

Fun While it Lasted

Rob Ekno grew up in Rhode Island and forged a career in radio and television production after graduating Mount Wachusett Community College in Massachusetts in the early 1980's.

During the latter part of that decade, he signed on to handle PR duties for two short-lived pro sports start-ups in the region: the New England Steamrollers of the Arena Football League and later the Worcester (MA) Counts of the World Basketball League. Both teams lasted only a single season and Ekno witnessed owners whose initial enthusiasm was quickly sapped by public apathy and buyer's remorse.

While his employers sank at the box office, Ekno struggled with his own anchors of alcoholism and drug addiction, sometimes working games on the tail end of ferocious benders on vodka and cocaine. After a period of homelessness in the early 1990's, he re-emerged in California as - of all things - a home shopping network host in the mid-1990's. He has since forged a career as a TV pitchman, motivational speaker, internet radio host and author. His website is www.robekno.com.

Rob Ekno spoke to Fun While It Lasted about his experiences in the Arena Football League and World Basketball League on April 16th, 2012

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

Rob, tell us how you got involved with the Worcester Counts and the World Basketball League?

Ekno:

There was an ad in the paper for a PR Director. I had actually done PR for the New England Steamrollers of the Arena Football League at the Providence Civic Center in Providence the year before. So I got the job.

FWiL:

I've seen some of your demo reels on your website (www.robekno.com). Given how comfortable you are in front of the microphone, I'm surprised you didn't end up doing broadcasting for the Counts, either on radio or TV.

Ekno:

Well, they had SportsChannel New England doing all the games and we had a gal named **Leandra Reilly**. She was the first woman to ever do play-by-play for an NBA game <in 1988>. She did the play-by-play for the Counts and **Ron Perry** did the color. **Bob Fouracre** was the radio man.

FWiL:

Among other things, you've been a TV pitchman by trade. You've sold everything under the sun, from teeth whitening systems to gemstones. So how does promoting minor league basketball in Worcester, Massachusetts rank in terms of the toughest sales jobs of your career?

Ekno:

It sure is a tough sell. I had done the Steamrollers the previous year in 1988 and then the Counts came along in 1989. **Frank J. Russo** and **Bob Andreoli** were the owners of the Arena Football League team thought they were gonna make "X" amount of dollars and that didn't happen, so they bowed out after one year. Frank was a very successful concert promoter and Bob made a lot of money owning tennis courts and mini-golf places around Rhode Island. They were both used to bringing in money consistently and when they saw the Arena Football was going to be a long, slow build before it made any money, they got out.

The guy who owned the Counts, his name was **Rob Shoemaker**. He was a Harvard Business School graduate. So, presumably well-versed in business. He was promised by the World Basketball League that he was going to make "X" amount of dollars and there would be "X" amount of attendance and so on.

When I got to meet Rob, he told me the league said to him that he could expect about 6,000 or 7,000 people a game. I said "What you're telling me all sounds good, but in reality I know what just happened in Providence and the Arena Football League only plays one game a week."

To cut down on travel expenses and stuff, the Counts and the World Basketball League set up the schedule with back-to-back games. A team would fly in from Youngstown, Ohio, for example, and they would play us at the Worcester Centrum on Friday night and then play again on Saturday night.

I told him "Listen, this is Worcester. You're in the middle of Massachusetts. People either go to Cape Cod on the weekend or they go to Misquamicut State Beach down in Rhode Island, or wherever. Not a whole lot of people stay around Worcester on the weekend. You're playing your games on Friday and Saturday nights - back-to-back games against the same exact team that people don't know anything about.

"I know that this league promised you certain things, but I'm just giving you my experience from the Arena Football League and I don't believe you're going to get the attendance you are expecting."

Shoemaker put his trust in the league, of course, because he had already sunk his money into the team and he didn't want to think he was investing in a failure.

So it was about a week-and-a-half before the first game and the gentleman who was the Director of the Centrum called me into his office and said "Look, you gotta help us out here. There's only about 2,000 tickets sold." I said "I've been trying to tell these guys that all along, but no one is listening to my experience here."

So I went out and in ten days I hit every business, every school, every charity...everybody who would take a hundred, two hundred, four hundred tickets to give away. And if you look at the attendance for the first night, it was a full house. I believe it was about 15,000 people - one of the biggest nights they ever had at the Centrum for a sporting event. *<Editor's note: the crowd was 7,056 according to the Boston Globe>*.

But then the second game dropped way off and from there it was down to a 1,000 people a game after that. One of the other deals that the Counts made - which I told them not to do - was they put every single game on SportsChannel New England. People that heard about the Counts...why would they pay to sample the product when they could watch it on television for a couple of minutes for free and see if they liked it? The Counts were actually paying about \$10,000 a game to be on TV so people could stay home and watch it for free.

FWiL:

I didn't follow the Counts when I was a kid in Boston, but I knew of them. And there was one player that I was particularly aware of and that was **Keith Smart** because I remembered him hitting the winning shot for Indiana in the NCAA Championship Game a couple of years earlier. What players stood out to you on that Counts team?

Ekno:

First of all, we had **Norm Van Lier**, the former Chicago Bulls star, who was the assistant coach. Norm was promised an apartment and all this other stuff but it never came through for whatever reason. So Norm and I ended up being roommates for the summer. That was an interesting experience for sure. I learned a lot about the behind-the-scenes workings of pro and college basketball from Norm. He would have been the dominant personality on that team.

We did have Keith Smart. All the guys were great guys. They all had dreams, obviously, of playing in the NBA. The whole premise of the WBL was that you had to be 6' 5" and under. It was all about the passing and the speed. You didn't see a whole lot of slam dunking and if you did, it was of the more spectacular, fast break variety. The idea was to get the ball up and down the court as quickly as possible, get it in the hoop and play a little defense.

