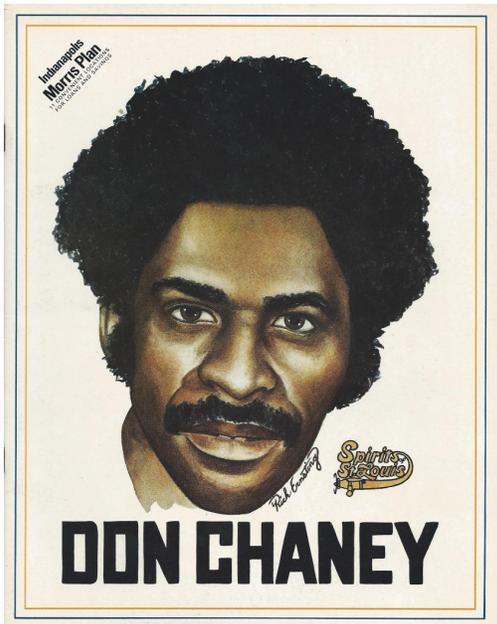


Fun While it Lasted

Rich Ernsting is a painter and photographer who, for one winter in the mid-1970's, served as the house artist for the Indiana Pacers of the American Basketball Association and the Indianapolis Racers of the World Hockey Association. The 1970's was arguably the Golden Era of the game day program, before the advent of digital printing and graphic design software, when many clubs produced thick, magazine-style publications and commissioned local artists to create a unique look and feel for the team.



We came across several Rich Ernsting Pacers and Racers program covers recently and went looking for the artist. We were happy to discover that Rich is still active today (although he has turned his focus to photography) and he was willing to answer our questions about his days as a sports artist for hire.

Rich Ernsting spoke to *Fun While It Lasted* on October 20th, 2012.

Interview begins after the jump

FWiL:

How did you land the gig designing the program art for the Indiana Pacers and Indianapolis Racers during the 1975-76 season? You must have been rather young at the time.

Ernsting:

I had a business partner at the time. Tina Marconi. She would find business for me and we split the profit.

FWiL:

Can you describe the process of creating these illustrations? What materials did you use?

Ernsting:

The Pacers and the Racers would tell me who they wanted featured on the covers and would supply me with several photos from which I would do the paintings.

They were all watercolor paintings on heavy watercolor paper. I basically had freedom of design to come up with whatever. If they didn't like any of them, they never told me. It was a lot of fun, but also tough because I had a full-time job at Herff Jones in Indianapolis. I didn't get much sleep in those days.

FWiL:

Did your subjects ever sit for you or did you always work off of photographs?

Ernsting:

No players ever sat for me. It was always from photographs. I was very busy working on these very late at night and then off to Herff Jones at 7:30 AM each morning. It certainly wasn't easy, but I did get a lot of enjoyment out of doing these covers.

I wasn't really a big hockey fan, but I was a huge Pacers fan. A friend of mine and I saw most home games, sometimes for free with mid-court seats. There was nothing like the old ABA Pacers. They were so exciting.

Roger Brown was my favorite player. I'm very disappointed that he isn't in the Hall of Fame. It's too bad the ABA didn't get the recognition it deserved. The type of basketball they played back then was much more exciting than the games of today. Bob "Slick" Leonard was great! Neto, Mel, Freddie and the whole gang were terrific!

FWiL:

Do you recall if there were any players that were particularly fun or challenging to paint? What were some of your favorite covers?

Ernsting:

I liked the Billy Keller cover and Roger Brown as well. The coach of the Indianapolis Racers and a couple of their players. There were several I thought really turned out good. There were also a few that weren't so good, sometimes because I was just so tired. It was a pretty hectic schedule I was on. Not enough hours in a day.

I never got to meet any players but just being able to see them play from good seats was good enough for me.

FWiL:

What are you up to these days?

Ernsting:

Right now I go all over the country and photograph university campuses and make the photos into collages. I've been to over 700 colleges in 48 states. I visit every school and walk and photograph the entire campus. I want to make a nice classy college remembrance piece. I offer these in three sizes, matted in school colors with option framing. My website is www.richtraditionsart.com.