

# *Fun While it Lasted*

**Steven Warshaw** was a 23-year old sales rep for Spalding sporting goods when he interviewed for the Deputy Commissioner's job in the Continental Basketball Association in 1984. That interview didn't pan out, at least not directly. But it did lead to an introduction to Bay State (MA) Bombardiers owner John Ligums and a three-year run managing minor league basketball franchises in Worcester, Massachusetts and Rockford, Illinois.

The CBA was the Official Developmental League of the NBA in the 1980's, offering a ladder to stardom for players such as Michael Adams and John Starks and coaches including Phil Jackson and George Karl. But the glitz and glamour of the Magic-and-Larry era NBA hardly reflected on the ballplayers hustling for a couple of hundred dollars a week in last-chance outposts like Bangor, Maine, Lima, Ohio and Casper, Wyoming. It was an old school minor league of endless bus rides, ancient half-empty auditoriums, and exceedingly long odds.

Like many young executives who cut their teeth in the minors, Warshaw wore many hats and he later took that experience and carved out a long career in professional sports management. His future stops included athlete representation at IMG and two years packing arenas and dodging Mafiosi as the Moscow-based point man of the ground breaking partnership between the NHL's Pittsburgh Penguins and CSKA, the legendary Soviet Red Army hockey club.

Today, Warshaw is still deeply involved in the world of pro hockey as a marketing and management consultant to the NHL, AHL and KHL.

Steven Warshaw spoke to Fun While It Lasted about the Bay State Bombardiers and the Continental Basketball Association on January 12, 2013.

*Interview begins after the jump.*

## FWiL:

Tell me how you got involved with the Continental Basketball Association in the first place.

## Warshaw:

I saw a tiny little want ad in *The Wall Street Journal* and it said “challenging career in pro sports”. Remember want ads, before the electronic boom? Anyway, I was working for Spalding at the time, so I was getting some good practical experience in selling as well as public relations and merchandising.

So when this popped up I put together a great C.V. that was geared towards sports and talked about all the events I had staged with Ronald McDonald House and with Spalding. I included some great recommendations I had from people in the business that I knew through family, friends and school and so on.

I was invited out to interview for the Deputy Commissioner position underneath **Jim Drucker** in the CBA league office. There were two guys that I was competing against. One was **Rick Horrow**, who has got a very successful sports business today. He was Joe Robbie’s guy and was involved in the building of Joe Robbie Stadium down in Miami and had crazy credentials. The other guy was **Tom Meschery**, a former NBA All-Star who ended up getting the gig.

So I didn’t get the job, but I met all twelve of the CBA owners. I had done very well in my interview. They told me later that I was the only guy that had told the owners to stop talking when I was trying to respond to questions. It was a big U-shaped, *Face The Nation*-type set up. Several of the owners were talking amongst themselves. I was just a 23-year old kid and I don’t know what got into me, but I said “*Excuse me, am I boring you guys?*” It was really arrogant and they loved it, apparently, because part of Deputy Commissioner’s job was trying to keep control of these guys.

One of the guys that liked my attitude was **John Ligums**, who owned the Bay State Bombardiers. We went out to dinner and had a bunch of laughs and he offered me a job to come sell for him as the team’s business manager.

## FWiL:

And what kind of condition were the Bombardiers in at the time?

**Warshaw:**

Well, the team was in Brockton, Massachusetts at the time. A former ABA star named **Johnny Neumann** was the Head Coach and he had just been fired after he failed his drug test. That actually made *Sports Illustrated*. The *Sports Illustrated* writer asked him what happened and Johnny Neumann said “*Well, I had been clean, but on the way to take the test, I got so stressed out that I smoked a joint.*”

**FWiL:**

I remember reading that article.

**Warshaw:**

Yeah. So anyway, John Ligums told me he was going to hire the former Boston Celtics All-Star **Dave Cowens** as the new coach. And I think I told John that if Brockton was good enough for Big Red, then it was good enough for Little Black, as I think I called myself.

And then we moved to Worcester in a heart beat. I might have been in Brockton for a couple of weeks before we pulled up stakes for Worcester.

**FWiL:**

I was the General Manager of the Brockton Rox baseball team for a couple of years and our stadium was right next to Brockton High School where the Bombardiers played. I've been in that gym. I know the CBA wasn't glamorous by any stretch, but it's still hard to imagine a pro basketball team playing there.

**Warshaw:**

I never saw one game there. Actually, no, I take that back. I went to see one game there towards the end of the season. And yeah, it was a joke. It was a high school. But I remember learning a few tricks of the minor league trade at that game. I remember watching the Bombardiers' game operations guy pouring so much salt into the popcorn that everyone had to buy extra cups of his crappy Coke that he poured out of two-liter bottles.

