

Fun While it Lasted

Every once in a while we get an interview subject here in the Fun While It Lasted archives who has little need for me to ask many questions. I can pretty much just let the tape roll while these artful and prolific storytellers spin their tales. It's fun and it's easy - I imagine this is what it was like for rock writers to interview David Lee Roth back in the day. Such was the case with long-time Southern sports promoter Rudi Schiffer when I tracked him down in Tennessee last month.

"They called me 'The Undertaker'," Schiffer told me by way of introduction. "Because I buried so many teams. When I walked in the door, people said 'Uh-oh...we're done'".

Across Schiffer's four decade career in pro sports, there were hits and there were misses. Schiffer promoted a string of sold out NFL exhibitions in Memphis, introduced the sport of indoor soccer to sold-out crowds in the Deep South, and promoted one of the most popular franchises of the United States Football League, helping to sell 25,000 season tickets as Vice President of Marketing for the Memphis Showboats in 1985. Misfires included Schiffer's efforts to promote a basketball league for short men in Nashville and to launch a Canadian Football League expansion team...in Shreveport, Louisiana.

Along the way Schiffer encountered assorted crazies and banked many tall tales (and pointed lessons) about promoting pro sports out on the margins of public awareness.

Today, Schiffer is in his seventies, semi-retired, living in Memphis and keeping busy as "The Voice of Tunica", a long-time commentator on and promoter of the gaming industry in and around Tunica, Mississippi. He is the lead columnist for *Jackpot! Magazine* and the producer and co-host of the The Goodtimes Radio Show, heard for years on WMC AM out of Memphis and streamed online at audiovegas.com. In his own words:

"I smoke cigars, gamble, drink fine scotch and watch EVERY Red Sox game on cable here in Memphis. Hate the friggin' Yankees. I'm teaching my four-and-a-half year old grand son to play soccer. Life is good."

Rudi Schiffer spoke with Fun While It Lasted about his life in sports on February 2, 2012.

FWiL:

Where did you get your start in pro sports?

Schiffer:

A soccer team called the Connecticut Yankees. I had a small PR & marketing firm in Simsbury, Connecticut in the early Seventies. I was looking for clients and saw that a soccer team was coming to play in Hartford. The Yankees were owned by a guy named **Bob Kratzer**, who owned a machine shop in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He was a tough little German who played soccer and wanted to have his own team.

We played at Dillon Stadium in Hartford. Kratzer recruited all kinds of players that he got out of the local leagues, mostly foreign-born players. We used to have workouts and they would come in and inevitably say: "*I play feerst dee-vee-zhion een my country.*" We used to laugh - everybody played first division in their country. We had a few American guys thrown in there who played for **Joe Morrone**, the Head Coach at UCONN.

Morrone fancied himself the Czar of Soccer in Connecticut. He had a lot of success there. Even though he was a college coach, he tried to run everything. Demanded tickets for our games. He was a pain in the ass, but we dealt with him because we had to. I think we was the state commissioner for the United States Soccer Federation or something.

Some of the memorable stories for the Yankees...we were playing on the road in Pittsburgh once and they shut the lights out and locked us in after the match. We had to climb the fence to get out.

Another time we were in Cleveland and we stayed at the hotel where they had the state convention for "Parents Without Partners". I don't know if you know anything about them, but they're mostly single ladies looking for a husband by any means. We got back to the hotel and the players were filing down the hallway disappearing into doorways left and right. We had a hell of a time getting them out of the bed in the morning and getting them on the plane.

You know, like any team of that type, you become chief cook and bottle washer. I took tickets at the gate, got the laundry done, wrote press releases. It was good basic training actually. That led to me joining the Hartford Bicentennials, a rival team that played in the same town.

FWiL:

This was the Bicentennials of the North American Soccer League, the league that had just signed Pele and brought him to the United States, right?

