

Fun While it Lasted

For this week's *Breaking Into Sports* interview, I caught up with longtime baseball and hockey executive **Jeff Eisenberg**.

I first met Jeff about ten years ago. At the time, I was the communications manager for the Nashua Pride baseball team, which was (briefly) the only professional sports team in the state of New Hampshire. Then Jeff arrived as President of the AEG-owned Manchester Monarchs of the American Hockey League, the top farm club of the NHL's Los Angeles Kings.

Jeff and his front office put together a fantastic game day experience and the Monarchs quickly became the hottest ticket in New Hampshire. In 2004 and again in 2006 the Manchester Monarchs were the top-drawing minor league hockey team in all of North America, surpassing more than 90 other clubs.

Prior to joining the Monarchs, the Tennessee native was President of the American Hockey League's Portland Pirates and held executive level sales positions with the Philadelphia Phillies, Milwaukee Brewers and Buffalo Sabres.

In 2009, Jeff Eisenberg resigned from the Monarchs and launched the Eisenberg, Vital & Ryze advertising agency in Manchester, New Hampshire.

But in keeping with the theme of the *Breaking Into Sports* series, I wanted to talk to Jeff about his earliest sports jobs during the pre-boom years of minor league baseball: 12-year old clubhouse boy of the Southern League's Memphis Blues in 1968 and 23-year old Assistant General Manager of the Eastern League's Holyoke (MA) Millers in the summer of 1980.

Jeff Eisenberg spoke to Fun While It Lasted on November 6th, 2012.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

You don't see too many LinkedIn profiles that go all the way back to age 12, but I noticed you've listed "Clubhouse Boy" for the Memphis Blues baseball team in 1968. Is it fair to say that baseball was your first love when it came to sports?

Eisenberg:

Oh, far and away. I only played football and basketball during the off season when I couldn't play baseball. That was pretty much we did - my friends went from one sport to the other. But baseball was far and away my first love.

FWiL:

Who were some of the memorable players and personalities that you remember from that boyhood summer with the Memphis Blues?

Eisenberg:

Well, probably the one name that you might know is **John Milner** who went on to play for the Mets and the Pirates. He was on that '68 Blues team. I don't know if I can even recall any other guys who made it from that team. I mean, I remember **Arsenio "Chico" Diaz**, of course. Every minor league has a Chico Diaz - a fan favorite who never makes it to the Majors.

Our stadium was still called Tim McCarver Stadium. Tim McCarver is a Memphis native.

FWiL:

What brought you up to Holyoke, Massachusetts? Was that connected with attending the University of Massachusetts.

Eisenberg:

Yes. I was at UMass and I was up there for the summer. The owner of the Millers back then was **Tom Kayser**. Tom reached out to the sports management department looking for some students to come down and work in the boiler room. We were making calls to sell buy outs for Mackenzie Stadium, basically. We were selling the stadium to companies for \$5,000 - for that amount you got every ticket in the place for the night.

I was completely dedicated to working in professional baseball. When they asked us "what do you want to do?", I said "I'm working in pro baseball." I went to work on the phones every day trying to get companies to buy the stadium out for \$5,000. And then Tom hired me for the summer out of that job.

FWiL:

And was that the first time in your life that you had to sell anything?

Eisenberg:

No. The summer before I drove the Tasti D-Lite van around Nashville, Tennessee selling ice cream.

That really doesn't count, does it? So besides that, yes, Holyoke was the first time I ever sold anything.

FWiL:

I remember my first ticket sales job in sports. My first day I got a phone and Yellow Pages and they said "go to it." No real training - just make a lot of mistakes and figure it out as you go. Was Tom Kayser a sales mentor to you or was it just get on the phones and try to figure it out on your own?

Eisenberg:

It was more of the latter. Tom was a baseball guy. His view was there were plenty of prospects out there, so just go for it. Nice guy, but we didn't a lot of mentoring there, no.

I mean he was busy, running around doing whatever he was doing. We were tucked away in some old room in that stadium. It wasn't exactly the fanciest front office.

FWiL:

I drove by Mackenzie Stadium a couple of years ago. It's hard to believe today that a Major League team would have put their prospects there back in the 1980's. It really does look like a high school field. What are your memories of that ballpark?

Eisenberg:

Well, the most vivid memory is the cinder track that ran through the outfield. Did you know about that?

The ballpark doubled as Holyoke high school track stadium. So this cinder track ran right through the outfield from halfway down the left field line straight across to the right field wall. It was the weirdest thing.

Other than that, it was just a non-descript, nothing fancy kind of place. It wasn't exactly located in the garden spot of the world either. It was challenging that franchise in that building.

FWiL:

Were there anything that people in Holyoke responded to, such as 10-cent beer night or other types of promotions that would get them to turn out for Millers games?

Eisenberg:

Um.....no. (*Laughing*)

Listen, I was a grad student, so it's not like I had a ton of experience at this stuff. Tom was trying to sell the stadium out for five grand a night. It was a small staff - it was Tom, me and this other woman in the whole office. I defined my own job. I basically created things to do and would ask Tom "could I do this?" and he would say "sure."

I walked in one day after a couple of months and asked Tom: "Can I be Assistant General Manager?" I was building my resume, you know? I'm planning to go on and do great things, and I want that to be my title.

And Tom said "Yeah, sure, sure, that's fine. Now go finish the popcorn."

