

# *Fun While it Lasted*

**Kevin Veleke** managed the front office operations of the Washington Lumberjacks minor league basketball club in the short-lived Western Basketball Association in the winter of 1978-79.

For the former collegiate athletics administrator, his lone season as General Manager of the Lumberjacks proved to be both his first and last experience in the professional sports industry.

Little information about the Western Basketball Association has survived into the internet age, so we were curious to speak to Kevin about his experiences in the league, which viewed itself - with some credibility - as "one step below the NBA".

Today Kevin continues to live in the Tri-Cities region of Washington state and works as a risk management consultant and insurance provider.

Kevin Veleke spoke with Fun While It Lasted about the Washington Lumberjacks and the Western Basketball Association on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

*Interview begins after the page jump.*

**FWiL:**

How did you come to get involved with the Western Basketball Association and the Washington Lumberjacks when they arrived in the Tri-Cities?

**Veleke:**

At the time the Lumberjacks came into being, I was an Assistant Athletic Director (in charge of fund raising) at Washington State University in Pullman. The ownership of the Lumberjacks was Columbia Pacific Resources based in Richland. Several of the owners were WSU grads who I had met several times when on fund raising trips to the Tri-Cities (Richland, Kennewick, Pasco). They were looking for a business manager, a person to put the business operation of the basketball team in place - everything from getting uniforms to socks & jocks; from securing playing and practice facilities to ordering tickets; from housing of players to transporting the team to games; and much more. Everything that had to be done to put on a ball game.

**FWiL:**

What was the reaction of the community to the Lumberjacks? As GM, what were your day-to-day challenges of marketing the club and trying to keep the thing solvent?

**Veleke:**

The community reaction was curiosity at first. People wondered about the name Washington Lumberjacks, especially since our area of Washington State is desert (very little rainfall...thus very few trees!). The name was selected by the owners prior to me joining the team. They felt that no one knew where Tri-Cities was so let's give the team name Washington and the nickname Lumberjacks. Big mistake. Besides the Montana Sky (located in Great Falls), the other teams in the league were well known places -Reno, Fresno, Las Vegas, Tucson, Salt Lake City. In the early 1990's there was another minor league basketball team here in the Tri-Cities that lasted several years, called the Tri-City Chinook. The name fit our area very well since we are located on the Columbia River, and salmon have traveled the river since the beginning of time.

Marketing the club was not easy. We had to create interest in professional basketball in light of the fact high school basketball back in the 70's was king. Local high school games were sell outs and we only could get so-called off days for our games - holidays, Sundays, mid-week, and my favorite: Super Bowl Sunday 1979. Guess where most of the fans were - in the concession area watching the Super Bowl! Not very conducive to success. Plus we had only 3 months to get ready before our first game.

The Western Basketball Association game was very good basketball but it did not catch on, thus the team was financially challenged from the start...as were all the other teams. I had really no staff other than some part-time people and volunteers - an assistant trainer, ball boys & girls, statisticians, Head Coach John Wetzel and my wife. We got some assistance from our parent company, Columbia Pacific, that provided secretarial and PR assistance.

**FWiL:**

Minor league teams are often known for their eccentrics - those players and coaches that couldn't or wouldn't fit in anywhere else, owing to some physical limitation, attitude problem or offbeat personality . Who still stands out in your mind after all these years as a "character" on that Lumberjacks team and are there any stories you can share about them?

**Veleke:**

The Lumberjack players were good people...from different parts of the country except for two former University of Washington players who knew where the Tri-Cities was back then, Chester Dorsey and Louie Nelson. No eccentricities as players or as a team except their height! Remember - in 1979, the NBA cut back the number of players each team could keep on their rosters from 12 to 11. I believe this was due to budget reasons. So the WBA drafted the 12th players...the last guy cut by each team. So the quality of basketball was very good.

**FWiL:**

What was your take on the rest of the Western Basketball Association? On the one hand, league founder Neil Christiansen promoted the WBA as much more professional than the Continental Basketball Association was in the East - "one step below the NBA" - with good coaches, air travel, decent hotels. etc.