Schiffer:

Yeah. The Bicentennials were owned by **Bob Darling**, who I knew from Simsbury. Our kids played soccer together. Darling was a nice guy, but kind of naïve. He was very wealthy and he wanted to own a soccer team.

The first year of the Bicentennials was the year **Pele** signed with the New York Cosmos. We hosted the Cosmos at Dillon Stadium in Hartford which was just a rundown place. I mean, I'd go in the locker room and all we had for lockers was a peg on the wall. Pele was in there with his clothes on the peg and must have been wondering "What the hell is this all about?" That was the first big crowd we had.

Darling picked that Bicentennials name in 1975 because 1976 was going to be the American bicentennial, right? I said: "What about after 1976? What are we gonna be then? The 19-seventy-seven-tennials?"

It was a terrible name. Not much meaning to it and too long to fit in headlines. So we became known as the "Bi's" in the papers, which I didn't care for because it sounded like the team was bi-sexual. But you know, having been around professional sports all these years and around so many different teams with terrible names, by the second year it just becomes accepted. It just falls into the common usage and people forget what a terrible name you have.

In 1977 the team moved from Hartford to go play in the Yale Bowl, which is a cavernous old 1920's thick concrete stadium down at Yale in New Haven. We used to cut the grass so high in the Yale Bowl that the other teams had trouble playing. It was like two or three inches high. We did that deliberately.

One time we were playing the Los Angeles Aztecs in New Haven and they had a bunch of foreign stars including **Georgie Best**. They came into town early in the week and were staying at a motel about ten miles away. Our Head Coach **Malcolm Musgrove** says "Rudi, go over there and see what they're doing." I went over and sat around the pool for most of the week and they were just drinking themselves to death and sneaking out every night, you know?

I came back and told Musgrove “Coach, we’ll kill these guys. They won’t be able to make the second half. They’re all drunk!” They beat us 5-3. Musgrove said “You should have found out what kind of whiskey they were drinking.”

The Bicentennials eventually didn’t make it, but by then I wanted to stay in the North American Soccer League. I had fallen in love with it.

FWiL:

So what was the next stop for you?

Schiffer:

I abandoned my PR business in Connecticut. I wound up in Memphis where there was a NASL expansion club going in, the Memphis Rogues. I flew down to Tennessee around New Year’s 1978 and met the guy who was running it - **Bill Marcum**. Marcum was from Tampa, where he helped get the NFL to expand there in 1976. He convinced a guy named **Harry Mangurian**, who was a horse breeder and owned the Buffalo Braves of the NBA, that he should buy the soccer team in Memphis.

So Harry Mangurian threw in with this guy Marcum, who was a four flusher, and sent him to Memphis to set the team up. Marcum hired me on New Year’s Eve for the Rogues marketing and PR job, but he was drunk. When I called him a couple days later to get my airplane ticket, he’d forgotten who I was. Which gives you a hint of what was to come.

I finally got down to Memphis and I didn’t have any money. I think Marcum paid me about \$15,000 a year. I didn’t have any money to live or get a car, so I stayed with Marcum and I’d ride to work with him every day. He was so absent minded that we’d run out of gas all the time because he’d never look at the odometer. I’d be sitting around the apartment and the lights would go out because he forgot to pay the bill. I had nothing to do except he had these huge boxes in his closet - he had every *Playboy* that was ever printed, which he carried around with him. Which made for good reading. Sitting there in the dark reading *Playboys*.

We put together a team and I brought in some of the old guys I’d had at the Connecticut Bicentennials. Great guys like **Hughie O’Neill**, **Henry McCully**, **Roman Russell** and a goalkeeper named **Eugene DuChateau**. They were single, American guys who just wanted to play and we didn’t have to pay them very much.

DuChateau was 6' 5" and he was kind of raw. One time back in Connecticut we were playing the Seattle Sounders and they had **Geoff Hurst** who had scored the hat trick for England when they beat Germany in the 1966 World Cup final. The game was tied late. A long cross comes into the middle and Hurst comes in and out leaps Eugene at 6' 5" to pump in the winning goal. I said: "Eugene, you gotta learn how to get those high crosses." I made a deal to send him to Hong Kong in the off season to play for a Chinese team. He sent me a letter and said "Rudi, I'm doing great. I'm getting every head ball." I wrote back and said "You better be. All those players are about 5' 6"!"

