

Fun While it Lasted

Gil Swalls served as the Public Relations Director for the Oklahoma Outlaws of the United States Football League during their lone season in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the spring and summer of 1984.

Swalls was one of the first front office hires for the expansion club and had a front row seat for the chaotic launch of the Outlaws franchise, an experience he described to me as his “best and worst career year”.

Following the 1984 season, the Outlaws merged with the USFL’s Arizona Wranglers and relocated to Tempe, Arizona where the Arizona Outlaws played their final season in the spring of 1985. Swalls, meanwhile, returned to collegiate athletics, where he began his sports career after graduating from the University of Southern Illinois-Carbondale in 1976. He has spent the last twenty years at the University of Tampa, where today he is Associate Athletic Director/Marketing.

Gil Swalls spoke with Fun While It Lasted about the United States Football League on May 6th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump

FWiL:

How did you originally get involved with the Outlaws when the USFL arrived in Tulsa?

Swalls:

William Tatham Sr. and his son William Jr. came to Tulsa in the summer of 1983 after having their USFL franchise rejected in San Diego. They visited the University of Tulsa, where I was sports information director, to negotiate a stadium contract. When the Tathams and our team, headed by Dr. Emery Turner, vice president for administration, emerged from the conference room, Dr. Turner turned to me and indicated we had a deal. I immediately suggested we call a press conference to make a formal announcement. Following their experience in San Diego, the Tathams were excited at being welcomed to Tulsa with a press conference. I was able to fill the room with media from local and regional newspaper, TV and radio organizations. The Tathams were very impressed with the event, and following the conclusion, I offered my services to do this on a permanent basis.

I was invited to dinner that evening by Sid Gillman, the team's General Manager, which was quite a thrill in its own right. We had a long dinner. Mainly I was just listening to him talk about football. I dropped him off at his hotel and by the time I arrived home my phone was ringing. It was Sid telling me the Tathams approved his hiring me as the PR Director and to start ordering Oklahoma Outlaws stationary. The next morning, Bill Jr. called me at my TU office and confirmed the offer. There was Sid Gillman, three player personnel scouts, then me, as the first official hires of the Oklahoma Outlaws.

FWiL:

Quarterback Doug Williams was the team's biggest star in an era when there were very few black quarterbacks at the professional level. How was Doug Williams received by Oklahoma football fans and in the Tulsa community? Was he a big enough star at the time to generate excitement among ticket buyers and sponsors?

Swalls:

Doug Williams was an instant star, a celebrity status NFL professional who was going to perform in Tulsa, Okla., where our other stars were college players and minor leaguers.

One of my first promotional ideas was to escort Doug on a tour of four states where we set up press conference lunches and dinners in places like Oklahoma City, Wichita, Ks., Springfield, Mo. and Little Rock, Ark. At each city, we had other players we signed from those areas meet us there, and that's how we began promoting the USFL in our region. Doug was great to work with and I had a blast with him. He did that tour, attended high school football games and anything he was asked to help promote. He also gave us a great effort on the field every week.

FWiL:

The Outlaws publicly courted Jerry Rhome for the head coaching role. Rhome was the former University of Tulsa All-American quarterback and, at the time, quarterbacks coach of the Washington Redskins. But he turned down the job on the eve of the USFL draft, right after Bill Tatham Jr. all but announced his hiring to the press. Do you recall the circumstances around Rhome rebuffing the team and the subsequent scramble to hire Woody Widenhofer?

Swalls:

I served at <the University of> Tulsa for five years and while I certainly knew of Jerry Rhome, I had never gotten to meet him personally. Based on his legendary status in Tulsa, and that he was experienced as an NFL coordinator, he seemed like a great choice. The Tathams recruited him hard and for as long as they could, but couldn't quite convince him to jump leagues. I don't recall that we came close to announcing him, but the Tathams probably tried to get any local assistance they could to convince him, so the word was definitely out that he was our candidate.

Bill Tatham Jr. had a backup plan, and when he turned to Steelers defensive coordinator Woody Widenhofer, it seemed that Woody was quick to accept. I remember he was sporting all four of his Super Bowl rings on his hands when I met him, and his hiring was a strong rebound for the Tathams. I guessed Coach Rhome felt he would get an NFL head coaching job soon, whereas Coach Widenhofer was quicker to take a head coaching offer in hand. It was getting into the second year of the USFL, and we had an ABC -TV contract, name players were signing and the situation was looking fairly stable. There seemed to be less career risk going into the league's second year.

