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### The athlete's go-to attorney

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*(Photo: Michael Schwarz/Special to the Democrat )*

Thanksgiving weekend, Tallahassee attorney Tim Jansen did something he's never done before — pull for Florida State in its annual rivalry game against his alma mater, the University of Florida.

“I was rooting for Jameis Winston to throw touchdowns against my beloved school. The first time in 30 years,” Jansen said last week. “I really believe in the kid and I feel for him. He’s gone through a lot.”

Jansen would know. As Winston’s attorney during his recent legal travails, Jansen became the public face of the star quarterback as he confronted a rape allegation. State Attorney Willie Meggs decided Dec. 5 Winston would not be charged because of a lack of evidence.

Winston may so far be the biggest, but he is not the only high-profile athlete Jansen has represented. He gained national notoriety in 2005 when he helped successfully defend Tallahassee resident, former Seminole and NFL star defensive back Corey Fuller against gambling charges brought by Meggs’ office.

In recent years, the 52-year-old Jansen has become the go-to lawyer for FSU football players, other local athletes and coaches in trouble.

“He’s a shark in the courtroom,” said Fuller, now a coach at Florida A&M University. “He will fight tooth and nail for his clients. Jameis is in good hands.”

‘Too much Perry Mason’

Russell Timothy Gerard Joseph Jansen was born Dec. 28, 1960, in the gritty, industrial town of East St. Louis, Ill., the youngest of six children. His father, a loan officer who also worked other jobs to support his large Catholic family, died when Jansen was 9. By that age, Jansen said he knew he wanted to be lawyer.

“I don’t know, maybe I watched too much Perry Mason,” Jansen said during an interview at his Levy Park bungalow office days before Meggs’ decision to not charge Winston.

After his father’s death, he moved with his mother and a brother in 1970 to Miami, and later settled in Clearwater where he went to middle school and graduated from Pinellas Park High School. At 15 he started working at a Kash-and-Karry grocery and put himself

through junior college before earning an academic scholarship to the University of Florida.

While he played soccer and enjoyed sports, Jansen missed out on high school athletics because he needed to work. Between college and law school, he worked for six months as a probation officer in St. Petersburg. He said he was assigned all the worst cases. His probationers were violent. Dogs chased him.

“I couldn’t wait to leave,” Jansen said.

At UF’s law school he was a decent student, but excelled in oral argument during moot court exercises. He credits that training and innate skill with his success in courtrooms today. He said he doesn’t keep a running count, but wins cases more often than not in court. He said the six date-rape cases he has been involved with all ended in his client’s favor.

“At Florida, they taught you how to think like a lawyer, how to look at a question, how to look at a set of facts and come up with a resolution,” he said.

‘I jumped off the cliff’

Instead of practicing law right after school, however, Jansen took a job as a campaign manager for U.S. presidential contender Gen. Alexander Haig Jr. For eight months Jansen traveled the country, working side-by-side with the candidate.

“It single-handedly made me not go into politics, the back stabbing, the cut-throat, I didn’t want to do that,” said Jansen, still a conservative Republican. “I knew I had a love for the law.”

After the campaign in 1987, he got a job working as an attorney in the office of then-Florida Secretary of State Jim Smith. Two years later, Jansen was offered a job by former U.S. Attorney Michael Moore and he became a federal prosecutor. Jansen worked in Tallahassee and Tampa helping prosecute some of the biggest federal fraud cases of

the day.

But in 1994, newly married and with a newborn daughter, Jansen got a wake-up call. His wife Stephanie, a Tallahassee native whom he met at Clyde's and proposed to at Lake Ella, laid out the reality of their finances and her fear that his government pay would never allow them to purchase a home.

Jansen went to Capital City Bank, obtained a signature loan for \$13,000 and started his own criminal law practice. He waited anxiously for months for the next telephone book to come out with his first advertisement.

"I jumped off the cliff and, luckily, there was deep-enough water," Jansen said.

More than 25 years after first meeting and working with him, Smith said Jansen has come into his own. Along with his thriving practice, Jansen also heads the Leon High School Foundation and is president-elect of Springtime Tallahassee.

"For a Gator, he is a pretty good guy," said Smith, a die-hard Seminole fan, with a laugh. "Tallahassee is fortunate to have a number of good criminal defense lawyers and he certainly is one of them."

'Not scared of a fight'

Observers repeatedly use one word to describe Jansen's style: Aggressive.

