

# Sports Tuesday

The New York Times

**'We are the people who make life a little smoother.'**

CHARLES PORTER, who along with a staff of eight helps athletes and entertainers take care of life's little annoyances.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIERAN DODDS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

## Need a Phone? Car? Santa? Done. Discreetly.

**Charles Porter helps 'fill the holes' in the lives of Premier League players. Just don't call it a concierge service.**

By RORY SMITH

RICHMOND, England — Charles Porter and his staff of eight work from his office in a converted riding school on the grounds of Aske Hall, an old manor house set in the gentle, rolling hills of North Yorkshire. His Australian Labradoodles, Bertie and Cybil, spend their days lounging on a leather sofa by a roaring fire.

It is an unassuming setting for an unassuming company. Porter does not advertise or seek to publicize his work; he had never previously granted an interview. His website is modern and sleek but studiously enigmatic. "There are no pictures of people we work with," he said. "We live and die by our discretion."

To hundreds of players in English soccer over the last 20 years, though, Porter is an integral part of life.

"He has helped me out with all sorts of things," said Kevin Kilbane, formerly of Everton and Ireland's national team.

Danny Mills, a longtime client and former England international, described Porter as a "consummate networker, a great person to have around to take the stress away."

To Porter's clients — actors and musicians as well as athletes — he is almost indispensable. He will not say it, but he is the ultimate purveyor of the Premier League lifestyle.

It is Porter whom you call to get your hands on the latest cellphone, or when the time comes to upgrade your car.



For some 20 years, Charles Porter, top, has been a "consummate networker, a great person to have around to take the stress away," as one client described him. Above, Porter has four phones of differing exclusivity to ensure personal service.

It is Porter who can make sure your Christmas shopping is completed, or your vacation is booked. It is Porter who knows the people to hire if you want Santa to visit your children, and it is Porter, to at least one player, whose help you seek when you want to propose.

"One client rang me and said: 'Charles, I want to get engaged, and I want you to sort everything out,'" he said. "I said, 'Have you at least found a partner?'" He said he had someone in mind, but that he needed every-

thing else arranged: a ring, a venue, to fly in by helicopter.

"We'd never done anything like that before, but we pulled it off. We sent them to a Scottish castle. She said yes, and they're still married. There was only one thing we couldn't quite do: He said he wanted snow. I had to tell him that there are some people I can't have conversations with."

It takes Porter a little time to come up with a satisfactory, concise definition of

*Continued on Page B11*

## As Season Approaches, Woods Backtracks

Three days after Tiger Woods committed to his first PGA Tour event in 14 months, he abruptly withdrew, leaving this week's Safeway Open with twice as many tickets sold as a year ago but a fraction of the star power.

**KAREN CROUSE**  
ON GOLF  
The Woods wing of fans descending on Napa, Calif., this week will still be able to see the five-time major winner Phil Mickelson, no small consolation prize. But the announcement of Woods's withdrawal, first reported by Golf Channel on Monday and later confirmed by Woods in a statement posted on his website, came as the interest in his comeback had intensified into a Category 4 hype storm.

It partly manifested in the gambling world: Bettors could wager on whether Woods's first drive would find the fairway and if he would finish in the top 10. His odds of winning were listed as 40 to 1, better than all but eight players in the field. The two-time major winner Johnny Miller — an owner of the course hosting this week's event, the PGA Tour's season opener — described the straightforward layout as ideal for

*As expectations mount, a superstar says, 'I knew I wasn't ready to compete.'*

Woods to ease his way back into a "second career" that Miller said would produce another six or eight victories.

A fellow touring pro, Jesper Parnevik, gushed about Woods's game after playing a nine-hole practice round with him recently, telling Golf Channel, "Comebacks are never a sure thing, but something tells me his might be spectacular."

