

Fun While it Lasted

Ilisa Kessler has an extensive management background in women's professional sporting events in the state of California dating back to the mid-1990's.

Like many in the industry, she started out as an intern, joining the San Jose Lasers of the women's American Basketball League. In 1999, Kessler worked behind the scenes at the historic FIFA Women's World Cup tournament, won by the United States National Team in a thrilling victory before 90,000 fans at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

The success of that Women's World Cup and the commercial breakthrough of American stars Mia Hamm and Brandi Chastain led a group of cable television operators to launch the Women's United Soccer Association in the spring of 2001. Kessler joined the WUSA as Director of Operations for the Bay Area CyberRays franchise. She stayed on for all three WUSA seasons until the league folded under heavy financial losses in September 2003.

In 2008, new investors re-launched women's soccer as a pro sport in the United States with Women's Professional Soccer (WPS). Brian & Nancy NeSmith founded a new Bay Area franchise - dubbed FC Gold Pride - and recruited Kessler as the team's General Manager.

Kessler would face a unique challenge in launching FC Gold Pride. The club was the last of the original franchises to sign on, with just seven months lead time before opening day in April 2009. In fact, WPS had already awarded 2010 expansion franchises before the NeSmith family signed on for the 2009 season.

The club had a roller coaster two-year history. Through shrewd drafting and a much debated decision by ownership to spend half a million dollars on the world's greatest female soccer player, Kessler and her soccer operations staff engineered a record-setting championship campaign in 2010. But off the field, Gold Pride struggled with constant league turmoil and media and fan apathy. The club folded less than two months after winning the 2010 WPS Cup.

Ilisa Kessler spoke to Fun While It Lasted about FC Gold Pride on November 6th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

You worked for three seasons for the San Jose CyberRays of the WUSA before that league abruptly folded in 2003, which must have been traumatic. When new owners came into the same market ready to try again with women's soccer in 2008, how did you feel when they asked you to lead the new organization?

Kessler:

First off I was honored to even be asked. Taking this position was a very difficult decision to make. I knew the history of women's pro sports in the Bay Area, I lived it, and it always ended the same way – and the emotional rollercoaster was traumatic. I learned this as early as being with the San Jose Lasers (American Basketball League) as an intern. When that folded I was heartbroken. For the Pride, professionally, I was leaving a stable job in broadcast TV and personally I was in a new place in life because I had a family. I also knew besides risk, how much work it was going to be to start a business in less than 6 months. I knew that was going to be taxing, and maybe even impossible. But again, I was honored, and there are not many opportunities to be a General Manager of a pro sports team, and to be in the sport I love, so how could I say no? Most importantly, there are not a lot of opportunities for women to be at the General Manager level in sports, and so taking the role, I looked at it as a very serious responsibility. I hope in the end, I represented women and the sport well.

FWiL:

What was the difference in the reaction of the Bay Area - the media, the soccer community, sponsors - between the arrival of the CyberRays in 2001 and the arrival of FC Gold Pride in 2009?

Kessler:

Honestly, I don't think much changed, at least for the mainstream media and the Bay Area community. For the Pride, the difference was that there were more avenues for us to try and get exposure – particularly with bloggers (who were great to us from the beginning), Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. But, in the end, we talked to the same people over and over. Look at the Big Soccer message boards and the WPS chat on Twitter. It's the same voices – which are important voices, but not new voices.

I always thought we had a great website, but great doesn't mean anything if people are not looking at it. We tried, but it was hard to break through in such a busy world. I remember a TV station telling us that they needed "a hook" to cover us for the 2010 WPS Cup championship match. Obviously bringing a championship to the Bay Area – the 1st since 2002 Earthquakes, didn't mean much.