The Rogues were out of control. In Memphis I was constantly getting calls from the police to come down and get the boys out of jail. We had a theme song called "The Rambling Rogues of Memphis". The theme of the song was *Off the field and on the field, we're the Rambling Rogues*. The English players in particular were just wild.

I was a young guy then. Well, I wasn't that young. We had parties all the time. I got close to the players, which was a mistake, but I didn't give a damn. We were in last place, we had no money, the lowest budget in the league. Harry Mangurian was tight as a drum. Our total budget for 18 guys was \$365,000.

The biggest moment in Memphis Rogues history - and one of the best in soccer history, really - was when the Cosmos came to town with that All-World Cup team of theirs...Beckenbauer, Chinaglia, Carlos Alberto. They came down here just expecting to beat the hell out of us. It was the Rogues first season and we were something like 1-10 at the time. What the Cosmos didn't realize was that the Liberty Bowl pitch was only 56 yards wide. It wasn't the 70 yards that they were used to. We packed it up in the back and just played defense and frustrated 'em. They were getting angry. We had an English player named **Phil Holder** who was about 5' 6". Carlos Alberto was so frustrated he came up kicked Phil right in the groin and got thrown out. Late in the game, we had a young kid from Chelsea named **David Stride**. Speedy kid with a great left foot. The key of the game was Stridey took off down the left wing, took it deep in the corner, and crossed it into the middle. At the top of the box was **Tony Field** who had played for the Cosmos the year before. They didn't want him any more and we got him in a trade. He put a one-timer right in the back of the net and we beat the Cosmos 1-0. It was shocking.

On the road I was constantly getting players out of trouble. **Eddie McCreadie** was our coach the first year. Eddie was a piece of work. A former Scottish international who became famous as a player and later as a manager at Chelsea. One time I got a call from Harry Mangurian who said "Rudi, go find Eddie McCreadie. He's in England scouting. I don't know where he is, but I keep getting bills on my American Express." So I went to London looking for McCreadie and I finally found him in a bar. He was a

professional drinker. He'd have a Bacardi and Coke before every game. He'd ask me to go drink with him before the game and I'd get to the game half in the bag. I found him in London and brought him home - we never got any players from that trip. He was a tough coach. I liked him. He was cool.

FWiL:

What was it like working for Harry Mangurian?

Schiffer:

Well, Harry really never did want to own a soccer team. Bill Marcum talked him into it. Harry had a lot of money. Harry owned the Buffalo Braves and later the Boston Celtics and he had like 30,000 buildings in Florida, three or four jets. He was tight with a buck. He probably fired me fifteen times, accused me of stealing from him and so on. He called me once and said "Rudi, how many glasses of beer do you get out of a barrel at the stadium?". I said "It must be sixty, Harry." He told me, "Well, you're only getting fifty eight. Are you stealing from me?" Then he sent me a special pump he found that would pump out the last couple glasses at the bottom of a keg.

He always hired me back the next day after he fired me. He said "You're like a pogo stick that keeps bouncing back up." We had a relationship that was kind of fun.

One time they wouldn't let him and his wife up at the elevator at the Liberty Bowl. They didn't know who he was because he never came to games. His wife turned to him and said "Harry, why don't sell the team?" He sold the team that fall.

But when the season was over and Mangurian was done, I got a call from his right hand man. He says "Rudi, why don't you come down to Florida? Harry wants to play golf with you." So they fly me down to his place in Boca Raton. He had this beautiful, immaculate white house on the beach. We're playing golf, coming up on the 17th fairway. Harry turns to me and says "Rudi, how'd you like to go back up to Boston with the Celtics." I says "What?!" He knew I grew up in Boston and was a Celtics fan.

