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Ecker is back: Star broker's exile ends

By **BETSY WANGENSTEEN**

Think of Howard Ecker as Chicago real estate's own Napoleon Bonaparte.

He is short. He is fierce. He is fond of sartorial pomp.

He also has returned to the field after suffering ignominious defeat.

Five years ago, the always-controversial Mr. Ecker was tainted—but not charged—in a kickback scandal at First National Bank of Chicago. Talk of a "consulting fee" that Mr. Ecker allegedly paid to a corrupt bank official killed a deal to merge Mr. Ecker's company with another. Clients and colleagues abandoned Mr. Ecker while competitors cackled.

"It's followed me for the past five years. Every day," says Mr. Ecker.

The diminutive real estate broker didn't go to Elba, but he did suffer some lean years.

Now, backed by Jupiter Realty Corp., one of the most respected names in Chicago real estate, the 51-year-old Mr. Ecker is becoming

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TODD WINTERS

Back in black: Colorful dresser and go-getting tenant representative Howard Ecker has risen again, this time with PM Realty Group Inc.

Ecker

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 a player again.

As part of a push into the Midwest market, PM Realty Group Inc.—a Houston-based company controlled by Jupiter principals—last year tapped Mr. Ecker to launch and run its corporate tenant advisory business.

"He's one of the godfathers of tenant rep.," says Jupiter Chairman Donald Smith, explaining why he hired Mr. Ecker. "He's been at it as long or longer than anyone else, and he knows everyone in town."

Mr. Smith calls rumors about Mr. Ecker's role in the 1991 First National episode "unjust."

So far, PM/Ecker Realty is justifying Mr. Smith's confidence. PM CEO Mike Lutton says Mr. Ecker brought in around \$2 million in commissions last year, representing such clients as Rodman & Renshaw Inc., Oppenheimer & Co. and Borg-Warner Security Corp.

"There is some satisfaction to success," says Mr. Ecker, with uncharacteristic understatement.

A bevy of loyal pals—including Sam Zell, Robert Belcaster and Helmut Jahn—couldn't be happier for Mr. Ecker. Others, who prefer to remain nameless, profess disbelief.

"He's like a mushroom—a fungus that grows in the dark. The more you push him down, the more he comes back. Unbelievable," says a competitor.

Such opinions abound. Indeed, Mr. Ecker keeps handy a copy of a letter from the U.S. attorney confirming that he was never indicted in the First National case. He used it just weeks ago, when a competitor faxed a client a 5-year-old *CRAIN'S* story implicating him in the First National scandal.

Mr. Ecker declines to discuss his role in the bank imbroglio other than to say, "I did nothing wrong. I was not charged. And I did not lose my real estate license."

In 1991, several First National executives pleaded guilty to charges relating to kickbacks they'd accepted, some of which had to do with the bank's real estate deals. The *CRAIN'S* story identified Mr. Ecker as the unnamed Chicago real estate broker referred to in court documents. He admitted to being First National's exclusive real estate broker, but denied wrongdoing and never was charged with any crime.

Friends and foes alike describe him as an abrasive and sometimes outrageous broker known for operating outside of convention. Just the type some like to see stumble.

"Howard was aggressive from the get-go," says Mr. Belcaster, Chicago Transit Authority president and former managing partner of the Chicago office of New York-based Tishman Speyer Properties Inc.

Mr. Ecker's first job was working in the mid-1960s as an understudy to Mr. Belcaster at Julien J. Studley Inc., where the two tried to create a tenant representation business—a new concept at the time.

"It was like being a Fuller Brush salesman—knocking on doors and getting tossed out," recalls Mr. Belcaster.

"Howard was perfect," he continues. "Aggressive. Tough. Could get a rise out of people. Some people like that. Some people, it rubs the wrong way."

Mr. Ecker isn't troubled by that part of his reputation.

"Of course I'm aggressive. In this business, you have to be to make things happen," he says.

Mr. Ecker left Studley to join Cushman & Wakefield Inc., where he was a leasing agent on the John Hancock Center during its construction. He later moved to that fertile ground for brokers with style—Rubloff Inc. In 1976, he formed Howard Ecker & Co., which he claims was the first company devoted exclusively to tenant representation.

Robert Somers, comptroller for Clausen Miller P.C., says it was Mr. Ecker's "pushiness" that landed him the Chicago law firm as a client 13 years ago.

Right kind of smarts

"Real estate people cold-call us all the time," he says. "Howard was smart enough to do it on a Saturday morning, when he knew I'd pick up the phone myself. That's the kind of smarts I wanted in a broker."

Mr. Ecker has worked with—he says trained—nearly all the big names in local tenant representation: Goldie Wolfe—now president of Goldie B. Wolfe & Co.—at Rubloff; Michael Silver—now president of Equis Co.—at Howard Ecker & Co.; and Nancy Pacher—now president at U.S. Equities Realty Inc.—also at his firm.

Sources say Mr. Ecker is not on speaking terms with Ms. Wolfe, Mr. Silver or Ms. Pacher. All either declined to comment or did not return calls.

But Mr. Ecker is not lacking for well-placed boosters.

"He's one of the smartest minds in the business," says Harvey Camins, vice-chairman of Frain Camins & Swartchild Oncor International. "The great thing about Howard is that he's not afraid to be an individual, from his clothes to the way he does business."

Mr. Camins' first memory of Mr. Ecker is a pair of red mittens he wore during his Rubloff period. Years later, Mr. Camins borrowed a "pretty wild" printed vest from Mr. Ecker to wear to a benefit. People who saw Mr. Camins from the back that night called him "Howard."

Indeed, Mr. Ecker is nearly as well-known for his attire as he is for that 5-year-old First National blemish. His yellow-framed glasses have left an impression on many, as have his slipper-style shoes and unpredictable neckwear. He once wore black leather pants to a meeting with a conservative insurance industry executive in California.

"I often dress down on the coast," says Mr. Eckert.

A couple of friends

"He is one of the most elegantly dressed people in the business. We have that in common," says Mr. Jahn, an architect and a longtime Ecker pal also known for his unconventional haberdashery. "We all go through ups and downs. Howard's had his downs, and he's overcome them."

Mr. Zell, who gave his friend office space at Equity during his professional nadir five years ago, finds yet another redeeming quality.

Says the investor: "My experiences with Howard have been nothing but terrific. But the most memorable thing about him—the reason I've stood by him all these years—is that he's one of the few people I know that's shorter than I am."