We also had a gentleman named **Keith Gatlin** and he was actually **Len Bias'** roommate when Bias OD'd and died. So that was quite the learning experience from him as well.

One time we went out to Youngtown, Ohio to play against the Pride. It was a weird situation out there. They were out in the middle of the woods. Their owner started harassing Norm Van Lier on our bench during the game.

FWiL:

Was that **Mickey Monus**?

Ekno:

<Laughing> Yes, it was!

FWiL:

To me, that was one of the fascinating stories of the WBL - that it was largely being financed by the money Mickey Monus was embezzling from the Pharmacy chain where he was the CEO.

Ekno:

There you go. Phar-Mor pharmacies. It was interesting. We were very happy to get out of Youngstown. That's for sure.

FWiL:

How did the Counts story end? I've heard the Rob Shoemaker more or less walked away from the team before the season even ended.

Ekno:

Yeah, that's correct. After about six or seven games, they laid me off because they couldn't afford to pay me anymore. It just went downhill from there. From what I was reading in *The Worcester Telegram* they were getting around 1,500 people at games. Which is what I told them all along they were going to get.

I said "If you get 2,000 people to any one of these games on a given Friday night, you should consider that a good night. You have games on TV that nobody has to pay for and you're not doing any promotions. What is the reason somebody is going to show up to your arena?"

My experience with the Steamrollers in the Arena Football League was that when they gave away tickets, they filled the arena. When they didn't give away tickets, there was nobody there.

The Counts barely finished the season. Rob Shoemaker took a beating.

FWiL:

Do you have a couple of favorite stories you can share from your days with the Counts?

Ekno:

Well, the biggest challenge and my favorite story was that effort to pack the arena for opening night with only a week-and-a-half to go before opening night. We already talked about that. That was a pretty cool challenge, but the problem was we dropped off to 2,000 fans right away after that.

As far as the players go, I just remember that every one of those guys had an entourage of women waiting for them in every city at every hotel we visited on a road trip. They had six or seven girls each on their arm at night and when I'd knock on their doors in the morning, six or seven girls would come walking out with them.

And I got to live with Norm Van Lier. I've got twenty years sober now. But in my heyday with the Counts, I was in the middle of my alcoholic disease as well. We did quite a bit of partying. They had a 50's night club around the corner from the Centrum and we used to spend a lot of time there. Norm and I did a lot of drinking together and a lot of story sharing.

FWiL:

Yeah, I noticed on your website that you are pretty candid about your struggles with drugs and alcohol during that era. I'm curious if you felt it was starting to really take a toll on your work at that time. Obviously you were working a lot of late nights and going on the road and that can be a tempting atmosphere for a lot of people.

Ekno:

Yeah, absolutely. It's all part of my book and my radio show and I don't have a problem talking about it. You can't help someone else get better in their own life if you don't share the experiences that you've had. The first chapter of my book is all about my insanity.

One story is from the summer of 1988 when I was in the Arena Football League. The night before our first ever game on ESPN, I stayed up all night partying at Misquamicut Beach in Rhode Island. We had a 9:00 AM production meeting with ESPN at the Civic Center. I drove up Route 95 and I was blasted out of my mind on vodka and cocaine, which were my drugs of choice.

Chet Forte, who was the first director of Monday Night Football, was the producer for ESPN. I pulled into the Providence Civic Center parking lot at 8:45 in the morning for the meeting with Chet and all the ESPN guys, and the PR guys from our opponents, the Los Angeles Cobras. I couldn't stay awake, so I did one last line in the parking lot before I went inside. I sat next to **Babe Parilli**, who was our Head Coach, and I never took my hat or dark sunglasses off. When you're doing coke, your mouth is going a mile a minute even when you're not talking. My whole body was twitching. I don't know how nobody ever said anything to me that day. I got through the meeting, went home and passed out, and then did the game that night.

That was one of the crazier times. I tell those stories because you can't help anybody change their life if you're not willing to let people know some of the insane choices and mistakes that you made in your own life.

FWiL:

And eventually you ended up on the streets, is that right?

Ekno:

Yes. About 23 years ago. I went from the Steamrollers to working for the Counts. And after my job with Counts ended in July of 1989, that is when things really went downhill.

I ended up living in a van that my brother gave me. I lost all my belongings. Later I took a Greyhound bus to Fort Lauderdale and ended up living out the bus station down there. I would put my one bag of belongings in the station and shower in the men's room. Then I would walk the streets all day, looking for a place to sleep on the beach.

FWiL:

And how did you emerge from that?

Ekno:

I drove out to California in 1993 in a beat up old car with no place to live. I answered an ad in *The Los Angeles Times* for a home shopping network looking for a host. They hired me two weeks later. I had no clothes and I had to go down to Goodwill to get a suit to wear on TV.

I did that until 1996 and helped build up a couple of home shopping networks that you see on Dish Network and Direct TV. In 2010, after **Billy Mays** died, I was selected to be among 25 people to compete to be "American's Next Great Pitch Man." I went to New York and did a spot on "Fox & Friends" for that but it never worked out with Telebrands. I am now in the process of starting Rob Ekno Ministries. I also do a daily radio show Monday through Friday from 10 AM to 11 AM West Coast time at www.indie104.com and the purpose of the show is to inspire, motivate and challenge each of us to become our best for ourselves, our country and God.

And I have a book coming out called *God, Bless America...Before It's Too Late* which is basically saying God, please help us before we completely fall to pieces here in America. That will be available on my website - www.robekno.com - in June and in bookstores four to six weeks later.