

Former JAG attorney, football coach ranks among the battle-tested



By Brian Cox

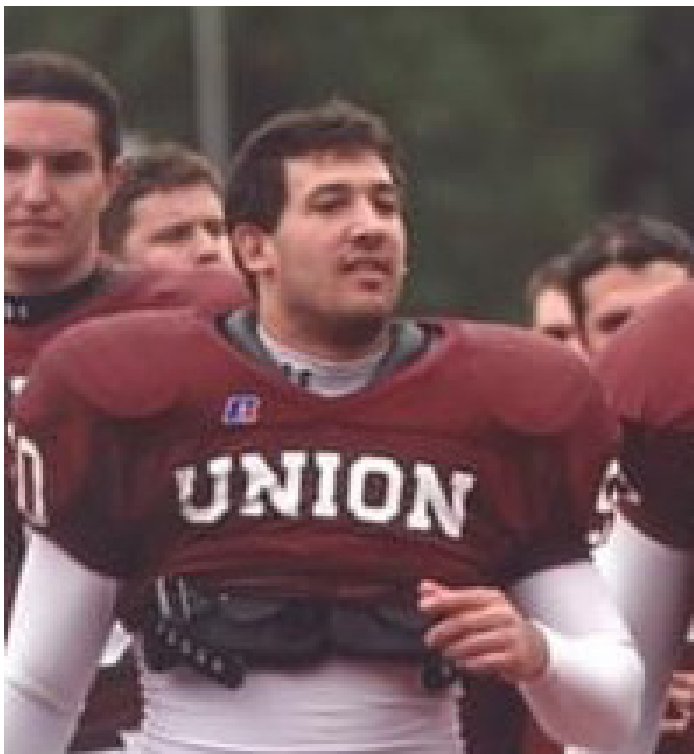
Attorney Christopher Zona has little patience for traditional career timelines.

Whether as an athlete, a college football coach, a JAG officer, or a Big Law attorney, Zona has always aimed to achieve as much as possible on the fastest track possible.

It's just the way he's built. Behind his large, friendly smile, Zona emotes an undeniable intensity that comes off of him like steam.

"If I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it full speed," he says. "Whenever I talk to people, I tell them, if you want something, you just have to push."

Zona is a partner in the Litigation Department, Healthcare Litigation Group, and White Collar and Criminal Defense Group at Mandelbaum Barrett PC, in Roseland, N.J.



A star athlete, attorney Chris Zona played defensive end for Union College.

He jokes that he's wanted to be a trial attorney since the second grade when he saw "A Few Good Men."

Born in New Haven, Conn., Zona largely grew up in nearby Wallingford in a close-knit Italian family. His father was an adolescent social worker who coached Little League and his mother was a part-time teacher. He and his older brother attended Hamden Hall Country Day School, a private school where Zona excelled in sports from early on. He started as a freshman in baseball and football and made All-State in both sports, but he saw football and strong academics as his ticket to college.

After weighing his options and goals, Zona chose to attend Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., where he played defensive end for the football team and majored in political science and history with a minor in economics.

By his sophomore year, it became clear to Zona that his progression as a player, despite a disciplined workout routine, wasn't advancing how he hoped. He understood his years playing the sport he loved and had dedicated so much time to would end with his college career. He took the realization in stride.

"Luckily for me I've always been onto the next thing before I've finished the thing I'm on," says Zona. "I was already thinking about where my life was going to go next."

One possibility was to follow a history professor's advice and go to Italy in order to finish his thesis on the interplay between fascism and the Sicilian mafia.

Another possibility was law school, of course — that had always been on the horizon.

But Zona says he felt done with school for a while. He wanted the real world. And he had an itch to scratch.

He wanted to take a shot at coaching.

"I knew I would never have another chance," he says. "Everyone was surprised, but I knew if I didn't do it then, I would never do it."

Zona began reaching out to contacts. His father, Ralph, was a founder of the ConnectiKids Celebrity Golf Tournament, which

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Chris Zona with his parents, Ralph and Marilyn, and his brother, Jonathan, at graduation from Union College, where Zona majored in political science and history.

raised money for the Department of Children and Families. Through the tournament, Ralph knew dozens of university coaches and athletes as well as several ESPN personalities.