For the soccer community, well, that's an interesting paradigm. I may be generalizing a bit, but from my experience, I found that a majority of the "soccer community" loves soccer if it is about their kid, or their adult rec game. For them, soccer is recreation, not entertainment. There is a difference. I remember walking soccer fields with <French National Team midfielder> Camille Abily to promote the championship match. Most said, "we can't make it, my kid has a game" or "I have an adult rec game". I asked one guy if he wanted to pass with Abily (he was warming up for his match). He just shrugged and kept passing to his teammate. I thought, these people are nothing but weekend warriors. They don't love soccer. They just love getting exercise and socializing.

Sponsors are hard to determine – I think they were weary on two fronts – those that knew the history of women's soccer stood by with a wait & see attitude. Is it really worth an investment? And then those that just need to invest in something that will guarantee a return on investment – mostly because the economy has just been so horrible – women's soccer isn't that.

FWiL:

What (approximately) was the dollar value of corporate sponsorships that FCGP was able to attract in 2009 and 2010?

Kessler:

We pretty much missed every budget cycle for sponsorship in 2009. We maybe had \$30K in cash and about \$165K in barter/in-kind. The cash didn't even pay for the operations of one home game. The hole was so deep from the on-set, it was impossible to dig out of it. 2010 was better. We got in the sales cycle and realized for us cash is king but offsetting operational costs with barter works for us too. We got creative. Our cash went up 857%, and barter up 44%. We had our medical bartered out – that saved us hundreds of thousands a year in medical and worker's comp claim costs. We got all our port-a-potty's through a sponsorship deal, saving us over \$24K. Even our game program was bartered out – otherwise, we were not going to have one in year 2. Like I said, we got creative.

FWiL:

Can you talk a little about signing Tiffeny Milbrett and her success at FCGP? Her late career come-back was a story that never really got much attention.

Kessler:

Remember, I am a fan of women's soccer. My spouse is a fan. There was a small shrine of Milbrett in my home in the WUSA days. The only FC Gold Pride jersey I bought was a Milbrett jersey. I know even Nancy NeSmith was a big fan of Tiff's. She is an amazing player and when she showed up to camp – as a walk-on – she blew everyone away. She was fit, mentally prepared, and still had what it takes to play at the pro level. Her story never got much attention but that is because the press never followed her in the beginning of her career, so there was no context to truly understand what this all meant. We tried to explain why what she was doing was incredible, but most didn't get it. This was indicative of the mainstream media in general. They didn't realize how great our team really was – and honestly, they didn't care to know.

FWiL:

In 2010, FC Gold Pride acquired Marta, who was the highest paid female soccer player in the world, at a reported \$500,000 year. Can you explain how her contract was structured? What was the club on the hook for and how much did sponsors like Amway have to contribute? Or did they provide sponsorship tied into Marta's presence that partially offset what you paid out in salary?

Kessler:

Marta's contract was a 3-year guaranteed contract. Meaning someone had to pay her – if not a team, then the league itself. Why there would be a 3-year deal agreed to when the league knew <Los Angeles Sol owner> AEG was only in it for one year, I don't know....I wasn't part of that negotiation. I do know how difficult of a negotiator Marta's agent is, and the league seemed desperate for credibility in the start and felt that we needed the best female player in the world in the league. I also know that a player like Marta needs the US too...especially for competition, media and sponsors. But in the end, she definitely won out.

Amway, has a separate endorsement deal with Marta, and it has nothing to do with the teams. When we acquired Marta, we had to negotiate with Amway to be a sponsor, which was not easy because they were already in the market with the Earthquakes.

"The Marta Effect" as I like to call it, does not exist off the field. Her salary does not justify any new business. It's not like a Beckham signing where you get incredible ticket sales, sponsorship and jersey sales. The biggest sale of Marta jerseys went to Marta, she bought a slew for family and friends. You can't do any huge media campaign around her because of her limited English. Reporters are not excited to do an interview with an interpreter, it's just not the same.

