

Fun While it Lasted

Bill Kentling spent the 1980's on the frontlines of the indoor soccer phenomenon in the United States. For a brief period in the early 1980's, club such as the Cleveland Force, Kansas City Comets and St. Louis Steamers of the Major Indoor Soccer League (MISL) drew larger crowds than NBA and NHL franchises in those cities.

After the demise of the outdoor North American Soccer League (NASL) in 1984, the United States was without a sanctioned Division I professional league for more than a decade. Although purists were horrified by the sport's hockey-style rules and promoters' emphasis on non-stop entertainment over soccer, there was a time when some believed the future of American soccer would be indoors.

Meanwhile, Kentling was in Kansas managing the MISL's Wichita Wings franchise, a small-market success story he compares to the NFL's Green Bay Packers. The Wings and their "Orange Army" of fans packed the 9,600-seat Kansas Coliseum for MISL games during the sport's glory years in the early 1980's.

In 1986, Kentling was drafted into service as the MISL's third Commissioner and he presided over one of the most challenging periods for the league and its slow decline from national prominence as investors became exhausted after nearly a decade of red ink. Among the challenges Kentling faced were labor discord with the MISL Players Association, the mid-season collapse of a high profile expansion franchise in Long Island, New York in 1987, and the contraction of the league in the summer of 1988.

Today Bill Kentling is 71 years old, a grandfather and cancer survivor, living in Topeka, Kansas. He spoke to Fun While It Lasted about the Wichita Wings and the indoor soccer business on May 23, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

You started out in the newspaper industry, isn't that right?

KENTLING:

I did. I was in the newspaper industry in Kansas and in California. As a college student I had read a book where the author said that the two best things he ever did were A.) get into the newspaper business and B.) get out of it. When I left after nine years I understood exactly what he meant.

I started out and I will tell you it was a much different industry in the Sixties. It was a much different industry than it is today. I sort of weep for what has happened to the daily newspapers in this country.

FWiL:

Was this in Wichita where you were working? At *The Wichita Eagle*?

KENTLING:

It was. There were two papers in Wichita both owned by the same family. A morning paper called *The Wichita Eagle* and an evening paper called *The Wichita Beacon* and I worked for both. And then I worked a year and a half in the L.A. area at a small daily. In those days there were about 13 or 14 dailies in Greater Los Angeles. We would have been about 7th or 8th in the pecking order.

FWiL:

And how did you get involved with indoor soccer when it came to Wichita?

KENTLING:

I did a lot of things at Pizza Hut in the corporate office. Pizza Hut was founded in Wichita. I was handling public relations and all corporate communications, just doing a bunch of stuff. They never let me get around the food product but everything else sort of reported to me. And eventually I decided I had had enough of that.

I was not involved with soccer its first year in Wichita. But the fella who had it - a fella by the name of Robert Becker - he figured one year was about enough. A group of us realized that professional soccer be could something very special for Wichita in the same way that you look at the symphony, or the local university or the opera. It would just add to the community. The NFL was not going to leave Kansas City and come to Wichita. But soccer would give us the chance to compete against Kansas City, Dallas and St. Louis, - cities that we normally

wouldn't be competing against. So we had about a dozen general partners and about 20-25 limited partners, but we really looked at it as a Green Bay Packers sort of thing.

And I was the last one out of a room one day and as I was walking out somebody said 'by the way you're gonna run that soccer franchise for us'.

And I had ball! I did six years in Wichita and another three as Commissioner of the league. Nine years was enough, I was worn out. But the one great lesson that you learn is that soccer in this country is a marathon, babe, it is not a sprint. You better have some staying power. Because it's gonna take a lot of your energy and a lot of your time and for a lot of people it's taken a lot of their money.

But it was fun. I really enjoyed it - I loved the energy of it.

FWiL:

Speaking of fun, the league was known as much for the laser shows and the pyrotechnics and the promotions as much as it was for the soccer.

KENTLING:

There's no question that we all realized what we needed. Not unlike what you're seeing in independent professional baseball today - they don't know what the final score is. They just want to know that they had affordable G-rated entertainment and the whole family had a ball and that's the way we looked at it. So you're absolutely right. Hell, I wouldn't know a great indoor soccer player from a bad one. They were all learning the indoor game at the same time.

We had some fellas who had really great reputations as outdoor soccer players all over the world but they were clearly at the end of their careers when they came here. Nobody in their prime was going to leave Manchester United to play for the Tacoma Stars or the Wichita Wings or the Baltimore Blast. But some guys in their thirties would come to live in America and it was a pretty good life. It worked out good for them.

FWiL:

When you were with the Wings, where did the Wings come down on the debate about Americanization versus importing these aging foreign players?

