

Fun While it Lasted

For this week's *Breaking Into Sports* interview, we connected with **Peter Wilt**. Peter's name is synonymous with professional soccer in the Midwestern cities of Chicago and Milwaukee. Thanks to the wonders of the internet, Peter also has something of a cult following among hard-core soccer fans nationwide, particularly leaders and admirers of Supporters group culture, which Wilt has consistently cultivated in his various front office roles. For the past quarter century, Wilt has worked at the highest levels of the men's, women's and indoor games in American professional soccer, highlighted by his eight-year run as founding President and General Manager of Major League Soccer's Chicago Fire from 1997 to 2005.

But enough about soccer. Today we are interested in ice hockey, specifically the Milwaukee Admirals of the International Hockey League where Wilt started his sports career as a PR assistant in 1983.

In the 1990's, the IHL would morph into a major market league that stretched from Orlando to Winnipeg, with NBA ownership groups and \$100,000/year contracts. When Wilt signed on for \$100 a week in 1983, the league was a still a hard-scrabble Midwestern bus league, operating out of frosty barns in cities like Kalamazoo and Muskegon.

It was, as Wilt recalls, "the best experience ever" and a place to learn every facet of the business and lifestyle of professional sports.

Peter Wilt spoke to Fun While It Lasted about the Milwaukee Admirals and the International Hockey League on December 30th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

Can you tell me how you landed your first job with the Admirals in 1983?

Wilt:

While I was in school at Marquette, I actually had two jobs in sports. One, I was an usher for the Milwaukee Brewers for five years from 1978 to 1983. And then I was sports reporter for *United Press International* covering the Bucks and Marquette and high school basketball during the same period.

After I graduated, I couldn't find a job. For about eight months I was working on a book which was really a way to stall things and convince my mother to continue sending me money for rent. It was a book about the history of trades in baseball. Anyway, I then got a notice in the mail from the Assistant Dean of the journalism school at Marquette who was helping me try to find a job.

It was a notice for a general assignment reporter at the Kankakee, Illinois newspaper and I had zero interest in it. But, serendipitously, on the back was a job notice for the Milwaukee Admirals of the International Hockey League hiring a PR assistant. So I said to myself, I don't want to go to Kankakee, but the Admirals job is exactly the type of job that I am looking for.

I called up several times and eventually got an interview with **Phil Witliff**, the Admirals GM. Phil was really curious about my usher's job at the Brewers. And I finally figured out that he wanted to see if I could sneak him into baseball games at the Brewers. A couple of weeks went by and I got the job. I think they interviewed about ten people and they only offered about \$100 a week before taxes. I suspect I got the job because I was the only person willing to work for that little money plus I had the potential to sneak the General Manager into Brewers games. I'm sure he was disappointed when I quit the Brewers job a couple of months later and took away his opportunity to sneak into County Stadium.

It was a jack-of-all-trades position, which was exactly what I needed because I didn't go to sports management school. That barely existed as a concept when I was in school. I was a sports junkie. I kind of knew the business from observations and from ushering with the Brewers. I was a bit of a pen pal with Chicago White Sox owner **Bill Veeck** when I was in high school. I had the strong desire to go into the business, but I didn't have the formal training. With the Admirals, which was a very small organization of seven employees at the time, I really got the opportunity to learn the business from the ground up.

I had a great boss named **Mike Wojciechowski** who was the Admirals' Director of Sales and Marketing. He taught me everything about the business. The main part of the job - even though it said PR assistant - was really ticket sales. Surprise, surprise. I did season ticket sales, group ticket sales, but I also wrote the program, proofed it, sold the ads, dealt with the printer, and so on. I did operations, community relations, dressed as various mascots...you name it.

FWiL:

I had much the same experience. I was a PR director in independent baseball and it was *exactly* what you are describing.

Wilt:

It was the best experience ever.

My favorite part of the job was every Tuesday I got to drive up to the owner's house with the bag of checks and have him sign them. The reason it was my favorite part of the job was that the owner of the Admirals was one of my boyhood heroes, a member of the National Hockey League Hall of Fame as a radio announcer, a guy named **Lloyd Pettit**.

My second or third year there he won the Foster Hewitt Award for his career achievements in hockey broadcasting and was inducted to the Hall of Fame. It was so cool. We told him we were going to honor him by giving him a plaque and drop the first puck of the game for the opening game <in 1986>. What we didn't tell him was that we were sneaking into town **Bobby Hull** and **Stan Mikita** from the Chicago Blackhawks teams of the 1960's and 1970's and he was just as much a part of those teams as Bobby and Stan as the broadcaster. And we were also working to sell out that home opener, which was back then unheard of for the Admirals playing in the MECCA Arena, which was about 9,000 seats.

I got to shepherd Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita before the game and keep them away from Mr. Pettit so that it would be a surprise for him when Bobby and Stan followed him out on to the ice. To this day, that was one of the thrills of my career to be able to be there and help surprise Mr. Pettit on that day.