I remember when we picked her up – prior to the Los Angeles Sol dispersal draft day, we created an entire ticket sales plan and staffed heavy in the office – longer hours, etc. to handle the phones. When it was announced she was coming to the Pride, we sat for an entire day staring at each other waiting for the phones to ring. When I came in the next morning, I said, new plan – outgoing phone calls start right now. Let's hit up season ticket holders who haven't renewed, large groups, teams, everyone, & let them know who we just signed. At that moment, I thought, crap, she isn't going to move the dial like we had hoped.

FWiL:

Talk a little about the behind-the-scenes decision to bid on Marta's contract. What roles did you, your Head Coach Albertin Montoya and the NeSmith family play in that conversation? Was it a consensus? Were any of the veteran players on the team involved in the discussion?

Kessler:

I don't remember discussing Marta with the veteran players – Albertin may have. I know throughout, Albertin did discuss with certain players the addition of new players – some we didn't pursue because of their feedback.

The NeSmith's discussed Marta with both Albertin and me. Of course, best player in the world - who doesn't want to coach or manager that type of player? But from a pure business standpoint, Brian NeSmith and I discussed how it was not a good business move. We figured she would not increase tickets and sponsorship to justify her salary. We knew we would have to be extremely lucky for that to happen. But, I am sure one reason why the NeSmith's bought the team in the beginning included the idea of owning a pro team. If you have the means, it's an amazing opportunity to own a pro team – especially in the sport you are passionate about. And so, once you own a team and you are already pumping a lot of money into it, and coming off a losing season, then, adding the best player in the world to your team could definitely make you enjoy your investment that much more. If you are already losing a few million, what's another half?

My last conversation with Nancy before the Board meeting that took place where the owners were to decide who could take Marta's contract, she told me that they were not going to do it. The call after the Board meeting was Nancy saying, well, we've got Marta. So just like that, I knew the Pride would be the team that would pick Marta up in the draft <a few days later>. The other teams were going to pass because of cost. It was a bit of a rollercoaster to say the least since Albertin and I had resigned ourselves to moving on & continuing our player acquisitions without Marta.

FWiL:

What would it have taken, at the end, for the club to keep going?

Kessler:

Someone with the Nesmith's passion for women's soccer + millions of dollars to burn for at least another 3-5 years. It is the Bay Area, there are a lot of people who have the means, but maybe not the passion.

FWiL:

Imagine that five years from now, someone decides takes a third crack at women's pro soccer in the Bay Area. When they come to you for advice, what do you tell them?

Kessler:

First you would assume they would come to me or anyone who has done this for advice. I find most come in thinking they already have the answers and can do it better than the last. But if they did come to me for advice, I would say, Good Luck. I am rooting for you, I will be a season ticket holder, but soccer is not an easy sell and put the word "woman" in front of that, and it's even harder.

I would lay out all the small mistakes. Like pick a team name that is not difficult for people to understand or relate to – ala CyberRays & FC Gold Pride. Go easy like Breakers or Freedom. And then let them know about some of the big mistakes – like don't rush the business. Start when you have had time to plan and execute. Any team coming into a league without at least 8-12 months of planning and ramping up is going to make a lot of mistakes and spend a lot of money that would otherwise not be spent if they had time to plan. Again, good luck!

FWiL:

Can you share one or two of your favorite memories from FC Gold Pride?

Kessler:

Catching about 10 minutes of a game with my family and Gold Pride scoring. Hoisting my daughter up on my shoulders and having her cheer for the team...very special memory for me.

We had an event at NASA Ames in Mountain View. I went with Rachel Buehler and Christine Sinclair. I am not too sure how much they enjoyed spending the afternoon with me, but I thought, not only am I getting a cool behind the scenes tour of NASA, I am doing it with two of the best women soccer players in the world. I was their boss, but that doesn't mean I couldn't be in awe of their talent.

In particular I loved two deals I made – the Camille Abily trade with LA Sol and signing Shannon Boxx. I was really proud when I was able to make those two work.

FWiL:

Can you share a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction moment from behind the scenes when you wondered what you'd gotten yourself into? (Start-up sports leagues are famous for these and I figure you might have one or two such stories.)

