

Fun While it Lasted

By the time Dave Presher began work at the San Diego Spirit of the Women's United Soccer Association, the WUSA's mortal wounds had already been (self) inflicted. After blowing through three-years of seed money in an orgy of spending leading up to opening day of its inaugural season, the WUSA stared into the abyss after two seasons of staggering financial losses. Corporate sponsorship badly underperformed expectations and TV ratings barely registered - distressing for a league founded and subsidized by cable television operators.

Presher was a 20-year sales veteran of the radio industry, but a pro sports novice. He was expected to apply his promotional know-how to fill seats for the Spirit, a club which already paced the WUSA in season ticket sales. Although brought on as a revenue-side hire, Presher immediately dove into player personnel - transforming an on-field product he found "in shambles".

Trades in the WUSA were rare and unremarkable. The top American players held an equity stake in the league and a say in which cities they agreed to play in. A few weeks into the job, Presher engineered the biggest trade in league history, shipping veterans Shannon Boxx, Margaret Tietjen and Sherrill Kester, along with the #2 overall pick in the 2003 college draft, to the New York Power. In return, San Diego received the #1 overall pick and midfielders Jen Lalor and Wynne McIntosh. The key to the trade was that #1 pick, which Presher used to draft Aly Wagner, the young U.S. National Team midfielder projected to be the best attacking player of her generation.

Presher ultimately spent just twelve months in San Diego before the WUSA imploded around his club in September 2003. During that year, his overhauled Spirit earned their first playoff appearance, San Diego hosted the final WUSA championship game, and Presher continued wheeling and dealing to the end. Unaware of the impending shutdown, Presher shipped his prized rookie Aly Wagner to the Boston Breakers just days before the league folded. It was his second blockbuster deal and, as it turned out, the league's last.

Today Dave Presher is the Founder and CEO of Involution Digital, a California based agency specializing in digital, social and traditional media consulting.

Dave Presher spoke to Fun While It Lasted about the WUSA on November 14th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

How did you get involved with the San Diego Spirit? What was your previous entertainment industry experience before joining the WUSA?

Presher:

I got involved with the San Diego Spirit through Kevin Crow. Kevin and I knew each other from San Diego State and Kevin was a well-known soccer player in San Diego since he had played there professionally for years. Kevin was being promoted from the General Manager role with the San Diego Spirit to the WUSA league office in Atlanta. A friend of mine recommended me to Kevin and he called me to discuss the position.

Before joining the San Diego Spirit as GM, I had been a VP/General Manager in radio and television. I had worked for companies like CBS in multiple markets including Los Angeles, Dallas, and Sacramento. I also had a soccer background as I played premiere men's soccer for seventeen years, a mix of amateurs and pros. I also had coached some of the better amateur men's teams in the country.

Apart from my soccer background, Kevin was most intrigued by my experience in Radio. He thought the creativity of radio was ideal for driving "butts in seats" in stadiums and coming up with creative promotions. The WUSA was in the entertainment category, so they had similar business models. It just made sense to bring the ideas & success of radio to building creative content, driving promotions that would help sell tickets, getting viewers for the televised games and designing marketing and advertising campaigns that overall would grow the team attendance.

FWiL:

What was the state of the franchise when you arrived in late 2002, both on and off the field?

Presher:

Off the field, I was blessed with a great front office team that Kevin had put together. We had excelled in season tickets, operations, finance and publicity. However, there were definitely areas that we needed to improve.

First, we had no dedicated sales manager for tickets or corporate sponsorships. Thus, we reshuffled some of the staff and put one of our strongest sales people, Danica Holmlund, in charge of our ticket and corporate sales departments. She also developed and trained a strong sales team. That helped tremendously and we saw a lot of growth in both sales areas.

Second, our in game entertainment needed to step it up as it was too traditional for the type of audience that attended the games. We would later push the limit with parachutists, music, events, concerts, etc. at our games.

Third, our marketing strategy needed to be changed. We had a strong Director of Marketing, Paige Blankenship, but she was frustrated with some of the things I discovered as well. So we set on improving our brand. We did this by developing a new logo, designing new uniforms, and developed new advertising campaigns; all of which gave a new look and feel for the team. Being that we had a limited budget, we also narrowed our paid advertising dollars to target parents of youth girls playing soccer. So all in all, it was a mixed bag.