FWiL:

What surprised you the most about the industry once you peeked behind the curtain and saw how the business really operated?

Wilt:

Well, that's a wonderful question, but I'm not sure I can answer it honestly because it was so long ago and it's hard to remember my expectations.

But I guess what may have been a surprise was how professional sports becomes a lifestyle more than a job. I had thought it would be a job, similar to how being an architect or a lawyer would be a job. But once you're in it, you realize it's not. If you're going to do it well, it's a lifestyle - something you are going to throw yourself into.

FWiL:

Here's something that surprised me. I remember very well a conversation I had with my GM during my first year in sports. He was a very promotional guy - he had been a mascot for the Louisville Cardinals back in the 1980's when they were the first minor league team to draw a million fans. So he appreciated the entertainment aspect.

A year before I got into sports, I read this article on an in-flight magazine about a promotion called "Birth Night" run by a minor league baseball team in Lowell, Massachusetts. They brought all of these women who were eight or nine months pregnant to the park and there was a contest to see who would give birth first. The implication was that it would happen at the game that night and they had ambulances ringing the field, ready to whisk them off to the hospital. They tracked the women after the game and the one who had the first baby got a lifetime supply of Pampers or something.

That promotion probably happened in 1998 or '99 and it still gets written about to this day in New England. So I was talking to my GM in 2001 and I really viewed myself as an idea man and I wanted to come up with something as good as Birth Night for our team. My big misperception about the sports industry was that I was just convinced that that's how teams sold out games in the minor league.

And I remember Billy Johnson saying to me: "Well, you know the Lowell Spinners probably sold about 13 tickets because of that promotion. That's not why they sellout. Now it helps them in the future because of the publicity that they get and it keeps them in the public eye and it helps them develop a reputation. But they sold out that game because they have a great sales operation."

And I was dumbfounded by that! I really thought that the man with the best ideas won. And if there was a team that was struggling, it was just because they didn't have the power of my brain behind them yet.

Wilt:

<Laughing> That's a great point. That's something that is very common with outsiders. They don't realize how much of sports below the Major League level is all about manufacturing an audience through sales efforts. You've got to have a sales machine and it's not really about gimmicks, it's about being organized, working hard, being diligent and have sales ability within your staff.

FWiL:

When you got to the Admirals in the mid-80's, where did you think they stood on the totem pole of Milwaukee sports at that time?

Wilt:

The only team below them was the Milwaukee Wave indoor soccer team that started in 1984. In Milwaukee, you had the Packers, the Bucks, the Brewers, Marquette and the Badgers over in Madison that were all bigger deals.

Interesting thing about the Admirals - we were maybe the only pro team in history to have five beer sponsors. This was back when Milwaukee was truly a brewery city. We had Pabst, Budweiser, Schlitz, Miller and Old Style. We only averaged about 3,500 a game at the MECCA Arena. The Bucks were playing there at the same time and selling out just about every game at about 11,000 fans a game. And we were selling more beer each night than the Bucks!

FWiL:

Speaking of beer drinking, how important was fighting to the fan base of the IHL back in those days.

Wilt:

It's an interesting question. Mr. and Mrs. Pettit were vocally against fighting. They were vocal leaders publicly against fighting in hockey. Which was ironic because Mr. Pettit was the best play-by-play man for hockey fights that I have ever heard. He was a great fight announcer but he deplored fighting.

I think that translated a bit to our players and we they didn't fight perhaps as much as other teams. It was probably still more than in the NHL, but less fighting than the East Coast Hockey League.

Most of our guys back then had almost no hopes of an NHL career, except for the one year we were the Chicago Blackhawks top farm team. That was hilarious. I think it was 1984-85 and we were the only team in the IHL with a top farm team designation of an NHL team. Every other team was either

independent or a secondary farm team. At the beginning of the season the other teams were all pissed off that we got this affiliation with the Blackhawks and they said, "Well, we'll just give you the Turner Cup right now".

In reality, it was a seven-team league that year and six of the teams made the playoffs. We were the only team that didn't make it. We were so bad. The Blackhawks only gave us like 16 players. When we had injuries we would have games where only 13 guys suited up. Plus, they were awful. We had some really bad players. **Darren Pang**, the future Blackhawks goalie and ESPN broadcaster, was one of the few bright spots. He was our goalie and he played practically the whole year.

FWiL:

Independent team get to focus on winning, while top farm clubs have to focus on development.

Wilt:

Yeah, that was a big part of it. Beyond that, winning for the most part doesn't matter at that level. It's like minor league baseball. The fans aren't coming to see you win or lose. There just coming for entertainment. It's a social event. It's a group sale.

