then Michael Jackson. Then the Rolling Stones."

John, now a longtime partner at the entertainment law firm Ziffren Brittenham, has a clientele list that reads like a history lesson in rock and roll, with a sprinkling of sports figures and comedians added in for good measure. His milieu is contract negotiations and advising and managing clients, so he has had the opportunity to represent figures outside of the music business such as Mike Tyson, Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy. But the vast majority of his work is with the music industry.

"I've represented over 30 members of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame," said John. "I think that's a record for a lawyer."



John Branca's uncle, **RALPH BRANCA**, (above left) played with Jackie Robinson on the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Not only is that a record, but in January 2019, John was named by Marquis Who's Who as the #1 Music Attorney in the World. In the WORLD. So obviously, he has done some pretty extraordinary things in the music and entertainment world. Hired by client and later good friend Michael Jackson, John assisted in the purchase of one of the largest music publishing catalogs in the world, and was instrumental in the distribution of "Thriller," the greatest music video of all time, and only music video housed in the Smithsonian. After Jackson's death, John became co-executor of his estate. Other acts he has represented are The Beach Boys, The Doors, The Rolling Stones, Berry Gordy, Dr. Dre, Don Henley, Carlos Santana, Nirvana, Aerosmith, The Bee Gees, Enrique Iglesias, Earth, Wind & Fire, the Elvis Presley Estate, and many others.

But neither John nor his family were strangers to fame. His uncle was the late Ralph Branca, a three-time All Star pitcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers who befriended a rookie Jackie Robinson when he signed with the team in 1947, being the first to break the color barrier in Major League Baseball. Ralph, prominently featured in the movie "42," was a close friend of Jackie's, standing next to him when others refused, and always insinuating himself if it looked like there would be a fight involving Jackie.

"My uncle was the one who basically went over to Jackie when he came into the [Dodger] locker room on his first day," said John. "They were lifelong friends; he was a pall bearer at Jackie's funeral, and was beloved by Jackie's widow Rachel Robinson and the Robinson family. So there's a connection for me with UCLA, my uncle, and Jackie Robinson."

Having this positive and renowned connection to UCLA Athletics, John was the second — the first being then-head coach Jim Harrick — to endow a men's basketball scholarship, establishing "The John Branca Family Endowed Men's Basketball Scholarship" in 1990, when UCLA Athletics' scholarship program was in its infancy. In fact, John was a member of the UCLA Athletics Campaign Committee (1987-1992) that was the impetus in starting the athletics endowment program, as well as being a member of the Pauley Pavilion Renovation Campaign Committee from 2010-2012.

John's love for UCLA has given way to a host of contributions to UCLA Athletics, among other entities on campus. His first Wooden Athletic Fund membership gift was made in 1989, and he has given steadily every year since to



where he is now a member of the John R. Wooden Benefactors, UCLA Athletics' premiere support group. When the Pauley Pavilion Renovation Project was underway, John was one of the first to contribute a sizable gift for a historical John Wooden display on Pauley's east concourse, aptly named "Wooden Way." Over the years he has given generously to Hoopsters, UCLA Athletics' fund that directly benefits the UCLA Men's Basketball program, as well as to the UCLA Baseball program.

But John's most recent gift is one that is very dear to his heart, and incorporates many of the things in which he strongly believes. This \$1 million gift will make improvements to Jackie Robinson Stadium, home to UCLA Baseball, by building a much-needed practice infield that will be added to the stadium.

"UCLA has a grass infield at Jackie Robinson Stadium," said John. "Our team plays on a lot of AstroTurf fields in the Pac-12, so [UCLA Head Baseball] Coach Savage needed an infield where they will be able to practice on AstroTurf."

To honor his Uncle Ralph, the practice infield will be known as "Branca Family Field," and will go a long way in adding player development space.

"John has been so gracious with his dedication to UCLA and our baseball program," said UCLA Baseball Head Coach John Savage. "I know Jackie Robinson and what he stood for means a great deal to John and his family. The entire program is very excited with the addition of the new infield, which will continue to help our players develop. It will be a great addition to the Gifford Sports Complex at Jackie Robinson Stadium. We are so appreciative to John and the Branca Family."

To make this a reality, a comprehensive campaign was launched, and John was joined by several donors in funding the infield renovation project. Making it even sweeter, many of those who contributed, among others, are former UCLA and MLB baseball players (see accompanying story.)