And last for off the field, just prior to my arrival, our budgets had been severely reduced. We were traditional in our approach and needed to shift from a soccer back office to an entertainment “show” mentality. The team responded very well to new ideas and each of them were wonderful to work with.

The on field team, well, that was a different story. It was in shambles and needed some serious change. Prior to arriving in San Diego, I spent some time researching women’s pro soccer and knew that rosters had changed as much as 50% in a year for championship teams. Kevin had tried to land a famous college and Youth National Team coach, but was unsuccessful. Which is funny, because I said I’m not worried about anything other than having a good coach, because the rest I feel comfortable with. So what happened when I arrived? I had no coach and no candidates.

The rest of the league was executing trades, recruiting players, and we had the second pick in the <2003 college> draft. While I would have preferred to have a coach on the team, I didn’t believe in waiting with the rest of the league in high gear while I was doing a thorough search for the coach. So I started analyzing the team. Tony DiCicco and April Heinrichs, the former and current US National Team Coaches, were quite helpful. What seemed like a concern to me was that the team lacked pace and we had too many central midfielders - all talented but none that were really attacking players. Julie Foudy was a holding midfielder. Lori Lindsey and Shannon Boxx were also holding midfielders. But neither had pace and we had too many players in their mold. We had concerns about some of our foreign players and we were allowed two changes a year out of four <international> players. We had no left footed players. We lacked diversity, speed, bite and flank play.

My personnel director wasn’t happy about it but I began looking to make changes while still searching for a coach. I was able to put together the deal for Aly Wagner with New York. It was a complicated, risky deal. Shannon Boxx was a great player. However, she was another defensive, central midfielder who lacked pace and fitness. Aly wasn’t the best attacking midfielder in soccer. She was, however, the best American attacking player in soccer. There was little

chance we could trade for Boston's German midfielder, or Atlanta's Homare Sawa (the Japanese Captain who starred in this year's 2011 world cup), or Sissi, the Captain of Brazil. And Shannon Boxx was in great demand for trading purposes and, quite frankly, she was also a damn good player. I had taken Julie off the table as she was our Captain, the US National Team Captain and the leader on the team. She was also a very technical player who knew how to win.

Mark Ziegler from *The San Diego Union-Tribune* is a first class reporter, but he loved to stir it up. Well, he really went at us when Shannon Boxx came back to town with the New York Power for the first time after the Aly Wagner trade. He called me out with something about "Presher's trade". Aly hadn't scored so far that year. In practice the day before the New York game she couldn't hit the frame, putting her free kicks in outer space. Then on game day she ended up with I believe two goals and an assist and we beat New York 4-2.

But my proudest moment was probably the hire of Coach Omid Namazi. He was a long-time player and coach in indoor, had played professionally outdoors as well and was considered a very good coach. I have a system for hiring and I really stuck to it for this hire. I think the staff and the league were a bit concerned when I hired an Iranian men's indoor coach, who had previously punched out a mascot at a game. But Omid was the real deal and he turned out to be a fantastic coach, leader and partner.

<Omid> found Christine Latham based on some film. He really helped Shannon MacMillan. He switched our formation to 3-5-2 which allowed Joy Fawcett more control in the defense. Two holding midfielders which gave Aly more room to run and the three in the center minimized our lack of speed. Julie Fleeting was without a doubt our most important player. She could turn, score and use her head as well as any women in the world. Combined with Shannon, Christine, and Ouying <Zhang>, we had a strong front line. A solid midfield with flank and central players, two tough marking backs, two great goalies and depth on the bench.

From the time I got there, we changed the personnel 50% and we couldn't guarantee victory but we could guarantee we would be prepared to win!

FWiL:

Cox Communications was the investor-operator in San Diego. Can you explain how the WUSA's single-entity model worked as far as decision making at the franchise level? As the GM, did you report to Cox executives or to a manager in the league office? How engaged was Cox in the day-to-day operations of the Spirit during that final year of the league?