That fact that we lost probably didn't affect our attendance one way or another. Where it did affect it though is that the Admirals had players who had spent five or six years in Milwaukee, which is an eternity for any minor league sport. And then when the Blackhawks came in, every one of them was gone and replaced by transient players. And that took away from the experience of the hard core Admirals fan, who knew the players on the ice and off the ice.

FWiL:

Who were some of the more memorable or outsized personalities who were involved in the IHL in that era?

Wilt:

Bill Beagan was the owner of the Toledo Goaldiggers. During the Turner Cup championship series against the Admirals in 1983 he got in a fist fight with my future boss, Mike Wojciechowski in the press box. Two writers from Milwaukee traveled to the game at the Toledo Sports Arena. The press box was full so they went and sat in a radio booth, which apparently doubled as Beagan's private box. Beagan kicked them out, Wojo went to talk to him about it, one thing led to another and Beagan punched him out, gave him a black eye. There was charges filed, lawsuits - it got ugly. And Beagan had been the Commissioner of

the league at one point!

The Admirals had a player named **Barry Scully** and we traded him. I drove him to the airport. Back then there was no security. We were late for the plane and I was trying to get him to run, but he refused. And he also refused to get onto a propeller plane. He kept saying to me 'this isn't a propeller plane is it'? And he finally got to the gate agent and demanded to know if they were trying to put him on a propeller plane. And the agent looked at him with a straight face and said 'No, it's a turbo prop'. And that calmed him down and he didn't realize a turbo prop and a propeller plane were the same thing until it was basically too late.

Then there was **Danny Lecours**. He was a five-foot nothin' Frenchman who was a superstar at the IHL level. He scored 75 goals one year in the IHL! He could never get a call up to the NHL because of his size. Great guy. And his career basically ended because of the Black Hawks affiliation. He had scored 57 goals for the Admirals the year before the Blackhawks came in, but they didn't want him.

His wife Jan was from Milwaukee and had a good nursing job in the city, so he couldn't really relocate to another city. So he ended up getting a construction job building the Bradley Center, the new arena in Milwaukee. The Bradley Center was built with money donated by Jane and Lloyd Pettit, the Admirals' owners. What a lot of people don't realize is that it was built as a hockey building. They wanted an NHL expansion team, but once they saw the going price they lost interest. Not that they didn't have the money, but they just didn't think it was a good investment and they kept the Admirals instead.

But Danny Lecours went from a star player on the Admirals to literally building the new arena for his team.

FWiL:

If Lloyd Pettit was a former NHL hockey broadcaster, how was he also a multi-millionaire?

Wilt:

He married well. Jane Pettit was originally Jane Bradley and she was an heiress to the Allen Bradley corporation, which was sold to Rockwell Automation for \$1.6 billion in 1985.

FWiL:

You mentioned that Mike Wojciechowski was your mentor at the Admirals. What lessons did you take from Mike - or self taught lessons perhaps - that you have applied in your subsequent jobs in the sports industry?

Wilt:

In general, the lessons I learned from Wojo were about how it all revolves around sales. He essentially told me to follow the money.

Later on in my career I was working with the Milwaukee Wave indoor soccer team. I had an opportunity to move to the Cleveland Crunch of the Major Indoor Soccer League for a pure public relations position for considerably more money. And I turned it down because it didn't have a sales aspect to it. I remembered that Wojo told me that to grow in sports, you need to be tied to the revenue stream.

The reason I left the Admirals in 1987 was that I had nowhere to move up in the organization. The only logical job for me to take was Wojo's and it didn't seem like he was going anywhere. And I was right. That was 1987 and now it is 2011 and he is still there!

And, of course he taught me that sports was entertainment. There was a year when we tried to have a mascot for every single game, beyond the Admirals normal mascot. One or both of us would dress up almost every game. If *Disney On Ice* or *Sesame Street Live* was coming we would get the costumes shipped in advance and borrow a couple. For President's day I dressed up as Abraham Lincoln and he dressed up as George Washington and we had him pop out of a birthday cake at center ice. My dad was a Lincoln-o-phile and I think his proudest moment during my career was seeing my out on the ice dressed as Abe Lincoln refereeing the Pee Wee hockey game between periods.

FWiL:

Last question. Later in your career, you've been in a position to provide a lot of first jobs into the sports industry. What are some things you consistently look for in a job seeker trying to get their foot in the door and conversely what are a few red flags that a job seeker might put out that would cost them an opportunity to work for a Peter Wilt organization?

Wilt:

For better or worse, when I interview people I know within two minutes if I want to hire them. The rest of it is a song and dance to justify their time with me.

The things I look for are personality, character, intelligence, desire. To delve a little deeper, experience is important. I really don't care about are education.

As far as red flags, I don't like Notre Dame grads and I don't like attorneys. I hate getting resumes from attorneys who are convinced that they are ready for a life altering experience and job and I'll be fortunate to hire them. You get a lot of those. I'd rather have a hungry 22-year old than a fat and sassy 35-year old.

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