This gift for Jackie Robinson Stadium seamlessly stitches together John's passions. He loves UCLA for reasons other than the Athletics' Department's number of championships, or for the top-notch law degree he obtained there.

"This gift for the stadium is important for me on a lot of levels," said John. "It's to celebrate who Jackie Robinson was; it honors him and my Uncle Ralph and their relationship. It is also based on my commitment to UCLA Athletics and the legacy of UCLA Athletics."

"The tradition of UCLA isn't just about academic and athletic excellence. [UCLA] also stands for social issues, like opposing racism and bigotry. The fact that Kenny Washington and Jackie Robinson were playing on UCLA teams in the 1930's while most schools didn't have integrated teams until 1970 — that's just unbelievable. Some of our alumni from UCLA — Rafer Johnson, Arthur Ashe, Ralph Bunche, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton, Jackie Robinson — these are people who stood for something beyond athletics and who changed things in our society. These are the things that really attract me to UCLA Athletics. It's not something that many other schools can boast."

Although John's time is spent at work, and on being a member of the Board of Trustees of the Jackie Robinson Foundation, the Board of Advisors for the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, and the Board of Advisors for the Ziffren Institute at the UCLA Law School, family remains of utmost importance to him. Recently married to Jenna Branca, John is fiercely proud of his three children. His daughter Jessica, 32, is at a video start-up company, while his two sons, John and Dylan, are in high school and already following in their father's footsteps of achievement. John, a senior at Sierra Canyon High School, transferred there specifically so he could design a technology and e-sports center that is now used not only for computer gaming, but for the school newspaper and as a study area. Prior to that, John was building his own computers at home, to ensure those used for gaming would be as fast as possible. He put together a

team to compete in the e-sports league, and competed in the high school league himself, coming in #5 in the country and #1 on the west coast. John's youngest son Dylan, at 16 years old, is a 6'4" talented baseball pitcher and fan much like his great-uncle Ralph.

To bring awareness to a new generation of baseball enthusiasts like his son Dylan, John helped form a youth baseball group several years ago called Club 42, a nonprofit that supports diversity in sports and assists with academic tuition awards and fixing inner-city fields in underserved communities.

"Club 42 is a tribute to Jackie and also to the relationship my uncle had with him," said John. "It is named after Jackie Robinson's number 42, and the point of the club is to encourage African Americans to be involved in baseball while paying tribute to Jackie and everything he accomplished."

"Part of the reason I felt driven to do the practice infield project was that there were only two college men on the Dodgers' 1947 team," said John. "Ralph spent time studying at NYU and of course Jackie went to UCLA. It just felt like Branca Family Field and Jackie Robinson Stadium were meant to be."

Baseball, basketball, his uncle Ralph, Jackie Robinson, and UCLA Athletics are all connected for John in a way no one else can claim. Similarly, his contribution to Jackie Robinson Stadium will bring myriad benefits to UCLA Baseball, enabling them to compete for championships, and allowing UCLA to be forever grateful to John for his generosity and foresight.



JOHN BRANCA, with his wife Jenna.

BRANCA FAMILY FIELD AT JACKIE ROBINSON STADIUM

FORMER BRUIN BASEBALL STANDOUTS STEP UP TO THE PLATE
FOR JACKIE ROBINSON STADIUM IMPROVEMENTS

by EMILY LERNER





What happens when you assemble an uber-talented team consisting of former UCLA Baseball first baseman Eric Karros, second baseman Chase Utley, third baseman Troy Glaus, shortstop Brandon Crawford, and pitcher Gerrit Cole?

You pretty much get a home run. More specifically, you get the go-ahead to begin a renovation project for the iconic college baseball stadium, Jackie Robinson Stadium.

In early February 2021, UCLA Athletics announced plans to make improvements to Jackie Robinson Stadium, home field of UCLA Baseball. The major renovation will be the building of a practice infield, which, thanks to a generous donation from the John Branca family, will hereafter be called “Branca Family Field.”

Named for former Dodger pitcher and three-time All Star Ralph Branca, it is fitting that the stadium that bears the name of the player who broke the color barrier in segregated Major League Baseball in 1947 — Jackie Robinson — would contain a practice field named for the teammate who befriended him — Ralph Branca — during Jackie’s years with the Los Angeles Dodgers. (see accompanying article.)