FWiL:

Only a few weeks into the Outlaws first season in town, Bill Tatham Jr. announced that Skelly Stadium wasn't suitable for the team and that he was fielding offers from other cities about relocating the team. How did that impact your job as the team's PR front man with the local media and supporters?

Swalls:

From the previous fall to this point, I was extremely proud and confident to be working in the USFL and for this franchise.

Our bad luck began when we experienced unbelievably poor weather; freezing rain, flash flooding, for like six of our home games. I don't think Tulsa ever had another spring that bad.

Then Bill Jr. came in to the office one day and announced to the staff that we were going to demand Tulsa build us a new domed stadium. My heart sank, because I knew we were heading from stability to crazy. I had no real inside knowledge about Bill's financial status, his political skills, or his ability to pull off such a big project, but I did know Tulsa, and I was quite sure a domed stadium demand wasn't going to fly. Maybe that was his way of moving the team. He kept talking about Oklahoma City, but I wasn't sure if he had any real prospects there. Anyway, he directed me to call a press conference, had his architects' drawings to display, made his appeal for a stadium, and that press conference was pretty much the beginning of the end of Tulsa in the USFL.

We produced a monthly fan rag and Bill wrote a column for it. He cited a league policy that stadiums needed to have a 50,000 capacity and that Skelly Stadium seated 40,000. He also determined that the crowds we were drawing (compared to TU attendance) were creating parking deficiencies that he didn't know existed. From the article, he wrote, "We were unaware of the extremity of the parking problem for what we anticipated would be average attendances (of 30,000) and that is why we brought up the issue of a new stadium. The weather is as much to blame for our attendance as the stadium, and that's why the new stadium should be a dome. I believe there is a 90 percent chance the Outlaws will remain in Oklahoma. I say Oklahoma, because it is Oklahoma's team." (He must have had some reason to believe Oklahoma City would build his stadium). Even though I felt this announcement was a mistake, I liked Bill and wanted him and all of us to succeed.

FWiL:

You must have spent a lot of time around the team. Were there any especially memorable members of that Outlaws team that still stand out in your mind today, either because of their personal back stories, personalities or eccentricities?

Swalls:

Our open tryouts were interesting. One guy showed up in a tuxedo, ran the 40, and kept on going, like Forrest Gump.

Telling Mel Gray he was my favorite Cardinal when I was a kid drew smile from him. (I'm from southern Illinois, a St. Louis fan.) I very much enjoyed Doug Williams, a very classy and friendly guy. Terry Beeson, a linebacker from the Seahawks, was among our few players with any real NFL experience and he was my mentor regarding dealing with the pro players. I met Herschel Walker and a few other stars, but my favorite player story is that of Steve Ballard.

Steve was one of our basketball players at the University of Tulsa, a good athlete who had also played baseball and boxed. He called me one day at the Outlaws office and asked if I could get him a tryout. I asked Bruce Kebric, our GM, to please give him a tryout. He did and to my pleasant surprise we signed Steve. So I felt like I had a part in that. Steve was on the development squad for some time, but finally got his activation. In his first game as a 6-8, 240-lb. DE, I witnessed the offensive tackle just blast him, so then I wasn't so sure I did him any favors.

FWiL:

Tulsa lost three of its four pro sports teams in 1984. In addition to the Outlaws, the long-running Tulsa Ice Oilers minor league hockey team and the Tulsa Roughnecks soccer team went under. Tulsa was one of the smaller markets in the USFL. Do you feel like the Outlaws arrival in town cannibalized the sponsorship and ticket base for some of those older teams and contributed to their demise?

Swalls:

Not at all. I didn't follow the hockey team, but with the Roughnecks and Outlaws, a lot of our issues came from management decisions. As a fan, I thought the Roughnecks always seemed to sign and announce these famous European soccer players, would sell season tickets based on those players, and by a few games into the season the big names would be traded, sold or released back to Europe. A few years of that and folks caught on.

As I mentioned, we shot ourselves in the foot from a PR standpoint with the stadium complaint. But Bill might have been right. Maybe we were not going to draw enough to sustain a successful franchise in that stadium. His family was on a time crunch to get a team established and Tulsa opened its arms. Insiders knew we weren't their first choice. When I worked for him, Bill never seemed to be there on the short term. He was securing nice office space and building a training facility, buying a house—I never had the impression he was in Tulsa just to move after a year. But I don't know how much revenue they needed to generate to survive and obviously we weren't producing enough.