Presher:

We had a wonderful relationship with Cox Communications. Dan Novak who was the #2 at San Diego Cox and is now a Senior VP of Publicity and Marketing for Qualcomm, Bill Gephert, President of Cox San Diego (since retired), Jim Robbins COO of Cox (since passed) and Jim Kennedy CEO of Cox, they were all very supportive of the franchise. They helped the team secure a very nice facility to play in at University of San Diego (USD) and it was the right size for the San Diego Spirit (seating just over 7,000). It was also an excellent field kept in perfect condition. But the <stadium> deal was quite limiting financially and our time was limited on the field. Which was frustrating as Cox had put over a million dollars in to expand the field and add a video Jumbotron for our games and all of USD's games. The Spirit did not share in many revenue streams such as parking etc., and that was tough.

As the GM of the Spirit, I reported to Kevin Crow. At the end of the day though, I worked with both Cox executives and Kevin. Cox and Kevin were good partners. Cox was more influential in San Diego. Kevin offered more insights into league politics and operations.

I worked directly with Dan Novak and Bill Gephert at Cox. Since the Spirit was owned by Cox, Jim Robbins, their COO, was responsible for the team. I was on the Cox strategic infrastructure team. Dan was over Channel 4, the local cable channel that also carried the San Diego Padres and was owned by Cox and carried the Spirit TV games. Dan was a creative type and we hit it off immediately. We are still good friends to this day. When the league cut budgets Cox stepped up to continue our in game video and televising the majority of our games local and away on Channel 4. They stepped up when we had a chance to bring the USA National Team to Play Japan and guaranteed the game. They stepped up when we brought in Martha Burke, who was the leader of the National Organization of Women and was protesting the Masters' exclusion of women to be members. BTW - this created great publicity for the team. And Martha Burke, Julie Foudy and myself spoke during a press conference. It was her only appearance on the West Coast and we had wall-to-wall TV cameras and over 20 journalists.

Overall, Cox was involved in much of what the Spirit was doing from day one until the final days. They helped with the major decisions, but left the details to me and my staff. They really supported us and our efforts as they wanted us to succeed.

FWiL:

At what point did it become clear to you that the league's financial backers planned to shut the league down? How long did you have to carry that knowledge before informing your players and staff?

Presher:

Unfortunately, I was systematically not told the whole story. I did not know until the day of the league's closing. I received a Blackberry message in the middle of the night for an emergency GM meeting. I knew we were in trouble and had just been told "don't worry about it". I had even turned down a big job and stayed with the team in hopes that everyone and everything would be okay. <Eleven days earlier> we executed a big trade that sent Aly Wagner to Boston for Angela Hucles, which I never would have approved prior to the World Cup if I knew the league was going to fold. I cared a lot about Aly and respected Angela.

Next thing I knew, I was speaking to the entire staff about the devastating news. It was very depressing. I was interviewed by local TV stations, speaking to newspapers, and other journalists, telling them all about our story and the story of the opportunity missed for women.

FWiL:

Women's professional sports poses a unique challenge for marketers and sales people. Based on your experience in San Diego, what works in selling women's team sports to sponsors and ticket buyers? And what misperceptions or mistakes about reaching that audience led WUSA to overspend so dramatically?

Presher:

Based on my experience, selling the idea of "Role Models" and reaching women (soccer moms) who typically make the entertainment dollar decision in the household, is what attracted sponsors.

What attracted ticket buyers was the added value of the ticket (i.e. all the entertainment that went along with the beautiful game of soccer), role models to the young soccer girls players, and women being able to support other women. Not to mention, the great product our team gave them on the pitch.

There were a few different challenges with our sponsorship sales in San Diego. For starters, the league blocked the majority of the categories at a local level and wanted to sell them on a national level. This hurt us as San Diego was not home to many of the big companies that the league was trying to secure. Thus, with limited categories it limited the amount of businesses we could connect with.