KENTLING:

I would have had an entire team of H-1B visa guys or green card guys if I could have. We really wanted to advertise ourselves as pretty soccer. St. Louis was more American, Kansas City was more American. It gave us the opportunity to portray ourselves as the beautiful game. Whatever the quota was on foreign players, I had it and I was in a room arguing for more.

I don't know that they could have done that in St. Louis with such a great tradition of American soccer or in Dallas for that matter. But in Wichita we had no real history.

FWIL

Especially in the early 1980's, Wichita was known for having some of the most passionate fans in the league. The Coliseum was often full and you had the Orange Army booster club. What do you think was the formula that allowed you to build such a loyal following from a marketing standpoint?

KENTLING

We have a very successful basketball program at Wichita State University and I say this as a Wichita State graduate. Wichita State won the NIT this year. And it has always drawn very very well. So many of the Wichita State fans are corporate fans, they are adults. It can be expensive to have a kid go to the game.

It's like if you want to go see the Boston Bruins and take three kids, you can't afford it. I mean it's corporate and it's adults. We went from the standpoint of let's get those people, particularly from the West side of Wichita and from the near countryside around us in the four or five counties that abut Sedgwick County. Let's reach out and get those that are unaffiliated.

Nobody from any newspaper ever graduated from the University of the MISL or the University of the Wichita Wings. We didn't have an alumni base or the radio, TV or newspaper coverage of the big four sports or the universities. So we knew we had to get creative and reach out to 'em and we also were creative in our pricing. Professional independent baseball today is following what we did, making it all about entertainment and making it so that you, your spouse and two-point-three kids can afford to go to the games.

FWIL

I've read that the Wings were year in and year out one of the lower budget teams in the league, and yet you guys drew good crowds. What was it about you and your staff that you were able to do more with less and how did cut some of those corners to make that happen?

KENTLING

I won't just restrict this to the Wichita staff. I had a great staff, but there were also great staffs in Kansas City and Cleveland, and a great staff in Baltimore and in St. Louis and in Dallas. We were so fortunate that so many guys and gals came along at about the same time who wanted to make a mark for themselves in sports marketing and we realized that we had to do two things. Or at least I realized it in Wichita.

We had to control costs. And we had to make it where it was affordable for people to come to the events. In 1983-84 we - back to my Wichita State point - we had 24 home games that year and we had pure sellouts - not a ticket left in the box - nineteen out of twenty four. And we did that for all the reasons I've already given you. We had four or five times when Wichita State basketball had a game at home and we had a game at home at the same time and both of us sold out. So it was really going.

We just didn't have any bad ideas and I had a young aggressive staff. We weren't above trying things that others might have thought were absurd. If you were to go to an NBA game in 1982, you wouldn't have seen a mirror ball come down from the ceiling and the steam and all that and now, all they've done is take what we did. Because they too, even as successful as the NBA is, and I think David Stern is the best - they're in the entertainment business.

It's not just about the physical prowess of the players. Because everybody has great players.

FWIL

People say that despite all the success in the stands, it seemed like an annual rite of spring that there would be a "Save the Wings" season ticket drive...

KENTLING

<interrupting>...That's taken a little bit of a life of its own unfairly. It was not a Save the Wings every year, but we certainly did it several times. I'll give you some history on that.

Even selling the hell out of tickets at an affordable price for the patron and keeping our costs down, we still didn't make money. And what the owners would come to me each year and say was 'look, we're willing to go for this, but we need some sign that people are gonna continue to support it at the same level' because it doesn't matter how much you control your costs if people don't come and buy your tickets and your souvenirs and your beer and your popcorn, it doesn't matter. You're gonna lose more money.

And so there were really three Save the Wings campaigns in Wichita and I just went to our patrons and said 'so prove to me that you're with us again and you can do that by buying season tickets.'

It was really a - I don't want to stay ploy - but it was a strategy for the selling of season tickets and I wanted to put some urgency into it. And nothing's more urgent than saying 'if you don't buy a season ticket by Tuesday, I'm gonna shoot your dog'. Fortunately we never had to shoot anybody's dog!

But if you look back on it now, it's like people think they were here forty years and they had forty 'Save the Wings' campaigns. But it wasn't really that way.

FWIL

How close could the Wings come to breaking even in a good year for the team?

KENTLING

In my six years we made a profit one year and by profit I mean a dollar and eighty cents. We didn't make enough to go and feed very many people. We were a little better than break even. We had a good paper value because we had the assets of contracts.

FWIL

Let me ask you a bit about your experience with the broader league. You were one of two dissenting votes on admitting the clubs that came in from the North American Soccer League in 1984. Is that correct?

