

# *Fun While it Lasted*

**W. Godfrey Wood** is a long-time owner, operator and executive in the world of professional hockey. A former goaltender at Harvard University, Wood was one of the original investors in the New England Whalers of the World Hockey Association in 1971. Wood was part of a group that bid for the NHL's Boston Bruins in 1985 and 1990 he served as front man for future Boston Red Sox owner John Henry's unsuccessful Miami expansion bid in the National Hockey League.

Wood owned the Nashville Knights of the East Coast Hockey League for several years in the early 1990's. In 1993 he partnered with Tom Ebright, owner of the American Hockey League's Baltimore Skipjacks, to move that franchise to Portland, Maine's Cumberland County Civic Center. Wood served as President and General Manager of the Portland Pirates, who began play in the fall of 1993. Maine hockey fans embraced the return of AHL hockey and the Pirates rewarded them with a charmed season, winning the Calder Cup during their first year in the city.

The Pirates are still going strong nearly twenty years later, albeit under different ownership (Tom Ebright passed away in 1997). Barely remembered today is a short-lived experiment that Ebright and Wood made with professional roller hockey shortly after arriving in Portland. Their New England Stingers franchise played a single campaign in Roller Hockey International, a summer league that attempted to capitalize on the growth of inline skating and hockey in the United States in the early 1990's.

Wood continues to live and work in Portland, where he has served as CEO of the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce since 1998.

Godfrey Wood spoke with Fun While It Lasted about Roller Hockey International on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

*Interview begins after the jump*

**FWiL:**

How did you come to meet Tom and Joyce Ebright and get involved with pro hockey's return to Portland, Maine?

**Wood:**

Tom and Joyce had a daughter in college in Nashville, and she was an intern for the Nashville Knights hockey team I owned there. They liked the way we ran the business and the fan experience and asked me to help them relocate their Baltimore AHL franchise to a better market. Portland was an obvious choice.

**FWiL:**

What was the impetus for purchasing a Roller Hockey International franchise for Portland in March 1994, shortly after launching the Pirates?

**Wood:**

I knew the league's founders and we believed we could translate our marketing success with the AHL hockey team into a summer sport.

**FWiL:**

Do you recall what the expansion fee was to join RHI?

**Wood:**

I think \$20,000 but whatever it was in retrospect was too high!

**FWiL:**

The Stingers seemed like a summertime extension of the Pirates, from the ownership to the coaching staff of Barry Trotz and Paul Gardner, to the players themselves. What was the players' view of the inline game? Did they approach it seriously, or was it viewed as a form of offseason conditioning for "real hockey"?

**Wood:**

I think the players genuinely liked the sport, and it was good summer conditioning as well.

**FWiL:**

Roller Hockey International had national ambitions. There was an ESPN contract and, unlike the Pirates, the Stingers had to fly across the country to play big city opponents. Was it a challenge to align RHI's model with the realities of a small market like Portland?

**Wood:**

It was extremely expensive to travel the team, particularly given summer airfares. Sponsorship was moderate, and I was concerned we were cannibalizing the hockey team's sponsors.

**FWiL:**

Did the launch of the Portland Sea Dogs minor league baseball team that same summer push the Stingers out of the spotlight in Portland?

**Wood:**

No, we were never really in the spotlight.

**FWiL:**

You pulled the Stingers out of RHli in March 1995, right around the time your old WHA colleague Howard Baldwin shut down his Pittsburgh RHI franchise. Pittsburgh had drawn some large crowds the previous season. What were the circumstances surrounding your decision to shut down? Is it a coincidence that experienced hockey operators like you, Tom Ebright and Howard Baldwin lost patience with RHI so quickly (and at the same time) or was there a philosophical divide about the business model?

**Wood:**

The decision to cease was easy. We incurred huge operating losses and the fan support was just not there. Tom and I had no disagreement about the business model. Quite simply it was flawed. Too many costs going to support the league and its founders, and apparently not attractive to hockey fans.

**FWiL:**

Do you care to recall what the operating loss was for the one season of Stingers roller hockey in Portland?

**Wood:**

Yes, we lost almost \$300,000 which is an awful lot of money in a short season of not many games!

**FWiL:**

As a long-time ice hockey player and executive, what was your personal take on inline hockey as a spectator sport? Did you find it equally exciting?

**Wood:**

Nothing compares to ice hockey. We had no idea how difficult it would be to convince Mainers that they should watch an indoor sport when they have waited so long for summer, boating, golf and beaches! Frankly, even giving away tickets (that got used) was hard.

Copyright © 2011 - Andy Crossley. All rights reserved.