He says "Yeah, that son of a bitch **Red Auerbach** is stealing from me." Everybody was stealing from Harry! He was paranoid.

I said "Harry, I can't go to Boston." I mean, Red Auerbach was the living legend. He was surrounded by a coterie of four or five guys known as the Irish mafia guys. I said "I can't go to Boston and watch Auerbach! Are you kidding me? They're going to know what I'm up to. They're going to hand me a pencil and tell me to sit in the corner and shut up. Either that, or they're going to walk me down to the Mystic River with a pair of cement shoes on!"

That wasn't going to happen. Auerbach was the boss. He ran the show. He ran it when Walter Brown owned the team and when Harry was there and when all the guys after Mangurian owned it. He was carved in stone there.

FWiL:

Did you find that promoting soccer in the Deep South was a different ball of wax than it was up in New England?

Schiffer:

Yeah. You didn't have the foreign guys playing in their own amateur leagues down here so much. The Rogues really never got credit for this, but the Rogues really became the force for energizing the growth of soccer in the region, which is thriving today. The Rogues did so many clinics and so much work with the kids. Those kids grew up and became youth coaches and then their kids played the game. That was one thing we left behind, was a legacy for youth soccer.

FWiL:

So what finally happened to the Rogues?

Schiffer:

Mangurian sold the Rogues to **Avron Fogelman**, who owned the Memphis Chicks baseball team. It ran a couple more years, but Fogelman got sick of it losing money. So Fogelman sold it in 1980 to **Nelson Skalbania** who was a wealthy, wild entrepreneur who wanted to move it to Calgary. Skalbania wanted it because his buddy **Peter Pocklington** owned the Edmonton Drillers in the league and he wanted to compete with him.

We went to Vancouver for the NASL league meetings in 1980. I'm sitting next to Fogelman, but I had already talked to Skalbania. I told him "I want to come north with team and I can help you." He said OK. So we're sitting there at this big horseshoe table. The league had taken a stance that it didn't want to expand and bring in these new cities anymore. So they took a vote on the sale and it went right around the table and right down to the last vote. The tiebreaker was the Vancouver Whitecaps. Vancouver wanted a team in Calgary because they wanted more local competition. Fogelman was sitting there shaking like a leaf - he was so nervous I thought he was gonna fall apart at the table right in front of me. **Herb Capozzi** was the owner of the Whitecaps - he was a great owner - and he voted yes so Calgary was in. So the NASL Commissioner **Phil Woosnam** says "Well, Mr. Fogelman you can go out in the lobby

and bring in Mr. Skalbania.”

Fogelman was kind of a tough guy with everybody. A dictatorial owner and boss. That’s the way he ran his businesses - basically scared a lot of people. Little Napoleon. So Fogelman says “Well, Skalbania, you’ve got the team for a million bucks.”

I had already coached Skalbania. I told him to ask for the indoor soccer carpet, which costs about a hundred grand, plus all the equipment and the vans and everything. I told him how bad Fogelman wanted to get rid of it. So Skalbania says “Well, Avron, I want all the equipment too.” Fogelman says “Oh no. You got to pay extra for that.”

Skalbania told him “Oh yeah? You can stick it up your tuckus. You want the equipment? Keep the whole team!”

Fogelman blanched. He turned white - and he gave it to him.

Avron was a good businessman - he was tough as hell. Nobody beat Avron. Well, he got beat this day because Skalbania never paid him. Nelson gave Avron a hundred thousand dollars down and never paid him the rest of the million bucks.

Fogelman’s bag man **Dean Jernigan** called me up in Calgary when I was working for Skalbania and said “Hey Rudi, can you help us get that money?” I said “Sure, the way you guys treated me? I’d be glad to.” He never got the money, needless to say.