The league really thought that we would have more support from women 18-24 and the Latino community. Thus, they blew through a ton of money trying to go after these targeted audiences. But by year 3, we were finding that women 18-24 who played soccer would rather see Men's games. And the majority of the

Latino community, for whatever reason, were just not that interested in supporting the product. The league also spent a lot of money on televised games, however, the majority of the televised games were at 1 PM on Saturday's. Right in competition with <youth> league players.

A lot of overspending and time was spent on reaching these audiences the first two years of the league. By year 3, the league began to crack down on the spending, but it was too late. If the league had started with the expense structure that they used in the third year it would probably still be in business.

FWiL:

After you got settled in at WUSA in 2002, did you ever have a particular moment where you thought "Oh my God...what I have I gotten myself into?"

Presher:

I only had the "Oh my God...what have I gotten myself into" in positive moments. After having worked in media, the San Diego Spirit was so much fun. From the players, to the staff, to the Cox executive team, San Diego was where I was born and I had returned to my roots. I loved every day of that job!

FWiL:

Can you share a favorite story/memory or two from your year in San Diego?

Presher:

I had a lot more than just one or two, so if you don't mind, let me give you a few...

Seeing kids light up when they met our players. Hey, I lit up when I met Mia Hamm and had a hamburger with her...LOL!

Julie Foudy making a penalty to win a game against Briana Scurry and Atlanta. We needed the win. Julie took what seemed like an eternity to throw Briana off, because Julie goes to her right and Briana knew it. Closest I think I have come to a heart attack.

The Aly Wagner trade with New York.

Christine Latham's first goal. It was well into the season and Christine had played well, but hadn't scored a goal. Jenny Branam sent a drop kick 70 yards down the field, Julie "Air" Fleeting flicked it on with her head; Christine was at full gallop and struck the ball on the half volley and rocketed past Washington Freedom's goalie. It was nominated for goal of the year.

We held the Founders Cup Championship at home in 2003. It was a delightful experience. We made the semi-finals and lost to Atlanta on an overtime goal. Their forward was offside and fouled Joy Fawcett but we didn't get the call. There wasn't a dry eye on the team. We came seconds from playing in the Founder's Cup game in our home stadium. That would have been the best memory of all.

The publicity stunt with Martha Burke.

The U.S. National Team game versus Japan that we brought to San Diego.

My first week on the job, we played an exhibition against the Philadelphia Charge in the first end of a double header with the Los Angeles Galaxy in L.A. Great turnout. I met the President and GM from the LA Galaxy, Doug Hamilton. Doug became great mentor and supporter of mine who ended up pushing hard for the league to name me as a GM in the MLS. Doug passed away at the young age of 43.

FWiL:

One last question, Dave. After giving up so much to get Aly Wagner and then watching her help you earn your first playoff berth, why did you trade her to the Boston Breakers for Angela Hucles in the final days of the WUSA?

Presher:

We had signed <18-year old Brazilian> Marta for the 2004 season and knew she was the best player in the world. We rated Angela much higher than Aly. Boston really needed an attacking midfielder and we needed speed. We had a number of great forwards, attacking players, a draft pick and one more foreign allocation. We need one fast central midfielder as we were considering some modifications to our formation with Marta coming aboard.

The advantage of hiring Omid was he rated players on their ability, not their National Team heritage. We both disagreed quite a bit with April <Heinrich's> selections and felt there was a bias favoring players that came through the system. I think it showed with the National Team play. We were fine except against the better teams. I had learned quickly to not pay attention to much to "the experts". Omid and I were from the outside. The speed of the game was much faster in the pros and accelerated quickly in the three years of the WUSA

We wanted completely different things from Angela Hucles. She would allow us to play with four rather than five in the midfield. We saw her primarily as a versatile holding midfielder. We saw her as having a lot more athleticism than Aly and fitting our system best. She was athletic and played the ball simply.

Sometimes we thought she was underrated because compared to a Shannon Boxx or a Julie Foudy she got to balls much quicker and that made it look like she had to make tougher plays. We saw it like a shortstop who has a few more errors, but has a larger range. I was very high on Angela and had seen her play in person many times

The league folding sucked. We may have been overconfident, but we thought with Marta we were going to really be a surprise.

Copyright © 2011 - Andy Crossley. All rights reserved.