

Member Spotlight: **Torben Welch**

‘The go to guy’ – why Torben Welch is always up for a new challenge, whenever, wherever...



Head of the Messner Reeves Utah office, and licensed in multiple states including Colorado, New York and Utah, Torben Welch has built his legal expertise by aiding in the resolution of complex business and commercial transactions.

His industry experience includes banking and financial institutions, corporations and businesses and he has a side interest in representing professional sports franchises. Among outside general counsel responsibilities, Torben has legal expertise in enterprise strategic planning, asset acquisitions, cyber-security, contract and lease negotiation, regulatory compliance, corporate governance, workout and recovery strategy (including representation of creditors in bankruptcy matters) for both domestic and international clients. Mr. Welch focuses on litigation prevention but serves as a trial attorney performing independent internal and external investigations or appeals hearings as needed.

Besides his family, Torben Welch has two great passions: the law and soccer (football).

With both, he drew inspiration from heroes he admired, but predictably only one of those passions has given him a career spanning two decades. This has taken Torben from his native Denver to Utah via legal networks stretching across the US, Europe, and Asia.

When he was a toddler, Torben decided he'd like to play for English premier league giants Arsenal FC and even the England national team. Through his sports mad father, he fell in love with Arsenal and particularly its star player, Dennis Bergkamp. He still has the posters to prove it.

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Meanwhile, as a teenager he was captivated by Atticus Finch, the quietly determined lawyer in ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’, played by Gregory Peck in the movie. It was while watching ‘Mockingbird’ that Torben realised he wanted to be a lawyer so, “I could be like Atticus and help people”.

Both passions followed him through school and college before he finally graduated from law school in 2002, albeit as a soccer mad lawyer.

“Law became more interesting to me after reading and then watching ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’” Torben recalls. “After I saw the

movie, I knew I wanted to do law. I wanted to be Atticus, or better, Gregory Peck.

“I started taking debate classes in high school and I’ve always been interested in reading documents to understand the meaning of things from different perspectives. Law became the perfect career for me early on.”

After graduating, Torben’s first job out of law school was to work as construction defect litigator: “All they did was practise construction defect litigation. That was it! For three years I was a litigator. It wasn’t what I really wanted to do, but it helped me understand about writing and understanding contracts from both sides.”

Fascinated by all aspects of the law, it soon became clear litigation wouldn’t be enough. Torben became the ‘go to’ guy in the office: “If people didn’t understand a particular job or issue, they’d pass it to Torben,” he laughs. “I like being thrown in the fire because you learn quickly on the job.

“On my first day as an attorney they sent me to a deposition with an electrical engineer on a big housing project. They didn’t tell me I was supposed to do the deposition. I just showed up and had to conduct a deposition, having never seen one before. Soon I was taking depositions and meeting clients, conducting settlement deals, and negotiating \$10 million settlement agreements.

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This shifted Torben’s workload away from litigation to real estate, banking and finance,

and then general corporate work: “I still view myself as ‘I’ll do whatever’. If you don’t know how to do it and you’re willing to let me do it, I’ll figure it out. But I still work on a lot of real estate work for companies that do corporate commercial leasing and acquisitions.”

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That’s also moved into more of an outside general counsel role: “So I sit and advise boards of public and private companies – any questions they have they run it by me and then usually head up their real estate and any of their financing and M&A work.”

With his focus on real estate and corporate work, Torben started at Messner Reeves LLP in 2008. The firm grew out of managing partner Monty Moran’s relationship with the CEO of Chipotle Mexican Grill. As the business grew, opening new restaurants, so too did Messner Reeves, working on all the leases and representing the restaurant chain in the US and overseas.

“We were outside general counsel for them and going to meetings at their corporate offices every day,” Torben says. “The good thing was the experience gave us that instruction; how to deal with Fortune 500 companies, the experience of working on major deals.”