FWiL:

Skalbania had a big sports empire at the start of the 80’s. He had the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League, the Calgary Flames in the NHL and now he had the Memphis Rogues, which became the Calgary Boomers in the fall of 1980. It wasn’t too long afterwards that he was on verge of bankruptcy and it all came down...

Schiffer:

He also had the triple-A baseball team in Vancouver. But his problems didn’t start that year <1980>. When he bought the soccer team, he was flying high. He was a flipper. He was a seismology engineer by training, but his business was flipping properties. I went his office in Vancouver once and he had a bunch of guys sitting around on the phone and they were flipping properties. You buy something in the morning for \$100,000 and sell it in the afternoon for \$150,000. I saw a list of all his properties going for millions of dollars. That was going pretty well, but the suddenly the interest rates in Canada went up 14 of 15% - some God-awful figure - and he was living on the margin with borrowed money. All of these balls he had in the air came tumbling down.

He had to get rid of the Boomers in 1981 and he sold the franchise to his buddy Peter Pocklington, who owned the Edmonton Drillers and wanted some of our players. I sat in between them while they passed a legal pad back and forth. These guys were horse trading. Pocklington would say I want such and such players. Skalbania would write down "I want your Lear jet." Pocklington would write back "I want your condos in Mexico." Finally they signed it and I witnessed it. It was craziness.

The next week I called Pocklington to see if I could go work to him. Pocklington said "Well, I'm not gonna buy the team." I said "Whaddaya mean? You already signed the deal!" We had done the deal at the <1981> NASL league meetings in Toronto. Pocklington says that in Ontario if you sign a deal on a Sunday it doesn't hold water. So the team folded and the players were dispersed all over the world.

FWiL:

Did Skalbania's financial problems affect the day-to-day operations of the Boomers team that year?

Schiffer:

Well, it was tough. He was going into bankruptcy. I showed up one day and the office was locked. I finally got in and some lawyers came in and took my desk away, told me we were shut down. He got it open again maybe a week later, paid somebody off, and we hung on to the end of the season.

We had already done a season ticket drive for the 1980-81 NASL indoor season. I had \$114,000 dollars in ticket deposits and league playoff money in the bank that only I could sign for. When the team finally went down, I wasn't going to send it back to Skalbania. He actually owed me a year's salary on agreement, so I could have taken \$65,000 out of that with no hit to my conscience at all. But I thought I wanted to stay in soccer and you do something like that, you'll never get another job.

So I went down to the bank and wrote refund checks to everybody who had paid for season tickets. The league was trying to get the money back and Skalbania was trying to get the money. I gave it all back to the fans and I didn't get anything. I left Canada broke.

That was the end of my soccer career with the Memphis Rogues. Thank God. I wound up going to the Memphis Showboats of the United States Football League later.

FWiL:

Of all of these speculative start-up teams and leagues that you promoted, what do you consider to be the best promotion job you ever did?

Schiffer:

There were a couple. One was the indoor soccer team for the Memphis Rogues. We brought indoor soccer to Memphis when the sport was just starting in this country <in the winter of 1979>. We played at the Mid-South Coliseum. We played indoor soccer there when no one knew anything about it and we sold out every game. We won the Western Division championship and had a heckuva team. We did that with a lot of promotions and it was wild and exciting and everybody loved it. We sold every ticket in the house. But that all faded when the team moved to Canada.

The other was the Memphis Showboats. We brought the team to Memphis. **Logan Young** was a millionaire in Memphis who originally bought the team in 1983. But he fell on tough times and had to sell it and **Billy Dunavant** bought it from him. Billy was a cotton merchant known around the world. I had moved back to Memphis and was working with an advertising agency that had the Showboats account. Billy Dunavant liked me and the work I was doing for the team. He hired me away from the agency and put me back on my feet. Paid me \$50,000 a year, that was good money back in the early 1980's.

We put the team together and got some real good players like **Reggie White** from the University of Tennessee. When the league went bankrupt a couple years later, 18 of our players went to the NFL. It was a decent team.