A \$1 million gift from Ralph’s nephew and UCLA Law School graduate John Branca spurred on a comprehensive \$3.8 million renovation campaign. Integral to the renovation project was a gift from UCLA Athletics philanthropist Rhodine Gifford, whose late husband Jack played baseball for UCLA in the early 1960’s. Rhodine’s \$1 million gift was not the Gifford family’s first foray into upgrading the stadium. The Jack and Rhodine Gifford Hitting Facility, erected in 2009, was made possible by the generosity of the Gifford family and has been an important addition to the Gifford Sports Complex at Jackie Robinson Stadium.

Just as Rome wasn’t built in a day by just two Romans, the Jackie Robinson Stadium renovation project could not have been realized without the generosity of others. This is where former Bruin baseball student-athletes shined brightly.

As it turned out, donations to the project came in the form of an all-star infield formed from a combination of five different Bruin teams over a 25-year spread. The five former UCLA Baseball student-athletes boast collegiate accolades and honors too numerous to list. Besides being Bruin baseball standouts, all five not only made it to the major leagues but collectively earned 15 All-Star spots, won four World Series championships, including one World Series MVP, one National League Rookie of the Year honor, and one all-time home run leader. Together, Eric Karros, Troy Glaus, Chase Utley, Brandon Crawford, and Gerrit Cole contributed \$1.5 million to ensure the new vision for Jackie Robinson Stadium.

“This vision became a reality with former players of our program that go back 25 years,” said UCLA Baseball Head Coach John Savage. “This commitment shows how influential this University and baseball program have been in the development for Eric, Chase, Brandon, Troy and Gerrit. Our current and future Bruin players will benefit greatly from this facility and our sincere thanks go to the former great Bruins and their spouses.”

Support from Bruin alumni demonstrates the bond and sense of team commitment created while being a student-athlete at UCLA.

“My wife Jalynne (UCLA ’09) and I always loved our time at UCLA, so for years we had been wanting to give back, but wanted to do it in a lasting and meaningful way,” said former Bruin shortstop and two-time World Series Champion Brandon Crawford. “When I heard about this project, we knew this was how we could pay it forward. We’re happy that the other alumni involved and we were able to help make this vision become a reality.”

Alumni support, particularly former student-athlete support, shows what it means to be a Bruin, and that the strong ties don’t end once they leave UCLA.

“When [Coach Savage] presented the opportunity to get involved in the project, it was a no brainer,” said former Bruin first baseman and all-time LA Dodger home run leader Eric Karros. “To be part of the group of former players who stepped up to get this to the finish line, I couldn’t be more excited to see the new practice facility ... and most importantly, to be a part of the future of UCLA baseball!”

Jackie Robinson Stadium is located on the grounds of the West Los Angeles Veterans Affairs. In addition to the construction of the practice infield and bullpen, other upgrades to the renowned stadium will include new field lighting and modifications to the existing parking lot and site utilities. These improvements will not only boost UCLA’s efforts to recruit the top baseball student-athletes and coaches, but will enrich the lives of veterans and their families by creating the ability to use the practice field for recreational activities that include not only baseball but soccer, jogging, yoga, softball, and other pursuits.

The generosity and foresight of all who contributed to this new vision for Jackie Robinson Stadium will result in a boon to UCLA Athletics, UCLA Baseball, and all fans who come to the stadium drawn by the promise of a fun day watching great Bruin baseball.

Left: BRANCA FAMILY FIELD rendering showing the new infield located just to the south of the Jack and Rhodine Gifford Hitting Facility.

BRUIN PUZZLER ANSWER KEY — PG. 33

ACROSS:	17-CLOCK	28-EDU	37-ELLIS	4-ARM	15-TDS	25-JENNY
5-ANNENBERG	18-ALLSTARS	29-SD	38-TEN	6-GARY	16-ARC	26-HUNGRY
7-MASCOT	19-CRONIN	31-NCAA	39. JORDAN	8-DAN	17-CHARGERS	27-GUERRERO
9-NIKE	20-PAULEY	32-BRUIN	DOWN:	10-FLOJO	19-CANADA	30-DENNIS
11-PAC	22-RED	33-HEISMAN	1-STEIN	11-PITCHER	21-YEARS	32-BAT
13-OSTIN	24-GAYLEY	35-TOREY	2-WATERPOLO	12-JUZANG	22-AL	34-ASHE
16-AD	25-JOHNSWOODEN	36-RAFER	3-RED	14-WESTWOOD	23-LOVE	