On the other hand, when the league got attention, it was usually because of some sort of chaos - Billy Martin punching out reporters in Reno or the owner in Las Vegas folding up shop in midseason and taking his 24-second clock with him.

**Veleke:**

The WBA was more professional than the CBA as Mr. Christiansen stated, yes, due to having good coaches and good facilities except for a team or two that played in high school gyms (like the Lumberjacks). Because the league was so spread out, teams had to travel by air. This was very expensive and probably was the undoing of some of the franchises. The teams did stay in nice facilities...and it was the responsibility of the home team to provide the hotel

lodging. I remember the day when Sports Illustrated came out with its article on the WBA. It made our day.

**FWiL:**

Were you still involved with the team in the summer of 1979 when the WBA attempted to merge with the CBA? If so, do you know why the merger collapsed and Michael McDermott chose to fold the club?

**Veleke:**

Yes, John and I were with the team through the summer, me a little longer than John. John left and joined the coaching staff of the NBA Phoenix Suns. I stayed on until about August of that summer when I left to join the insurance agency. The debt that teams took on while in the WBA and the projected travel costs were the undoing of the merger. The Salt Lake City franchise was not coming back since the New Orleans Jazz announced they were moving to Salt Lake City. Bottom line: the attendance was too low and the operating costs too high to make a go of it so Mr. McDermott folded the club.

**FWiL:**

What were the most rewarding aspects of the job for you? Do you have a couple of favorite memories you can share from that season?

**Veleke:**

Most rewarding aspect of the job -- the friends that I made. Being in the Tri-Cities was like being home. I grew up in the Seattle area and went to college at Washington State University. When the league folded, I stayed in town and went to work for local insurance agency. As my new boss said back then, if you can sell "socks and jocks", you can sell insurance. And he was correct.

The Lumberjacks coach, John Wetzel, and I are good friends to this day. John went on to successful coaching career in the NBA. We still talk about the WBA year we were together -- the challenges in putting together the team; renting an apartment together and sleeping on the floor. I had a bed. His was being shipped from his home in Phoenix -- his family was in Phoenix and were in the process in moving to the Tri-Cities. Once we rented a motor home to drive the team to Spokane to catch a flight to one of the team cities (it was less expensive to rent a motor home and drive to Spokane and take a flight from there than fly out of our local airport). We celebrated Thanksgiving as a team (John's wife and mine put the Thanksgiving meal together) and knew that for several of the players this was the first time they were away from home for Thanksgiving.

Another memory was the time I went with the team to Great Falls to play the Montana Sky. The Montana Sky were owned in part by the country music singer Charley Pride. Mr. Pride entertained the crowd by warming up with his players, and yes, he did wear a Sky uniform.

When the WBA folded (as did the Lumberjacks), I kept the Lumberjacks uniforms. Several years ago I located most of the former players with John Wetzel's help. I contacted them by phone or email to say that I have the uniform that they played in and I wanted to send it to them. To say the least, they all were very much appreciative.

**FWiL:**

Did you ever work in pro sports again after that lone winter with the Lumberjacks and the WBA? Did you ever have the itch to go back and take another crack at managing a team? Does anyone in the Tri-Cities still ask about or mention the team to you on occasion after all these years?

**Veleke:**

No. I did not get back into sports, either professionally or collegiately. It was fun at the time, but I have no regrets in not continuing in the sports profession. As I said, I made many local friends who I still see at times. The newspaper man that covered our games, Hec Hancock from the Tri-City Herald, is now retired but I still run in to him. The former college basketball official from the area who refereed some of our games - I played golf with him several months ago. The former high school athletic directors who were at their jobs when the Lumberjacks were playing. The timer and score keeper for the games - local area teachers who recently retired. And people who went to games and who still remember.

As I type this, I'm smiling because my time with the Lumberjacks was memorable and I still remember many of the things that we all did. Far too many to present in this format.