Zona interviewed at a half-dozen Division 3 schools around the Northeast before signing a contract at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts as a defensive line and special teams coach. The hours were long and the stress was high, but Zona found it “super fun.” He was 23 and biting at the bit to advance.

His ambition was to be a full-time position coach in a Division 1 program or in the NFL within five years.

So, when he was offered a position as an assistant D-line and player development coach at the University of Rhode Island, a Division 1 school, he seized it. With exuberance, he describes the experience of coaching at a D1 program as a “total grind.” He put in 20-hour days and slept in the locker room some nights. Other nights, he slept in the clothes he would wear the next day in order to buy a few more minutes of sleep.

“People never realize how much coaches work,” says Zona. “It was insane.”

Though he thrived under the all-consuming work, as he looked around he saw the full-time coaches having little time for their families and knew they had moved several times seeking greater opportunities. That wasn’t the life Zona wanted.

“Unless I could make a jump pretty quick, I didn’t want to grind it out,” he says. “I didn’t want to be a career coach. I wanted to see how high I could go and how quick.”

But when the URI head coach announced at the end of the season that he was leaving to take a position with the Miami Dolphins, Zona saw the upheaval as a sign.

“This was God telling me I’ve got to get back on track with the rest of my life,” he says, adding that his brief detour into coaching provided numerous life lessons and prepared him in many ways to be a better lawyer.

“The great thing about coaching is it taught me what real hours are and what hard work is,” he says. “You realize that’s what it takes to be successful and to ask yourself whether you’re going to make that commitment or not.”

His plan to attend law school hit a speedbump when he was wait-listed at each school he applied to, but Zona refused to “wait and see.” He began calling the schools every Friday to ask if a seat had opened. His tenacity paid off when Washington and Lee University School of Law offered him a spot.

Zona, who thought at the time he wanted to be a district attorney, treated law school like a job. His goals were set: get the degree, take the bar, become a criminal attorney.

As a gregarious and brash Northeasterner, Zona stuck out at Washington & Lee. He resumed working out in the gym, which as a coach he had had no time for, and remembers classmates staring at him as he did pushups outside the lecture hall before class.

In his second year, a professor, who was a former JAG Lt. Col., pulled him aside to ask what he wanted to do after law school. Zona told him he wanted to try cases in court within his first year or two. When the professor explained to Zona how quickly he could get into a courtroom as a JAG officer, the young, ambitious law student was sold. He applied to the Air Force and Army JAG Corps.

Though he received an offer for a summer position from a high-end boutique law firm in West Virginia, he took the Air Force’s offer of a job with the Criminal Appeals Division in Washington, D.C. He also did an externship at the Army’s JAG school in Charlottesville, VA teaching military justice.

Zona says his decision to become a JAG officer was sealed when he interviewed with a prestigious law firm in New York and one of the partners was a former Navy JAG, told him to close the door.

“You don’t want to come do this,” Zona remembers the partner telling him. “Go be a JAG. Run it to ground. You’ll always be able to do this at some level.”

Zona took the advice to heart.

“I wanted to see what life was like as a military attorney,” he says. “It was the best time of my life. All my great stories are from my time in the Air Force.”

As a JAG officer, Zona served as lead trial counsel in dozens of criminal trials, prosecuting and defending the Air Force’s most serious and complex felony cases. He did his first trial four months after arriving on base and became the second youngest defense attorney in his class.

He defended the first case that arose out of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations’ “To Catch a Predator” sting, a case that drew wide media attention and was highly publicized.

In one case, he defended a young Airman who was an aircraft

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gunner on a C-130 gunship in Iraq. After getting the Airman off, he gave Zona a used weapon system launching tube that had fired one of the first guided missiles that had a KIA in Iraq as a gesture of his gratitude.

“It’s one of my prized possessions,” says Zona.

But what Zona really wanted was to be a senior prosecutor, a role that typically requires eight years of experience and the rank of major.

He remembers being at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas and sitting in on a trial and watching the prosecutor, who had been a top senior prosecutor for years, and thinking, “I want to be that guy. That’s the guy I want to be.”