I used to make up stuff to do. Group sales and PR and press releases. I did a community project - a kids fair and fun day, with hit, pitch and catch contests. That stuff wasn't around as much back then. It wasn't a tremendously structured situation. It was really just before minor league baseball boomed and went to the next level.

In fact, I had a 13-week internship lined up with the Phillies after grad school but there was no commitment that I would have a job after that. When I first started in Holyoke that summer, I knew that Tom Kayser was selling the team. The asking price was around \$75,000. I started to call people, like friends of my older brother's to see if we might put together a group to buy the Millers.

It didn't happen. The Phillies offered me a full-time job and I said well, this was my goal, to get to the big leagues.

One of my brother's friends was a pretty prominent banker type in Philadelphia. For years later we had fun with that one. It was an "I told you so" and we used to laugh about it a lot. Because, of course, the value of that franchise soon became exponentially higher than the \$75,000 asking price in 1980.

FWiL:

When I worked for the Brockton Rox, the Commissioner of the Can-Am League was a guy named **Miles Wolff** who owned the Durham Bulls when *Bull Durham* was made. He bought the Bulls in 1979 for \$2,417 as an expansion team in the Carolina League. He sold the team in 1990 and the rumor was it sold for around \$4 million.

Eisenberg:

Oh my God. That is amazing. Well, that is classic. Back then, that's what the business was. The boom was just around the corner.

But even now, minor league baseball is still all hands on deck for everything. For me, it ranged from making the popcorn to writing the press releases to making group sales to pulling the tarp with the grounds crew.

That was a great summer. We actually won the Eastern League championship, that year.

Kevin Bass played for that Millers team. He was probably the biggest name. Great guy. We had **David Green**, who later played for the St. Louis Cardinals. He was wildly talented but we thought he might have lied about his age. He claimed to be only 19 or something and we didn't believe it.

Who else? **Steve Lake** made the Major Leagues. **Frank DiPino** was on that team and had some good years with the Astros as a pitcher.

Here's a funny thing that happened. The Millers won the Eastern League and then right afterwards I joined the front office of the Philadelphia Phillies, who had just won the World Series. So I was at the Phillies when the everybody on the staff got their World Series rings. And I had my ring!

Well, my ring didn't exactly hold up compared to theirs. But I was just as proud of it as they were of theirs. Mine looked kind of funny - I still have it. It had some sort of loose stone in the middle - I don't really know what it was. And it was kind of shaped like an old box TV. The head of stadium operations for the Phillies was a really funny guy and he used to ask me where the vertical hold was on my ring. He'd flash his World Series ring in front of me and then he'd look down at mine and ask where the volume knob was.

I'll never forget getting my ring while they were getting theirs.

FWiL:

Was there anything you learned selling Holyoke Millers tickets that helped you sell Philadelphia Phillies tickets?

Eisenberg:

(Laughing) No.

I mean, God bless Tom but...he was a baseball guy and that's where his focus was. We were making it up as we went. He didn't vend concessions. One night I said "How about I sell beer in the stands tonight and see if it works?" And he said "Go ahead." That's where we were at.

I was 23 years old. I'd do anything. I had the best time. I loved it. Going through the stands hawking beer yelling "Last chance for romance!" I was trying to get his attention. I wanted to push the envelope to be a little bit more aggressive with revenue. I was probably a little over the top.

But in terms of selling tickets, no, I didn't learn much there.

It was just before the day of real aggressive, progressive sales techniques in the minor leagues. They just weren't around then. And we didn't do well. At all.

But I *knew* it had potential. And that's why I considered putting a group together to buy the team. I just sensed that a real organized sales and marketing program had never been undertaken like it could have been.

But Mackenzie was not a great facility at all and that would have been an impediment.

FWiL:

During your career you must have brought a lot of young people into the industry either as interns or entry-level hires. I think a lot of kids trying to get their foot in the door struggle to differentiate themselves. What qualities stood out for you when hiring young people into the industry?

Eisenberg:

Three things come to mind.

One is...hiring for salespeople, I didn't always pick the top sellers. I looked for someone certainly who was in the top 20%, but it was very important to me how that person helped others and participated as a team member. It's important to know that sales are critical, but it's not the only thing. I'm looking for good team members and people who are going to help each other. I'm looking for the team player who might give up a sales in a controversial situation - such as a dispute over where a lead came from - for the good of the team.

Number two: volunteer for anything and everything.

I remember we lost our graphic designer at the Manchester Monarchs who put together our game program in house. There was a kid on the staff who stepped forward and said 'I can do this. I know this enough - I'll do it until we can find someone else.' He didn't ask for more money, but I'm sure I gave it to him. He put in a lot of extra hours. I said 'thank you' and he said 'it's my honor. I'm happy to do it.'

You always notice the people who put themselves out there to do something extra. To do that community appearance on a weekend. Because so few people do it. And if you love what you do, it's not a problem.

The third thing - and I did this at the Phillies and it worked out very well for me - is do a market research project. It's very simple isn't it? And very simple is nice.

When I was an intern at the Phillies, I went to a guy named David Montgomery who is now a part owner of the team. I said 'I'd like to do a survey. Can you give me ten ushers for ten games from doors open until the 2nd inning?'

I made a questionnaire, the ushers collected it, I collated it all and wrote up the results and turned it in. And where do you think it goes? On to everybody's desk, right up to the top, including the owner **Bill Giles**. So I got to author something that showed off my enthusiasm and energy and ability to write and work and think and have it seen by key people right up the organizational ladder.