So then we moved to Worcester and spent a couple of years there. Dave Cowens lasted the first year only and it's fair to say that John and Dave are certainly not on each other's Christmas lists.

## **FWiL:**

What was John Ligums like? I seen a few articles about the CBA and it seemed like he was always good for a sharp one-liner.

## **Warshaw:**

It's funny, I just got an email from him this morning. We still keep in touch. He lives in Houston now with his family down there.

John is a really bright guy, an interesting guy. He went to Johns Hopkins. He was a wrestler. I think he always felt that he wanted to be a pro athlete. A lot of athletes who don't make it never really get over it and I think he was one of those guys. He was extremely competitive in business and rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. But with me he was very fair and I always enjoyed John and I still do. He's a very interesting character and I wish he had a little more money so we could buy another team!

I learned a lot from John. He was my first boss in the minors. One thing he was great to me about was that he really let me run the operation. My first year I brought in a lot of money from national advertising accounts such as Spalding, Nissan, Converse and the Army. Big, big accounts. He gave me the reigns to his team and he really let me do anything I wanted promotionally and in terms of media relations and PR. I've always respected owners that would let me do my job and not interfere and those guys are few and far between. From that standpoint, John was great.

He was also a great interview. Always said controversial things, got himself in trouble. He got a lot of media.

It was a time when these teams were run on shoestring budgets. Not much money was put back into the product. I think that's why the league eventually ended up in mothballs and with a premature death, even though it had been around for years as the Eastern Basketball Association.

## **FWiL:**

Was John Ligums the kind of owner that was more concerned about wins and losses and making the playoffs, or was he bottom line oriented?

### **Warshaw:**

John was bottom line. I had convinced him early on that winning is not everything in the minor leagues. It's more about the experience than actual wins and losses. But let's put it this way - he didn't like to lose.

I think the reason there was so much strain between John and Dave Cowens was because John's expectations were ridiculously high. To win in the CBA, you have to have a player personnel network that's crazy good. You really have to know where to get players. And with Dave, well, there's no way he should have known how to do that. He didn't have any experience at the time. The CBA was a very specialized player market. Dave was just really focused on the coaching and he didn't have the horses to win and to dominate in the playoffs. So that's why the friction occurred between John and Dave. Unrealistic expectations by the owner and a rookie coach, who was a great coach, but didn't have the player personnel chops to unearth the talent.

### **FWiL:**

You mentioned promotions earlier. Do you have a couple of favorite promotions from those days.

### **Warshaw:**

Well, because of Cowens we did a series of promotions around "Big Red".

We had a "Redhead Night" where any redhead got in for free and we made them all sit together in a big red headed leper colony behind one basket. We had a couple hundred people - it was just very funny and a great photo op. Wrigley Gum also sponsored a night when every fan got ten packs of Big Red gum.

We had some really great giveaway nights. I worked for Spalding before I came to the CBA and was able to bring Spalding on board as a big sponsor, so we had Spalding everything. Spalding basketball night where all of the kids got basketballs, plus Spalding socks, towel nights, t-shirt nights, and so on.

One of our better nights was a Hot Dog Eating contest. This was long before all of the Coney Island madness got really big. We went around Worcester finding all of the best hot dog eaters. The contest was at halftime. One guy threw up on the court. The guy who won it had no teeth. His name was Clarence "Gums" Millet. It was a great stuff. Great minor league kitsch.

**FWiL:**

Tell me about Captain PJ.

**Warshaw:**

<Laughing> Captain P.J. was our mascot and probably one of the greatest parts of our team. He was this crazy local disc jockey. I think he still might have a show in Worcester. He ran around the auditorium in a flight suit. He slid across the court on his belly and choked himself with his aviator scarf. Captain P.J. was sort of like Chuck Yeager meets Rain Man.

**FWiL:**

Did you ever play any games at the Worcester Centrum, or was everything at the Worcester Auditorium?

**Warshaw:**

No. Everything was at the Aud. We tried to go into the Centrum, but the GM at the time wanted no part of it. He didn't even want to let us play a game of the month there, or even *one game*. I remember I even brought Cowens to the meeting and that didn't help. I thought, Jesus, I've got Dave Cowens here and you won't even try one game with us. That's just hubris. We do one night with Cowens and he could bring in all of his Celtics buddies, but this guy wouldn't hear of it. It was just a really foolish attitude by the management of the Centrum at that point, so, no, we never played a game there.

**FWiL:**

What players stand out in your memory from the Bombardiers days?

**Warshaw:**

We had probably one of the greatest players in the history of the CBA. A guy named "**Awesome**" **Joe Dawson**. He was clearly our John Henry, our mythical 6' 5" CBA god. But Joe could never make it in the bigs because he was a tweener. Joe played football and basketball at Southern Mississippi. He used to train with Walter Payton. He was a really interesting character.