After pressing the higher-ups, Zona got his wish and became one of only 26 senior prosecutors in the Air Force after only 18 months as a defense counsel. Six months later, he was added to the elite Special Victims Unit, a group of the six best prosecutors charged with leading the Air Force’s most complex and serious trials. He was the youngest member of each by a wide margin.

He was ecstatic.

“Throughout my career path I’ve had people, who never had to but for some reason or another, took a direct interest in me and helped me advance,” he says.

As he was preparing his last defense case, which was an attempted murder, Zona who had previously blown out his neck while working out, received news that an MRI discovered a large tumor on his thyroid. Test after test came back inconclusive. His doctor advised that the odds were high that it might be thyroid cancer and suggested surgery, but Zona was reluctant to have his thyroid removed. He put off surgery for two years and threw himself into work.

“I told them I didn’t ever want more than two or three days off on my calendar,” says Zona. “I didn’t want to be sitting in the office.”

He was willing to fly anywhere and do anything from motion hearings, victim interviews, or preliminary hearings to stay busy between trials. He traveled to 27 bases in 2-1/2 years and worked a grueling trial caseload. He was named Best First-Year Senior Trial Counsel and, the following year, was awarded the Air Force Senior Trial Counsel of the Year. He once did seven trials in nine weeks.

“Trying cases on that pace was the coolest thing,” he says.

In 2017, after having surgery on the tumor, he learned it was benign. Eight days after the surgery, he was back at trial, with a bandage on his throat.

After 2-1/2 years as a senior prosecutor, Zona was ready for a new assignment.

“I had two things I wanted to do in the military,” he says. “I wanted to try cases and I wanted to go down range. I wanted to work with guys who were actually doing the mission and putting

their lives in jeopardy.”

The role Zona wanted is known as a “Jump JAG,” an attorney assigned to a special operations group or the Airborne Division who travels with servicemembers down range and advises on law of war, rules of engagement, and mission pre- and post-briefs.

When it became clear that he didn’t have the necessary rank for the position, Zona decided it was time to transition out of the military and back into civilian life.

He began making inquiries at Big Law firms, seeking partners who had military experience and who would value his background.

“I was looking for a firm where I could go from being a trial attorney to being an immediate plug-in associate who could take on roles that are generally reserved for people who were sixth, seventh, eighth years because of my on-my-feet experience,” says Zona.

He received that opportunity from the New York law firm Boies Schiller Flexner, where he first started doing civil work.

“I felt like a fish out of water,” says Zona. “It became my training ground. It was a great opportunity to learn from some incredibly smart people. I had to figure out what it takes to be



Zona joined the Airforce JAG Corps after graduating from Washington and Lee University School of Law.

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good in this world, which was far different from what it took to be good in the other world.”

After three years at Boies Schiller, Zona took an in-house position with United Healthcare where he says he furthered his understanding of clients’ needs.

“It helped me reshape and recast some of the ways I talk to clients and helped me understand that where the litigation falls within their business is far more helpful to them than just explaining the legal end.”

But the pace at United Healthcare didn’t suit Zona. He missed the courtroom.

“I get my energy from the value I have at work,” he says.

After a year-long stint at a litigation boutique law firm, Zona was contacted by Mohamed Nabulsi and Steve Adler at Mandelbaum Barrett. Zona says he was “totally blown away” after talking with them about the firm and that accepting the offer was a “no brainer.”

“This is so different from anywhere I’ve ever been as far as the support and opportunities they offer,” he says. “There’s no other place I could have gone that was going to roll out this level of support.”

Zona says he wants to become a known commodity, both inside the firm and with clients. He wants clients to see him as “on the ball,” responsive, and willing to take charge.

“I want to do cases that are going to affect lives, whether that’s their business or their life and liberty or it’s their career,” says Zona. “I want to be the person they turn to when they’re in a crisis. I want them to know that I have been in battles and I’ve been in these rooms. I know what’s on the line.”

Zona says he thrives under situations that present intense



Chris Zona and his dog Bane.

and critical consequences.

He smiles when he adds, “Diamonds are made through high pressure, right?”