All the talk, however well intentioned, intensified the pressure on Woods, whose final three shots in front of the public, from 100 yards out during a media day in May for a tournament that benefits his foundation, all found a water hazard. People may remember his promising finish to the season last year, when he contended before settling for a tie for 10th at the Wyndham Championship in what turned out to be his last competitive event. But it cannot be easy for Woods to forget how he started 2015: with a first-round withdrawal and three scores in the 80s in his first six events.

Since his five-victory season in 2013, Woods has acquired a kind of scar tissue that no amount of vitamin E will ameliorate. The only remedy for Woods is to play and accept that his shots might get worse before his scores get better. For Woods to have committed to a tournament on Friday before changing his mind three days later suggests that his problem is mental, not physical.

Woods, 40, appears to be experiencing performance anxiety, and really, who in his position would not feel a little like the emperor with no game? In the statement on his website, Woods described his game as "vulnerable and not where it needs to be."

His candid assessment called to mind a line from "I Said Yes to Everything," the memoir of the Academy Award-winning actress Lee Grant. In it, she

*Continued on Page B8*

## Talk in a Locker Room Is Not What One Thinks

By BILL PENNINGTON

My father was a coach and the manager of a sporting goods store that installed and maintained equipment at athletic facilities. By the time I was in third grade, I had already spent countless days and nights in locker rooms — at colleges, high schools, prep schools, private adult clubs, you name it.

Then I became a football player and track athlete, something that continued into my college years. Until I was 20 years old, it felt as if half my life took place inside a locker room.

Not long after I stopped competing seriously, I became a sportswriter. What was my job day after day?

Hanging out in a locker room.

I've been paid to be there — and listen to what is said there — for the better part of 30 years.

Thanks to Donald Trump, the term "locker-room talk" suddenly is widely discussed. It is a pretty broad term; I've heard athletes in locker rooms deeply engaged in conversations on

their municipal bond portfolios and what to feed their cats and, of course, traffic.

Trump was recorded talking about forcibly kissing and groping women, and after an uproar, he chalked it up to "locker-room talk."

The episode raised the question of how common such extreme talk is in locker rooms.

Yet I would say that while I have heard distasteful boasting and crude talk about the attributes of a recent date or a new girlfriend — wives never seem to come up — I've never heard anything that could be described as an assault, or any crime. Not even close.

This is not the same as saying those acts do not happen. I'm just saying it is not any kind of locker-room talk I have heard in my decades working and functioning in that space. Granted, the professional athletes have hours to themselves when the news media is not present. But reporters' access to teams

*Continued on Page B8*



WILLIAM WIDMER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

## HOCKEY

# Rangers Seek To Play Deeper Into Spring

## Lundqvist Is Ready to Return To Ice After Quick Playoff Exit

By DAVE CALDWELL

GREENBURGH, N.Y. — Goal-tender Henrik Lundqvist, the oldest Ranger, joined his teammates in a team-building exercise this weekend, which included visiting the National September 11 Memorial & Museum and participating in a Police Department tactical-training session.

Lundqvist, 34, was happy to be back in New York, partly because he had been away for the longest stretch of his 11-year N.H.L. career. Before playing in the World Cup of Hockey last month in Toronto, Lundqvist spent nearly four months in his native Sweden, reflecting on a rough April.

The regular season had gone well for Lundqvist, who led the league in saves for the first time, with 1,788. He won 35 games, and the Rangers finished third in their division. But then the Rangers were blindsided in the first round of the playoffs by the Pittsburgh Penguins, the eventual Stanley Cup champions.

The Rangers lost the series in five games, and Lundqvist played in only two full games, allowing 15 goals on 113 shots. He was poked near his eye in Game 1 by the stick of a teammate, defenseman Marc Staal, but later said that the injury was not to blame for his poor play.

Having helped the Rangers to the Stanley Cup finals in 2014 and the Eastern Conference finals in 2015, Lundqvist was jarred by the team's elimination last season 11 days into the playoffs. The Penguins exposed the Rangers as

slow and aging.