It's always been my opinion that if the league would have stayed the course about signing one or two stars, adding some regional draft picks, and running on 30,000 fans, and ABC would have backed us for spring programming, we could have made it. But as we know, ambition got in the way, in the form of wanting to be in the NFL. Some of the owners, including ours, were convinced they were getting NFL expansion teams or that our league might compete on a level field with the NFL. I don't know, it was their money, but I sure enjoyed the original concept, with regional draft choices and medium cities.

FWiL:

What happened to you and the Outlaws local staff at the end of the 1984 USFL season? Did you stay on until the merger with the Arizona Wranglers in December, or did the local operations shut down during the summer when the Tathams announced the club would not return to Tulsa?

Swalls:

Following our one season, we were given a month's vacation, and the checks kept coming in, so all was good. One day I received a phone call from my friend Bill Wall, who was the team business manager (and a former asst. AD at Tulsa who I helped get a job with the team). He called to say the Tathams have left for Arizona and we are done. All of us in administration and on the football side had been let go. Although Bill Wall admitted he had been invited to join the Arizona group, being the finance guy, he was the only one Tatham could take. Part of his agreement was to absorb the Arizona management team. So I spent some time job hunting as did everyone else who went their separate ways.

Fortunately, the Tathams continued to send me a paycheck, which I thought was generous. I landed a job as Asst. AD at Oral Roberts University, right there in Tulsa, so I ended up okay. Then, about a year-and-a-half later, we experienced a coup at Oral Roberts and several of us were relieved by a new AD who wanted his own staff.

The first person I called was Bill Tatham, Jr., and he offered me the PR job with the Arizona Outlaws. So I went out to Tempe for three weeks during some camp exercises, met Coach Frank Kush, and did some work for him. Then they sent me home to wait out the <USFL anti-trust> trial and told me to come back when they won. So I'm watching CNN one day and the announcer states, "the jury is in and the NFL is found guilty." Well I jumped out of my chair and yelled to my wife, "We're going to Arizona." Then after the commercial break, the announcer said "and the award is \$3."

I called my friend Bill Wall in Arizona and for the second time he got to tell me, "It's over, we're done."

FWiL:

You were in college athletics before the Outlaws and returned to the NCAA after your one season with the Outlaws. Did you ever have an itch to return to the pro game after your USFL experience?

Swalls:

My year with the Outlaws was both my best and worst career year. I enjoyed out staff, working the big stadiums, the game trips, hanging with the pros, and having a pretty good expense account, but there always seemed to be pressure, intensity, some backstabbing and a lot of hiring and firing among the ranks.

I have a USFL ball signed by both Sid Gillman and Doug Williams. I remember the day Sid got fired by Bill Tatham, Jr. Bill knew I had a good relationship with Sid, so he asked me to take a half dozen balls to his office and ask for his autograph (while he was cleaning out his desk!). That was bizarre, and Sid knew who it was for, but he smiled and signed them. I got to keep one. I also have a jersey worn by kicker Efren Herrera and a few other souvenirs.

My only other shot at the pros occurred when the Oklahoma Outlaws folded, I applied for an advertised PR job with the Golden State Warriors. One night at home my phone rings and the person on the other end identified himself as general manager of the Warriors. He said he was interested in meeting me, and that I and one other USFL publicist were his top choices. But, the other guy was his old college roommate and he had first dibs. So, I didn't get the job with the Warriors.

After not getting to Arizona, my media friends, mainly *Tulsa World* columnist Charlie Smith, helped me get an administrative job with the *Tulsa World*. I did that for three years. One day I received a call from Bill Wall. When Bill left Arizona, he became an asst. AD at Miami (Fla.), and later got the AD job at Tampa. He called me to be his asst. AD/SID at Div. II Tampa. I was anxious to get back to a team/school environment, so I accepted that job in November of 1989. He left a year later and I am still here, in my 22nd year. Tampa has been my favorite place, favorite people, and I really enjoy the environment of NCAA II.

I spent my first several years in Tampa as a game day assistant in the Buccaneers press box and I am friendly with the Rays and Lightning PR staffs, but that lifestyle isn't for me anymore. My goal is to retire from college athletics around 65 years old and become an usher at Rays games. That's when I would like to return to the pros.

Thanks for asking about my USFL experience. I teach a college course in sports management and none of my students have ever heard of it, and for many who went back into the NFL, it's probably a blip they'd just as soon forget, but for me, it was the Big Time, and I really enjoyed it.

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