

The Palm Beach Post NEWS

Lawyer's silence golden to Tiger Woods in divorce case



FILE - In this June 11, 2009 file photo, Elin Nordegren talks to her husband, golfer Tiger Woods during the first quarter of Game 4 of the NBA basketball finals in Orlando, Fla. Nordegren said she has "been through hell" since her husband's infidelity surfaced but she never hit him, according to an interview released Wednesday telling People magazine she and Woods tried for months to reconcile the relationship. In the end, a marriage "without trust and love" wasn't good for anyone, she said. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip, File)

By **LAURA GREEN**

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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His cheating played out in the tabloids, endorsement deals falling through, Tiger Woods was headed into divorce court with his reputation in tatters.

He needed a world-class lawyer to represent his financial interests and protect his relationship with his children.

The man Woods turned to lives in our community, yet you've probably never heard of him. And that's just the way Tom Sasser wants it.

The West Palm Beach divorce attorney has attracted a stable of high-profile clients with his decidedly low-profile way.

He doesn't paper his office walls with press clippings of himself and celebrities he's represented.

"One of the reasons he gets those high-profile divorces is the exact reason you had to call me to learn about him," said fellow lawyer John Schutz. "He won't give the press a quote; he doesn't talk about his clients, and he doesn't talk about his cases."

Sasser would not comment for this story other than to confirm what is already in the public record: that he represented Woods in his divorce and a Manatee County paternity suit that was dismissed.

An Eagle Scout with a little-boy haircut, Sasser, 40, has been described as an intellectual and a technogeek.

Sasser represented NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon in his acrimonious 2003 divorce from wife Brooke that became a battle over Gordon's net worth. The dissolution of their seven-year marriage was settled before the case went to trial.

He also represented Palm Beach millionaire Fred Keller in the divorce from his fifth wife, Rosemarie. Keller murdered Rosemarie days after a judge awarded her half her husband's \$60 million plus \$8,659 a month in child support, despite a prenuptial agreement.

Sasser's competitors have called him a settler, implying that he doesn't have the pit bull instincts required inside a courtroom.

But his colleagues say that he searches for common ground first in divorce proceedings, and if the two sides can't reach an agreement, he's up for the fight.

Sasser's approach to law is much like former President Reagan's Star Wars strategy of mutually assured destruction. The lawyer prepares himself to go to war, all the while betting that the weapons he accumulates will serve as a deterrent.

"He's not one of the Rambo lawyers. They just fight and kill everything in their path good, bad and indifferent," said family law attorney Victoria Calebrese of Palm Beach Gardens.

Jeff Weissman, a Fort Lauderdale family law attorney who says he shares Sasser's philosophy, says they are "velvet glove" fighters.

"If Tom or myself find ourselves in a situation when the other side is throwing punches, we don't sit with both hands behind our back," he said.

"We come out of the gate, reaching our arms out and trying to be problem-solvers, but if you can't be a problem-solver, you better watch out because what you thought was soft will hit with a very hard punch."

There's no way to know whether it was Sasser the problem-solver or the velvet-glove fighter who appeared in the Woods case.

Woods and his wife, Elin, reached a financial and custody agreement before setting foot last week in the Bay County courtroom for their quickie divorce. The settlement was not filed among the court documents.

Sasser is the son of divorce lawyer Don Sasser, his law partner. He has been married since 1994 to Judge Meenu Sasser. She is a University of Pennsylvania-educated lawyer, known as "the rocket" for her role as a Palm Beach County Circuit Court foreclosure judge cutting through a backlog of cases.

They have three children.

After graduating from St. Andrews School in Boca Raton, Tom Sasser studied English and history at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. He earned his law degree at the University of Florida.

He is a member of the American and International Academies of Matrimonial Lawyers and has built a reputation for working cases with international custody disputes and offshore trusts that need untangling.

Sasser helped write and lobby for two recent Florida laws that changed the way alimony and child support are awarded. One change defined a short-, mid- or long-term marriage to provide more flexibility in alimony awards rather than a simple temporary or permanent award.

Magistrate Diane Kirigin, who has worked with Sasser through the Florida Bar Family Law Section, said representing a client in a divorce is "a very intimate thing."

Sasser understands that, she said.

"You look in the newspaper and magazines and you see other attorneys give quotes about their representation of people," she said. "If I were a celebrity, I would want to go to someone who did not trade on my celebrity."