"It was just the way it ended," Lundqvist said after practice Monday. "They turned up the speed the last two games there, and we didn't have an answer for it. You look at the run they had going into the playoffs, and once the playoffs got started, they were the best team, no question about it. So it was tough to face them in the first round."

He added: "Sometimes you need that first round to kind of get going; then, in the second round, you get better and better. To face a good team like that right away, we didn't have any answers for it."

But Lundqvist said that after thinking about it for a while, he had decided it was time to move on.

"It's a new season now, a new approach," Lundqvist said. "We brought in some guys who are really hungry, and we're all trying to get going."

The Rangers open the regular season Thursday at Madison Square Garden against the Islanders, who made it to the second round of the postseason last year for the first time since 1993. The Rangers have largely retooled their lineup, becoming younger and faster.

But Lundqvist, with a franchise-record 374 career victories, 59 by shutout, remains essential to the Rangers. After the World Cup ended, Lundqvist was given a few days off by Alain Vigneault, the Rangers' fourth-year coach, but Vigneault said Lundqvist had played and practiced well.



Rangers goaltender Henrik Lundqvist while playing for Sweden against Team Europe last month at the World Cup of Hockey.

"For me, he's the same Hank I've ever known," Vigneault said. "He's ready to go."

Lundqvist and other players sounded motivated to bounce back from how the Penguins ran through them en route to the Cup. In the three straight losses that ended the season, the Rangers were outscored by 14-4, including a humiliating 6-3 loss in Game 5.

As forward Chris Kreider said, "it's been a long summer — a little bit too long."

Lundqvist and his goaltending coach, Benoit Allaire, have returned, but the former Rangers defenseman Jeff Beukeboom has replaced Ulf Samuelsson as the assistant coach in charge of the

Rangers' defense, and the Rangers' third and fourth forward lines are virtually new.

Lundqvist's .920 save percentage was only a tick below his career best for a season: .930 in 2011-12. In 65 games, he faced 1,944 shots, the fourth most of his career.

Referring to the Rangers team that lost to the Los Angeles Kings in the 2014 Cup finals, Lundqvist said: "We were extremely fast. It wasn't that we were skating faster than everyone else, but we had good passing, and that second pass was always on the tape. The timing was right."

He said of this season: "We definitely have a lot of fast skaters. It

just comes down to how you use that. I hope we can play a fast game. We have all the tools."

Lundqvist is one of four players on the roster older than 30. Pavel Buchnevich, a 21-year-old forward, has been a speedy and tough revelation, especially when put on a line with Kreider and center Mika Zibanejad, acquired from the Ottawa Senators.

Practice ended with a determined Lundqvist tending goal in front of an enthusiastic group of players trying to pound in pucks from close distance. Lundqvist twirled and lunged and flopped to make saves, shaking his head when a shot went in.

Asked what he had learned

about himself last season, Lundqvist thought for a moment before saying: "Sometimes, it's not going to be perfect. So you just have to go out there and battle. We made it to the playoffs, and I thought we were in pretty good shape after the first two games, but then they kind of took over."

He added: "You hope for a season where almost everything goes well, where you're consistent as a group. It helps everyone when you're winning, obviously. You tend to focus on the good things instead of the bad things when you're winning hockey games. You don't necessarily have to play great, but you have to try to find ways to win."

## SOCCER

# Need Car Upgraded? Trip Booked? Proposal Planned? Done. Discreetly.

From First Sports Page

what it is, exactly, that he does. "It is," he said, mulling it over, "quite difficult to pin down. It can be a bit of a challenge when people ask."

He can say easily enough what he is not. "We are not a concierge service," he said. "We are not the people you call to get a table at the Ivy, or at the Chiltern Firehouse."

He is not, as one of his clients found out, the man to call when you want a pack of cigarettes delivered to a bar by taxi at 3:30 in the morning.