"He leaves no stone unturned," said veteran assistant state attorney Frank Allman, who has frequently gone up against Jansen in court. "He is definitely the type of defense attorney who is able to identify weaknesses in the case and focus in on those."

To face Jansen in court, Allman added, "You better have your A-game ready."

Criminal defense attorney Thomas Findley agreed that Jansen's strength and success as a lawyer stems from his unwillingness to back down.

"He knows the law, but I think it's mostly that he is an aggressive lawyer. He's not scared of a fight," said Findley, a fellow UF graduate who has known Jansen for years and has worked alongside him as co-counsel in federal court cases. "He has a lot of passion for what he does. He is going to defend his client zealously."

Jansen's bulldog approach however isn't courtroom bluster, said others who have worked with him. Criminal appellate lawyer Michael Ufferman said Jansen is "very sharp legally," does his homework and does not shoot from the hip.

"He does an outstanding job representing his clients," Ufferman said. "When your life literally hangs in the balance, you want an attorney who is going to aggressively defend you."

'Like a doctor'

Hanging on the wall of Jansen's office is a large framed portrait of Clarence Darrow, the famed early-1900's defense attorney and civil libertarian.

"He said, 'Protect the rights of others in order to protect mine,' that's why I have that picture," Jansen said, pointing to the portrait and ignoring his incessantly beeping cell phone. "I look at it every day because sometimes you have to represent the persons who are not the most loved."

Jansen said no one who comes to him says they are guilty. He makes a point to never make promises or give percentages on what he thinks may be the outcome of a particular case.

"I'm like a doctor. I treat people, I don't judge them," he said. "I have some good people who make bad decisions and then I've got some bad people who keep making the bad decisions."

Then, there are people like Godby football standout A.J. Graham. The 18-year-old was charged with armed robbery and hauled into jail hours before he was to walk in his graduation ceremony. Charges were dropped months later and Jansen, Graham's attorney, excoriated the Tallahassee Police Department for a lax investigation and the teen's wrongful arrest.

Seeing Graham cleared and his college football scholarship restored was, Jansen said, "a Super Bowl to a lawyer."

"I know the system. The system can swallow up innocent people," he said. "If you know you are the only thing stopping an innocent person from getting swallowed in the system, that's a lot of stress."

That stress increased exponentially in the Winston case, which drew overwhelming media scrutiny.

"If this would have been my first case, I would have been shell-shocked. I would have been paralyzed," Jansen said.

'A potent combination'

While Jansen does not shy from the media attention — friends say he enjoys the notoriety that comes with high-profile cases — much of the work he does for athletes and other well-known people occurs outside of public view. Cases are closed and deals are cut before they receive any attention.

"I can't tell you how many student athletes I've represented that nobody knows," he said. "Unless (the Winston) case resurrected its head, no one would have known. It was closed in February and it would have gotten no publicity."

Much of Jansen's work with FSU athletes involves violations of the university's code of conduct, which can result in suspension or expulsion. Any criminal violation also is reviewed for possible university sanctions. Such proceedings often are shielded from public view because of federal student privacy laws.

“I spend a lot of time over there, fourth floor, dean’s office,” Jansen said.

In one case, Jansen said an FSU student athlete was expelled for a non-criminal student code violation, but with his help his client was successful on appeal and able to stay in school. His success in such student athlete-related cases has resonated with the university community and has helped him gain more work, Jansen said.

FSU officials also like that he is not a university booster, he said. NCAA rules require athletes not be given any special deals. Jansen does no pro bono work and has a set fee structure, usually paid by an athlete’s family. He does not have a contract with FSU and is not paid by the university.

“There is no real conflict of me giving special benefits or privileges to a player at Florida State,” he said. “When you do a really good job and get good results, people come.”

Jansen, who is currently representing an NFL player he declined to name, said his experience has convinced him athletes are targets.

“Not consciously, but maybe unconsciously,” he said. “These athletes are known in the communities, they are high-profile if they are a really good athlete. You’ve got girls out there. And don’t forget they are teenagers. It is a potent combination.”

FSU football officials have talked about having Jansen talk to the team as a group about the legal challenges and realities of being top-tier athletes. Jansen hopes he gets the chance. Jansen said Gainesville has a reputation of leniency toward Gator players, but that certainly is not the case in Tallahassee.

“They could learn their rights and understand the process,” he said, “and that just because you are a football player or an athlete doesn’t mean you’re going to get things taken care of.”

If they do get in trouble, Jansen also wants them to know who to call.