KENTLING

I certainly voted against it but I can't tell you exactly what that vote was. I know there was certainly at least one dissenting vote, which was mine. My reason was that the North American Soccer League for all of its fame and Pele and all of that ... the reality is that they got themselves in trouble by refusing to stop spending. The last thing we needed in our league was someone to come in and outspend the rest of us and that's what I feared was gonna happen.

Now as it turned out, Lee Stern who owned the Chicago Sting was terrific - controlled costs and did a bang up job. So if I had to do it all over again, I'd vote for Chicago to come in and maybe no on the rest of them. But it was an issue of looking at their history and knowing that they spent a lot of money.

FWIL

What were the circumstances that led you to become the Commissioner of the MISL in 1986?

KENTLING

When the co-founder of the league, Earl Foreman resigned the post, we formed a search committee and found a fella <Francis Dale> who looked good on paper, came from a great background, came from a publishing background. He probably wasn't right for us and we probably weren't right for him. We came to a mutual understanding after his second year and the job was vacant. We literally sat around several evenings, all of us, and talked among ourselves that maybe we needed one of our own to be the Commissioner. And again I was the last guy out of the room and somebody said "you're it".

And it was fun. It was taxing. Lee Iacocca wrote the book about his time running Chrysler and how it was to wake up every morning knowing you had to spend \$30 million or \$300 million just to pay the interest that day. Well I know what he means because every day you get up and put on that asbestos suit because you knew you were going to spend the day fighting fires. That just goes with soccer in this country. I don't know the fellas who are running it now, but my suspicion is that they're fighting the same kind of fires. Although I must tell you that the TV deal for the outdoor league now looks good and it seems like they're making progress.

FWIL

One of the first fires you had to fight when you came in was the situation with the New York Express, who folded in the middle of the 1986-87 season. Can you talk about the circumstances of their final days and what went on behind the scenes?

KENTLING

The fella who owned them <Stan Henry> owned the Pennysavers down on Long Island and did rather well in that. And so we wanted a team in New York, we'd had a good team in New York before. We wanted to tap into the <NHL> Islanders success out on Long Island. We knew that was the hot bed of youth soccer and there was a building there that was accessible and worked well for indoor soccer.

Once we brought Henry in, I wanted to move the league offices to New York City. There was no point in having a franchise in New York if you weren't going to be there taking prospective clients and advertisers out to see the games. They got off to a good start, had a nice opener, drew ten or eleven thousand fans legit. *Sports Illustrated* and all the New York papers were there to cover the opening. We got off to a good start.

Then in the middle of December or January the fella called me and asked me to come out on the Island to dinner. Mitch Burke, the deputy commissioner, and I drove out on a snowy night and had a lovely dinner. We sort of kept waiting for the reason for the dinner and we got the check and we were paying and he said to us 'Oh by the way, I'm not sure I can make payroll this week'.

I said "I'm sorry...perhaps we should sit at the bar for a moment and talk about this." And he was just out of money or chose to be out of money, you're never sure.

Once that franchise folded, it was an ungodly expense to be in New York without a franchise. I can't look into Stan Henry's heart and tell you what really happened, but halfway into the season he gave up the ship. Now we were covered by a letter of credit, we could pay certain bills and whatever.

Goddamn, I haven't thought of that name in a while!

I had brought in a really good operator from Baltimore to try to run the Express, but it just didn't work. We had a lot of good guys. We really did. Some of them have gone in sports and other have been successful in other businesses. I suppose the one who has done the best is Tim Leiweke, who is running all of Anschutz <AEG> sports properties around the world and doing a good job and he was a terrific operator with us in Kansas City.

FWIL

At the end of the 1987-88 season, the MISL lost four of its most established franchises and nearly folded, despite major salary cap concessions extracted from the MISL Players Association. What was the behind the scenes situation at that time? Was it just a matter of exhaustion on the part of these long-standing ownership groups?

KENTLING

Yes, I think in many cases it was just pure exhaustion. A lot of guys just got tired at the same time. I think the Robbie family <owners of the Minnesota Strikers> had been looking to get out for a while. We spent a year fighting our union. We lost some seriously good business people.

FWIL

Where has your post soccer life taken you?

KENTLING

After I resigned as Commissioner of the MISL in 1989, I was pretty burned out. I went and lived on an island in the Carribean for a year and then Hurricane Hugo came and killed the island.

In the 1990's I promoted the National Hot Rod Association at Heartland Park in Topeka. I have grandkids now and I work in the radio industry in Topeka, doing sales management and sales training.

Last year I was diagnosed with level IV kidney cancer which reached my lymph nodes. I've been in treatment and that chemo is bad shit. But a month ago I was declared cancer free.

I've survived soccer and cancer.

Copyright © 2011 - Andy Crossley. All rights reserved.