

Fun While it Lasted

Playing careers are not the only improbable dreams chased in the remote outposts of the minor leagues.

In 1998, a young minor league salesman named Chris Ames created an alter ego named The World Famous Monkey Boy. The WFMB was a peanut hurling, Super Soaker toting, break-dancing dynamo in a tattered costume shop bear suit, held together by duct tape and re-purposed to an approximation of the simian form with a cheap plastic monkey mask.

Ames developed the character largely through a series of happy accidents. His manic after-hours impersonation of a co-worker caught the attention of Ames' boss, Billy Johnson, a former minor league mascot himself who was looking for a promotion to liven up the opening weekend debut of his new club, the Nashua Pride. Ames' day job as the Pride's ticket sales manager quickly brought him into contact with Ted Giannoulas (The San Diego Chicken) and Dave Raymond (The original Phillie Phanatic), two icons of character-based entertainment who swung through Nashua on their annual summer circuits of the minor leagues.

By 2001, Ames was working in software sales, but was not finished with Monkey Boy. Using sick days and vacations, he booked himself as a touring act in minor league ballparks around the country, working up the nerve to dive-in full-time in the spring of 2003. In developing his business, Ames would face many of the same challenges as ballplayers toiling in the minor leagues, battling injuries and balancing his love of entertaining with the priorities of raising a family and making a living.

Today, Chris Ames works in information technology in Florida. On July 29th, 2011 he will return to Holman Stadium in Nashua to for an encore performance as the World Famous Monkey Boy for the Nashua Silver Knights of the Futures Collegiate Baseball League.

Chris Ames spoke to Fun While It Lasted about his alter ego, the World Famous Monkey Boy, on July 6th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

You joined the front office of the Nashua Pride for the team's first season in 1998. Was that your first experience in the sports industry?

AMES:

It was the first experience I had working in a sports organization. I had a couple of TV internships working for sports departments, but as far as working for a sports organization, the Pride was my first experience.

FWiL:

How did you learn about it? How did you come to connect with the team?

AMES:

My wife's family is from Nashua. My father-in-law cut out an article from the local newspaper. A guy named Ken Shepard and <Pride owner> Chris English were involved at the time and they had announced in late 1997 that they were bringing a team into Nashua and they were going to be renovating Holman Stadium. I had gone to school for sports communications and decided that this would be a good opportunity for me to get involved.

I put together probably about a 65-75 page marketing plan for the Nashua Pride and I sent it to Ken Shepard who then contacted me and said they would be up in the Nashua area to look at office space and to interview a couple of prospective General Managers and they asked me to come in for an interview. I came in and at the time they didn't have a general manager. Once Billy Johnson was hired <as GM>, he got a hold of my marketing plan and it was enough for him to be impressed and offer me a position with the Pride.

I decided to take a leap of faith and join what was then a four-person front office with the Nashua Pride. I was in charge of ticket sales.

FWiL:

Can you talk about the genesis story of the World Famous Monkey Boy character?

AMES:

There was a staff member who only lasted a year with the Pride. He was notorious for coming in late and leaving early. He was the only other one besides Billy Johnson who had his own office. He was like Superman in the way he could get his coat on, get his stuff packed up and get out of the office in no time. The rest of us had a little joke about the fact he was so quick to get out of the office.

One night we were working late and I thought he had left. I was impersonating him, trying to put on my pull over jacket as fast as possible, my arms were flailing up in the air, trying to find the head hole. I stuck my head through the hole and lo and behold there he was. He had stayed late and wanted to know what we were all laughing at. He said "Hey, that looks like the way an orangutan would put on his jacket."

So then Billy Johnson, the General Manager said "That's it! We're dressing you up in a monkey suit for opening weekend".

There had just been an article written a few days earlier that the Lowell (MA) Spinners were doing a promotion where they were gonna invite a bunch of third trimester pregnant women to the game and the first one to give birth would win a year's supply of diapers. So the write up was very favorable for the Spinners, who played about 15 minutes south of us across the Massachusetts border. We had just released our promotional schedule at the same time and <the press> found ours to be rather uncreative. So this was Billy's idea of how we could bring some fun and excitement to the ballpark. Also from his background, he had put himself through college working as "Billy Bird", the Louisville Redbirds mascot. Very near and dear to his heart was the fact that he had entertained hundreds of thousands of fans over the course of his early baseball career.

We were planning on having about 8,000 fans come through the stadium for opening weekend and that was gonna be the extent of my act. I would run out in the middle of the 5th inning and throw peanuts in the crowd and that would be it. We got through opening weekend and apparently Monkey Boy was a hit. So Billy decided that instead of renting this cheap converted bear costume from a Boston costume store, we would buy it. I think they paid a hundred bucks to rent it and then another hundred bucks to buy it. So, then he decided that Monkey Boy would perform at every Pride game that season.

The first night I went running off the field after my performance and, Ken Cail our P.A. announcer, turned to an intern and said "what do we call this guy?". And the intern just said "I don't know...Monkey Boy?". And that was it. That was the origin of the species if you will.

FWIL:

How long did it take you to develop his personality? He clearly seemed to have a developed personality - things that he did and things that he didn't do. How did you put together the persona?

AMES:

It was a lot of hit or miss. I had a little bit of a theatre background. That first night we had about 4,400 people in the stands and at first I don't think they really knew what was going on. But then as the music was playing and they had the opportunity to get some free peanuts, they started cheering and it built my adrenalin level.