Kessler:

I have quite a few, most I can't tell, but here's a sampling:

One of my first decisions as GM was to approve Pounce's (our mascot) chest size. The first drawing we got had her at about a D-cup. I asked for B. If I ever needed a title for a book about my experiences at the Pride, it would be "From the B-Cup to the Championship Cup".

Year 2 opening day. My ops department had a complete meltdown the week leading into it. They were totally unprepared. The night before, around 7pm, we realized most of the stadium wasn't loaded in and we had a ton of issues – no wireless for one. No wireless means no ticket sales on-site. We were freaking. I had my entire staff stay till about 2am to load the stadium – field boards, signage, food product, you name it, it was all off-site at a different location. The WPS league office showed up game day and didn't think we were going to be able to open gates for the fans. My brother came to the Bay Area for the game and I called him at 7am to get him to the stadium to help. We asked a woman off the street with her kid to help for free tickets. I had a coach from a rec league go get us corner flags. We moved more barricade that day than I had my entire ops career. It was a nightmare. We made it, but if I didn't have a background in ops and a staff that was willing to do anything, we probably would have never opened. Fans and the team had no idea – we prevailed.

Trying to get Marta into the country. Nothing is ever easy. I actually called up Senator Feinstein's office to help accelerate her petition, and they did. Only then Marta's agent decided that it wasn't convenient so she didn't come as early as we wanted (i.e closer to the start of her contract)..still she eventually got in the country with a few weeks of preseason. Sometimes you do a ton of work, think you have solved the problem, only to have a last minute glitch. Speaking at a club board meeting. It was being held at a hotel. By the time I had

to speak, the room next to us was in full karaoke mode. I delivered my speech with Gloria Gaynor's "I will Survive" being belted out by someone who had no business doing karaoke. The irony of the song says it all. During my presentation, I laughed several times because of the absurdity of the situation, but did get through what I wanted to say and they were very responsive.

I actually had a file called "ridiculous"...in it was one of my favorites from the league office in 2009 called "hair control". They actually sent out an email defining what type of accessories could be in player's hair. Pictures and video were included. I can be a bit sarcastic, so I decided to respond with my own pictures and commentary on the matter – bananas (very ripe) are acceptable. Chopsticks, not so much. I just couldn't believe we had to police that – isn't that why we have refs?

Negotiating with players was always interesting. I actually had great relationships with almost every agent. The hardest was when I had to deal with a parent, because they are too close to the issues at hand. But, the best was in 2009, several international players wanted salary, housing, a car, food, and to pay no taxes. I said: "Welcome to America. We all pay taxes (well 99% do) and we earn salaries to pay for our food, car and housing." I don't think they were happy about that, but our internationals were some of the best paid players on the team...so they were by no means hurting.

Puma – they were great for us. Having a national apparel deal is huge for a fledgling league. I remember the CyberRays days – 3 apparel sponsors in 3 years. It was awful and stressful. Even as great as Puma was to the teams, their "lifestyle" designs got in the way of functionality. The skort was a personal fight with them. I refused to have my players wear them – here I was trying to legitimize women as strong, athletic, professional athletes, and they wanted them to play in a skort. Not on my watch.

Then there was a meeting with Puma where they came to our offices and presented their <original> concept for 2011. They started the presentation with photos of 80's style one-piece jumpers. I physically had to restrain myself as I started to realize what was about to happen. They presented us with the "Uni-Kit", which they pointed out was their "working title". Nancy NeSmith was in the meeting with me and our VP of Marketing and Sponsorship, John Hooper. We all just about had a meltdown. John and I couldn't imagine any player wearing a one-piece uniform. We brought up injuries to the midsection (how does the doctor treat?), what if blood gets on their jersey? They have to change the entire uniform? FIFA - do you think they would approve this? But the best was Nancy. She flat out said "how do you expect the women to pee? They have to completely undress to pee? No way". I just laughed. It was by far one of the most surreal experiences I have ever had in women's soccer.