Patt Morrison: Owning O.J.

How do you squeeze a dime out of a celebrity? Sue to own one.

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SWEAR TO DeMille, this is going to be the most frightening story that Hollywood has come across since the news burst upon El Mundo de Movies that a private eye named Tony Pellicano was supposedly eavesdropping on some quite glamorous and private telephones.

Oh wait, hang on — maybe the second most frightening story. I forgot about the shocking news that the fabulous, dazzling contents of those awards-night goodie bags will henceforth be regarded as taxable income by the Internal Revenue Service.

In what looks like one truly inspired piece of lawyering, Fred Goldman — the father of Ron Goldman, murdered a dozen years ago along with O.J. Simpson's ex-wife, Nicole — is going after O.J. Simpson, again. Make that, still.

Goldman has pursued his son's justice a lot more tenaciously than Simpson has pursued the "real killer." And Goldman means to squeeze Simpson, using as his "juicer" his share of the $33.5-million judgment that a Santa Monica jury assessed in 1997 when it found Simpson civilly liable for the murders.

But consider: Simpson says he'll never hand over Dime One to the Goldmans. He moved to Florida, where the law protects his half-million-dollar-plus house from court rulings. Even the $25,000 NFL pension check he gets every month is untouchable.

So how can Goldman lay a finger on him?

That's the beauty part: Goldman wants the court to award him Simpson's publicity rights: Simpson's name, his image, his likeness — anything that cashes in on O.J. Inc.

Simpson is no golden goose — not any more. But when it comes to residuals, his movies and TV work are still around (what kind of dough are "Circus of the Stars" reruns pulling down, anyway?). His autographs were fetching $100 a pop in Chicago last year, I read.

I said the idea for the Goldmans to get Simpson's publicity rights was an inspired piece
of lawyering, but it wasn't a lawyer who dreamed it up. Karl Manders did. He's the head of Continental Enterprises, an Indianapolis intellectual property consulting company.

When I talked to Manders on Wednesday, he told me, "I would give anything to see O.J. Simpson's face" when he heard about this. "It does strike at the heart of what's important to him. Our opinion is: The only thing that's important to Mr. Simpson is Mr. Simpson." If the court grants this request, "every time he signs his autograph, that name is the property of the Goldmans. The moment it comes off the pen, it's no longer his."

Years ago, Manders says, he worked out the deal that let John Wayne give his publicity rights to his children before he died, "so the concept of a person walking around who doesn't own his own likeness is not so strange."

And intellectual property "is property like any other property. It's bought and sold and transferred every day, especially in Los Angeles — that's what the city's built on."

A judge's blessing on Goldman's request might be the scariest sound to come out of Hollywood since the shower music in "Psycho." Whatever Le Tout Hollywood might think of O.J., this precedent might make allies out of all the Simpsons — O.J., Jessica and Homer.

Severing a performer from publicity rights is like severing him from himself. The publicity rights, the face, the talent, the investment, that other, eternal self — in the universe of celebrity, it's as much a part of the performer as the soul. That's why Manders calls it "poetic justice."

Imagine it was the other driver who had been killed by James Dean's car on that road near Cholame on Sept. 30, 1955 — and that the money from every James Dean film, every commercial, every product endorsement and Halloween mask and action figure went to pay a judgment for the dead man's estate.

Or, speed ahead half a century. Let's say Paris Hilton's small, tormented pet of the moment happens to take a bite out of you while you're stuck alongside her behind the rope at the MTV Video Music Awards after-party. You sue. She ignores you like the peon you are. Her lawyers ignore you. You go to court for redress and suddenly you own Paris Hilton. Her name, her image, her perfume profits, her CD royalties, such as they are — all yours, until the million bucks she owes you for the coatimundi bite is paid off.

Manders isn't anybody's idea of athletic — a shade under six feet, a shade and then some over 200 pounds. He says he looks like a red-haired Jerry Garcia. His sport in school was chess. But maybe, just maybe, this guy is the one tackler that O.J. Simpson can't outrun.

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