Joe was probably the most polished, media-savvy, sweet, competitive man that I met in my entire CBA days. He was just an absolute gentleman and yet on the court he was absolutely vicious. Vicious body, big sharp elbows, and tough. I mean, no one messed with Joe Dawson. Nobody messed with Joe Dawson. There were a lot of brawls and nobody would go near this guy. I mean he looked like John Henry. Joe was my all-time favorite Bombardier.

We also had some wild guys like **Kevin Williams**, the former St. John's point guard who played in the NBA for a bunch of teams. He was actually a really nice guy, Kevin, but he was also a city kid from a very tough part of New York City. He was a brawler. Kevin started a couple of big brawls in the CBA. He also led our team in scoring. Kevin Williams was probably the best player I ever saw in the CBA.

### **FWiL:**

And you also had **Michael Adams** for a little while also, correct?

### **Warshaw:**

Michael, in my opinion, was the most marketable, fantastic CBA All-Star and the league really didn't do anything with him. It was ridiculous.

His agents **Frank Catapano** and **Larry Fleisher** came to me. They worked on Michael together and represented him. I remember Frank said to me "Listen, I'll let you beat me up in the salary negotiation so you look good in your boss' eyes. I'll just need one favor" We signed Michael for \$450 a week. That's what this future NBA All-Star was making in the minors.

Anyway, Frank says, "The only thing I'd ask you to do is call the NBA GM's for me every Friday when there's a point guard that goes down to injury and let them know about Michael." He gave me a list of all their phone numbers. I thought that was the greatest offer I'd ever gotten. I was a 24-year old in the minors and I got to talk to NBA GM's every week and send them stats.

Michael was just a great kid. We're the same age almost. We would actually go out dancing together at the Best Western in Worcester. I was the same age of a lot of these players, so it was a lot of fun for me.

Michael Adams was the most telegenic, the most interesting, thoughtful, caring guy that I knew in the CBA. The media loved him. He also got it done on the court. This guy was a phenomenal talent. His speed was even more obvious in the CBA. His first step was just so good. He absolutely dominated. It was a pleasure to see and he didn't last in the CBA too long. He played for us for one season and then he stuck in the NBA for good after that, becoming an NBA All-Star in the process.

### **FWiL:**

After Dave Cowens departed in 1985, your new coach was a CBA institution. **Mauro Panaggio.**

### **Warshaw:**

A legend. A legend of the CBA. One of the league's winningest coaches. Remember I was talking before about the need to have a player personnel grapevine? He had that, unlike Dave Cowens. That was Mauro.

He was a bit of a monster in terms of practices. He really kept his distance from the players. He knew how to be successful in that league. He was old school and he was a winner.

He was a very nice guy away from the court. We went to the beach a couple of times, we hung out a couple of nights. Just a warm guy. But certainly the public persona of Mauro Panaggio was more cut from the Bobby Knight cloth.

### **FWiL:**

During the years that you were in CBA with Bay State and with Rockford, were there one or two cities that were dreaded by the players? You know - places where players hated to go on road trips or begged not to be traded to?

### **Warshaw:**

Wow. That's a good question. They were all bad! <Laughing>

A better question might be 'Was there any place that players *wanted* to be traded to'?

So, actually Tampa and Sarasota both had teams and everybody wanted to play down there in the sunshine. Either of those teams were really desired. Puerto Rico also.

Casper, Wyoming - not so much. Cincinnati and Louisville were no good. They were right in the middle of college basketball territory and nobody paid any attention.

**FWiL:**

What about Albany with **Phil Jackson**?

**Warshaw:**

Albany played in a dump. It was an armory with tanks parked around the floor. Albany was definitely not a garden spot. But, you know, it was with Phil Jackson and **Charley Rosen**. And they drew very well. They packed the place. Actually, I would say Albany was a good place to play and I'll tell you why. They were really popular because they won. And there was a big groupie scene in Albany and that was pretty popular as well.

I think the answer to your original question is: you don't want to play any place where it's cold, like Baltimore or New England or Wyoming. Where you're sitting in buses freezing your butt off. You wanted to be in Florida or Puerto Rico.

**FWiL:**

How did the Bombardiers come to an end?

**Warshaw:**

We did as well as we could in Worcester for two years. It just couldn't work in Worcester. It didn't have its own television station. It didn't have its own identity. It was always sort of in the penumbra of Boston and the Celtics were the kings there. They were always winning, winning, winning and the people in Worcester thought of themselves as a Boston suburb. Worcester is not a great sports city. Or rather it's not a great minor league city, I should say.

I remember Jim Drucker, the CBA Commissioner, came to me at the end of the second year and said "Can you squeeze any more blood out of this stone?"

And I said "Nope. Time to sell it and get the hell out of here."

But having said that, we are hoping to pull off a 30-year reunion for the Bombardiers someday soon!

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