Likewise, off the back of the Chipotle Mexican Grill relationship Messner Reeves expanded from one office to nine in a decade and from 34 attorneys to 136, with practices in every field.

It was a growth spurt that would have a huge impact on Torben’s life.

“Home for me has always been Denver, Colorado and that’s where I’ve always expected to live and work,” he says. “Then three years ago as we started our next phase of expansion, I was asked if I’d like to open an office in Utah. They knew my wife was from Salt Lake City and that I already had a small client base here that I’d grown when I’d visited from time to time.”

It was another ‘go to’ task Torben couldn’t refuse: “I liked the challenge of starting from scratch. It’s not something you can do often. Salt Lake City was relatively new territory

when it came to attorneys. There were four or five big firms, but mid-level businesses between \$10 million-\$50 million a year had no access to those big firms, they were relying on attorneys from California.”

Although Torben already had a small client base, he told the firm he could triple the workload and revenue if he moved to Salt Lake City. It also coincided with the huge development in and around the city as real estate and tech firms moved into the area.

“Salt Lake is what Denver was 20 years ago,” he says. “The quality of living is good, and companies are coming here to cut costs from the more expensive coastal cities. For example, many large tech companies have relocated or sent teams to Utah from their former tech hub locations. We now represent these teams and provide nationwide service from Utah.

“My Utah business has grown to the point where I’m almost 75% Utah-specific clients now – the opposite to how it was three years ago. Most of them are satellite offices for bigger companies and even during the pandemic the real estate and corporate work has not stopped. In fact, it’s gone gangbusters – I’ve been in exactly the right place at the right time and the pandemic hasn’t hurt at all.”

Nevertheless, Torben admits that certain sectors, such as hospitality clients, have taken a huge hit due to the lockdown. Elsewhere, clients are looking at real estate and rethinking leasing and office space for the future.

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“My office and landlord clients are looking at new ways of operating. With everybody working from home, you don’t need to be in the office every day and owners are trying to figure out what they do with all this extra space.

“What’s the next phase? Is there a gym that we can put in on the second floor to benefit everybody? Because now we have all this extra space that nobody wants; it might be like this for two years, five years or longer.”

Along with his work in Utah, Torben is also busy with clients from New York to London.

Before Covid-19, this involved a ton of travel, but these days he’s happy to Zoom with most of them – although he doesn’t believe technology is the answer for all of his jobs:

“I miss getting back out with clients, just doing a client development lunch with somebody to talk about their business. I’ve discovered it’s easier to get to chat and discuss things over a one-hour lunch than it is to schedule a Zoom call. With Zoom there’s no small talk and strict time deadlines.”

My daughter loves soccer and I coach her; of course, she’s an Arsenal fan.

With his referrals from IR Global, it’s also helped to ensure the quality of work is constant: “And that’s one thing I love about IR global. If someone says: ‘I’m affiliated with IR global or somebody from IR Global told me to call you’, I know all the hard due diligence work is already done. There’s credibility that’s been vetted; it’s easy to trust that way.”

Unbelievably, amid all this activity – developing a career, setting up a new office, building relationships and long-term clients, setting up a new home – Torben ensures he spends time with his family and his hobbies. Predictably, he’s even created a job out of his hobby.

“My daughter loves soccer and I coach her; of course, she’s an Arsenal fan. I’m also licenced by the FA as an intermediary and agent. Instead of representing players, I end up representing the agents who aren’t attorneys and I review contracts – so that’s a bit of fun.”

Torben also likes golf and watching baseball and cricket, particularly the Indian Premier League. But, above all, he loves his adopted city and the big country around him.

“Living in Utah is really nice,” he says. “I mean, the mountains are just 10 minutes away. Literally. I can look out my window right here and the mountains are just there. You can go hiking in the morning. We do a lot of mountain biking; we love to get outdoors.”

Not a bad life for a Denver lawyer even if he never quite made the Arsenal or England soccer teams.

Torben Welch

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