Porter initially settled on calling himself a "jack-of-all-trades," but a little later, a more poetic turn of phrase occurred to him. "We are the people who fill the holes," he said. "We are the people who make life a little smoother."

That his name is still so little known outside the rarefied circles in which he works goes some way to explaining his success in doing that. He would doubtless be able to write a compelling, salacious memoir, but breaking the omerà of his trade would be anathema to him. He religiously eschews name-dropping. That sort of tact, to the rich and famous, holds tremendous appeal.

Porter started out some 20 years ago, after his work with the phone network Cellnet brought him into contact with Middlesbrough, the Premier League club the company sponsored.

"I remember going to the training ground," he said. "There were two guys hanging around in the car park." They were known, to the players, as something not far off from Baloney Bob and Fairground Frank. "One did cars, the other watches and jewelry," Porter said. "I thought I could do it better than that."

His initial sphere of expertise was, thanks to his background, cellphones. "It was one of the first things the players wanted," he said. "But the clubs did not have people helping them set those things up. In the early days, there was one Senegalese player who had a pay-and-go SIM card. He was spending about £7,000 a week phoning home."

Porter used his contacts not just to give players access to up-to-date contract phones but to help them with the paperwork, customer care, technical support and security. There was, for a while, a fad for personalized phone numbers, incorporating birthdays or jersey numbers. "Then they started asking for other things," he said. He sourced cars, worked with private banks to set up accounts, and, later, added insurance, holidays and luxury shopping to his repertoire.

As his portfolio expanded, so did his client base. "I started out with 12 Premier League players,"



Charles Porter with one of his two dogs, regulars at his office. Much of his staff's daily work involves sorting out bank accounts and car insurance for clients.

Porter said. "Now we have about 3,500 people from sport, entertainment, everything. Most of them work in teams or casts, and they talk to each other. It is all word of mouth."

Porter looks after the families of many of them, too. "One of the things I learned working inside a club was that you have to take care of the unit," he said. "If a player is happy but his wife does not have a car or a phone, then that does not help."

As the Premier League has become more international, of course, the clubs have picked up much of that burden. One of Porter's first clients was Juninho, the Brazilian playmaker who signed with Middlesbrough in 1995. He was installed in two cramped rooms at the down-at-heel Stockton Hotel, along with his entire family.

Now, most teams have dedicated player care departments, employing as many as a dozen

people to ensure their charges' lives run as easily as possible. They help them find properties to buy or, increasingly, rent; enroll their children in schools; make sure their bills are paid; and, in some cases, find churches or

## An expertise in cellphones has led to other offerings.

mosques where they can worship.

"The clubs have done all they can to take Bob and Frank out of the equation," Porter said. They maintain lists of trusted suppliers, from luxury brands to financial advisers; the department store Harvey Nichols is among the retailers that install pop-up shops at training grounds so players do not have to browse with the masses.

Porter, though, has not seen his work dry up. If anything, the opposite is true. He is now invited by clubs to educate young players about phone security; his clients are, increasingly, the teams themselves, rather than individuals.

"I will quite often get calls at night explaining that they are with such-and-such a player in a restaurant," he said. "They will say they are signing tomorrow and they need a phone for them as soon as the deal is done."

The phone invariably comes first; Porter and his team remain available for everything else, should they be required. They arrange about 20 cars a month, ordinarily upgrades. A small clutch of clients demands the latest phone on the day of release, regardless of how many they already have. At least one player, a peer said, had as many as seven at one point. They are sent out wrapped in scented tissue paper.

"That is what we do: that old-

fashioned personal service," Porter said.

Much of the day-to-day work, though, is sorting out bank accounts, credit ratings, car insurance, technical problems.

"I realized a long time ago that these people are not going to ring

a call center, give their names and spend 40 minutes on hold to sort out their data allowance," Porter said. That is where he and his team come in: to take care of life's little annoyances, to fill the holes, to make the journey as smooth as possible.

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