The second year in this upstart league, we sold 37,000 tickets a game with 25,000 season tickets. All paid. It was very promising, but the league went down.

After the USFL, I did some work for **Fred Smith** who owned Federal Express and **Pepper Rodgers** who had been the Head Coach of the Showboats. Pepper was working with Fred. We staged three NFL exhibition games at the Liberty Bowl in Memphis and we sold all three of them out. We knew the NFL could play in Memphis - it would get the support. But unfortunately the city didn't want to put the money up to build the stadium and the NFL expanded to Jacksonville instead, which had also had a popular USFL team.

FWiL:

In terms of promotion for the Showboats, you guys several big name college stars from the SEC who were relatively local like Reggie White from Tennessee and the quarterback **Walter Lewis** from Alabama. So as a promoter, did you just promote "Great Football" or did you seek out the more offbeat, wacky promotions to get people into the stadium?

Schiffer:

I'm a marketing and PR man by trade. We always looked for something crazy. I remember one time. Reggie White was a naïve young guy out of Tennessee. We had a press conference at the Peabody Hotel to announce we had signed Reggie. We handed him a check for a signing bonus of \$500,000. Here's a kid who grew up poor and had no money and all of a sudden he's got \$500,000.

He promptly went over to a local store called Lansky's for big and tall guys. Lansky Big & Tall. And they locked the door behind him and the salesmen went to work. He ended up buying something like sixty or seven pairs of white socks for \$5,000. And somehow it ended up leaking out that Reggie got taken advantage of. He bought all this stuff that he didn't need. I guess he never had socks. Lansky's was one of our minor sponsors, so now we had a problem. I've got a sponsor on one hand. I've got a player who's been taken advantage on the other hand. I'm the promoter and I'm in the middle. What do I do? The town was all upset about it. A big story in the papers about Reggie being used and so on. A real nasty situation.

So I went to **Bernard Lansky** who was an old promoter himself. I says "Bernard, we've got a problem. You're a sponsor and I respect that. I've got an idea if you go along with it and Reggie goes along with it. We need to defuse this."

We got a radio station involved - Rock 103 - and Lansky's gave us thousands of socks to give away. Pepper Rodgers was fine with it. Reggie's sock - size 15 or whatever. We made a big bundle of these socks that Reggie could twirl around his head as he came out of the tunnel during pre-game introductions. And the crowd went nuts and everything was fine - everybody was happy.

And Pepper took all the credit for the promotion - which is what happens when you have a great promotion. They take all the credit and you get all the blame!

FWiL:

When I first got in touch with you, you introduced yourself by saying "They called me the 'Undertaker'".

Schiffer:

<Laughing> Yeah, I buried so many teams! I buried the Connecticut Yankees, buried the Connecticut Bicentennials, the Memphis Rogues and the Calgary Boomers. I buried the Showboats and the Shreveport Pirates of the Canadian Football League and helped bury the Memphis Mad Dogs. There was another basketball team in there somewhere. When I walked in the door, people said “Uh oh...we’re done.”

These teams just weren’t going to make it. To me, it was just another job. Usually they were under-funded and the owners just didn’t want to be in it. There was a bunch.

FWiL:

So you’ve talked about a bunch of different guys - Harry Mangurian in Memphis of the Gliebermans that owned the Shreveport Pirates - and then you say “Yeah, they never really wanted to own that team.” So what is it? Why do these rich guys end up with these teams that they don’t want?

Schiffer:

Their ego gets them into it through other sources. Like in the case of Bernie Glieberman who owned the Shreveport Pirates in the Canadian Football League, his son Lonie wanted a team. Bill Marcum talked Harry Mangurian into buying the Memphis Rogues. Avron Fogelman’s right hand man Dean Jernigan talked him into buying the Rogues from Mangurian. But they were successful businessmen. Once they got in and saw they weren’t going to make any money, they lost interest. They stuck their toe in the water to see what the temperature was and then they got out of the pool.

Their ego got them into it and the bottom line got them out.