

Fun While it Lasted

A graduate of Johns Hopkins University, Miles Wolff took his first job in pro baseball in 1971 as the General Manager of the Atlanta Braves Double-A farm club in Savannah, Georgia. After spending most of the 1970's operating minor league ball clubs and in the Southeastern United States and writing a novel, Wolff famously made his first foray into ownership by purchasing the Durham (NC) Bulls Carolina League franchise for \$2,417 in the fall of 1979.

Wolff's success with the Durham Bulls during the 1980's inspired best practices among countless new investors in the minor league baseball industry, particularly after the critical and box office success of the 1988 film *Bull Durham* which brought the club to national prominence. Wolff also published the influential *Baseball America* newspaper throughout the 1980's and 1990's. In addition to the Bulls, which he sold in 1990, Wolff has owned baseball teams across North America from Butte, Montana to Quebec City.

In 1990, Wolff made his first and only ownership foray outside of baseball, purchasing the Raleigh IceCaps expansion franchise in the upstart East Coast Hockey League. (Wolff's partner in the IceCaps venture, Pete Bock, is former minor leaguer who served as GM of the Bulls in the early 1980's and has a cameo role in *Bull Durham* as a minister.)

Wolff and Bock ran the IceCaps for four years in Raleigh and Wolff credits his experience in the do-it-yourself early days of the ECHL with inspiring perhaps his most ambitious undertaking - the creation of the Northern League and the revival of independent professional baseball in 1993.

Today Miles Wolff serves as Commissioner of two independent baseball leagues - the Can-Am League in the Northeastern United States and Canada, and the American Association which stretches from Texas and Louisiana up through the Great Plains and on to Winnipeg.

Miles Wolff spoke with Fun While It Lasted about the Raleigh IceCaps and the ECHL in November 2011.

Disclaimer: The following interview was conducted by Miles Wolff's son Hoffman, who attended IceCaps games in his youth, and who has worked for his own fair share of minor league ball clubs.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

How did the idea of starting the IceCaps come about?

Wolff:

Blake Cullen, who had been a longtime minor-league baseball executive, was having success running the ECHL team in Norfolk, Virginia. We were talking to him, and he said, 'this is just like running a minor-league baseball team.' We thought it could work in our area.

FWiL:

What was Raleigh's history with pro hockey?

Wolff:

Raleigh had never seen professional hockey. The arena was a livestock hall built in the 1950s, and we weren't going to dig up the concrete floor to install pipes and whatever else you need for a proper ice system. Instead, we went out and purchased this system of mats that made really bad ice...we had some of the worst ice in the league.

[IceCaps GM] Pete [Bock] and I didn't know much about the sport, either. One day, a few weeks before the season started, he came to me slightly panicked, and said that we needed to buy paint for the ice right away. 'What do you mean, paint for the ice?' Apparently, in hockey, the ice gets painted...we had no idea.

The local media was completely ignorant of hockey, and expected us to fail. Pete went to the local newspaper's office to bring a puck to the sports editor – he had never seen one up close. The paper assigned their golf writer to cover the team because they wanted him to quit.

The team started the season in Toledo, and Pete and I flew up there for the first game. We lost something like 10-1, and our players got totally beaten up by their guys. Toledo played in this old barn, and their fans were loud, obscene, and kept throwing octopi on the ice. There was a four-year-old near us who was giving our players the finger...his dad was encouraging him. Was this the sport I was supposed to promote?

FWiL:

What were your expectations going in?

Wolff:

We thought that we might be able to draw 3,000 a game and maybe make a little bit of money. What we didn't realize was that there was a big population of Northerners and Canadians who grew up with the game, had moved down to the area for work, and missed it. They were big supporters of the team. We also had a good base of Southerners who came with the NASCAR mentality – they wanted to see the wrecks, the fights. But we also saw a lot of Durham Bulls fans at the games: people who just enjoyed and supported minor-league sports, and liked having something to do during the winter.

We always heard from scalpers that they got more money from selling IceCaps tickets than they did selling ACC basketball tickets.

FWiL:

Why did you decide to sell?

Wolff:

When N.C. State began developing plans for their new arena, we sat in on a couple of meetings with the architects. Shortly afterwards, they stopped calling us. It turned out that the American Hockey League had been in contact with the N.C. State people as well – the ECHL team in Greensboro had moved to the AHL, and they wanted to expand their Southern Division.

Hockey has no territorial rules, so there wasn't really anything we could do to prevent them from moving in. A lawyer from the proposed Raleigh AHL team's ownership group called us one day, and basically told us that they would be the ones playing in the new arena...but they would help us move the IceCaps to Fayetteville, N.C., where a new arena was being built. At that point, I figured it was time to sell.

FWiL:

How did those early days of the ECHL compare to your experience operating baseball clubs?

Wolff:

The ECHL was essentially independent hockey – you'd have a couple of players assigned by NHL clubs, but mostly, you found your own guys. It was one of the factors that gave the push to start independent baseball..."if we can do this and make money in hockey, why not baseball?"

A lot of the player rules still in effect in independent baseball today – a limited number of veterans, rookie requirements, limited service requirements – come from the ECHL.

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