When the Atlantic City Surf would come to town, they had a first baseman named Juan Thomas. They called him the Large Human. He was a huge guy - he had to be 6' 3" or 6' 4". Whenever the Surf were in town, I would go out and try to make fun of him just because the difference in our sizes was comical enough. One time during the first game of a doubleheader, I was out there doing a Max Patkin rip-off, pretending that I was playing first base behind him, basically mimicking him and making fun of him. And he turns around, picks me up and body slams me into the ground. The crowd loved that.

For the second game of the doubleheader, I went into the locker room and took two or three towels and some zip ties and made up a mock sumo wrestling underwear get up. I tied on a head band and went out there to try to wrestle him. He turned around to face me and did the sumo stomps with his feet. It was pretty funny. Just getting that improvisation side of the act was really important to getting the fans behind the character and the persona.

FWIL:

How was your relationship with the umpires?

AMES:

Uhhh...*(laughing)*...some were great. That first year I learned a lot. You really need to plan out the things that you're going to be doing. Just communicate with the umpires what your intentions are, what your ideas are. Ask for their permission, if you will.

A couple of times I didn't. I did a skit where I got the umps dressed in sunglasses and Mickey Mouse ears like they were going to go on vacation or whatever and then I had the music guy change the music to *Three Blind Mice*. That didn't go over so well with the umpires. They were pretty furious with me. It just was one of those things where had I run it past them at the get go, they probably would have said "no, that's not appropriate" and I would have changed my plan. But after that, there was a certain riff with myself and that umpiring crew.

The more communicative I could be with the umpires over the years...they were pretty open to it. Some of the umpires were great because you would just go out there and do your thing and they would ignore you, which was funny in its own right, or they would they would get involved in the act sort of off the cuff. The more that they knew <ahead of time>, the more appreciate they were of being involved in the process.

FWIL:

Was there a particular moment when you realized that the Monkey Boy character had become the face of the team, and perhaps more well known than any of the players or other personalities on the club?

AMES:

During that first off-season - this is really before the explosion of the internet, it wasn't what it is now - there was a website called FoxSportsNet. They interviewed Ted Giannoulas, who was the San Diego Chicken, and he was asked who were his favorite mascots. He mentioned Boy as one of his top three favorite mascots he had seen in his travels. We had had him in earlier in the season for an appearance and we did a little shtick together.

From there there was another article in the U.S. Airways in-flight magazine that mentioned Monkey Boy. From the time that we were going to just going to rent the costume for four days to having the national media with those two articles, it became evident that Monkey Boy was something that had become a draw for the Pride organization.

FWIL:

Did Ted Giannoulas give you any specific feedback or mention things that he liked about your act when you had a chance to work with him?

AMES:

Ted definitely had his game plan and you could tell he had been doing The Chicken forever. I can't really remember ever having any sort of planned skit

with Ted. When Dave Raymond, who was the original Phillie Phanatic, came to Nashua - I think he was touring as a character called "Sport" at the time - he actually got me involved in a couple of his skits where he actually planned things out and was organized.

With Ted, I'd be out on the field doing my thing and he took it upon himself to get involved in the performances I was doing. Instead of my getting involved in his skits. I don't think we ever mapped anything out. I think it was more improvisational.

I talked to him a few times over the years as I started farming out the Monkey Boy act to other organizations. He gave me some advice. He's an interesting guy. I don't think he was all that willing to give up some of his trade secrets, if you will. But he definitely said 'stick to it, you've got something there'. He was encouraging, to the point where he had a schedule conflict or something and his assistant wasn't going to be able to make it to an NBA appearance he had somewhere - it might have been Chicago -and he invited me to fill in and be his assistant. I wasn't able to do it, but it was flattering for him to ask me to be his assistant for the night.

FWIL:

How long were you out on the road with the Monkey Boy act on your own after you left the Nashua Pride?

AMES:

Well, not as long as I wanted to be. After I left the Pride in 2000, I worked for a software company for a couple of years. I used all my time off and sick days to sell the act to various minor league teams. I probably had about 15-20 gigs in 2001 at different ballparks. And then about the same in 2002 - maybe about 30 appearances.

Then I got laid off from that job after surviving about three or four rounds of cutbacks. Finally it was my time. They were sort of cutting out the fat to prepare to get acquired. So I thought that was the perfect opportunity to expand the act and start looking at it as a full-time business. We did our first minor league hockey game, we booked a couple of Arena Football games, and we had 60-70 minor league baseball appearances booked. We started traveling through the country as far as California, Texas and Florida. We had one gig that got cancelled in Montana.

Halfway through that first year on the road in 2003, I was doing an Arena Football game halftime show and I went to go tackle this giant banana character that we had developed as part of the act, and I ended up tearing the ACL in my left knee. Which then created an interesting situation. We had a replacement - a friend of mine who volunteered to fill in and try to keep the commitments.

FWIL:

I remember that. Because we booked you during that time and the replacement was noticeably taller than you were.

AMES:

Yeah, he was. So the size difference and the performing ability - it was a lot different. We communicated with all of the teams what had happened and explained I wasn't going to be able to perform the rest of the summer, but would they mind if we brought a replacement. Most teams were OK with that. We did have a couple of cancellations.

But the act obviously wasn't up to the same standards that they expected and what they had seen on the videos we had sent out ahead of time. Unfortunately, that kind of put an end to that chapter of my life. After I recovered from the surgery and the physical therapy, we were still able to put together about 30 appearances for the summer of 2004, but at that point we had just had our second child and I decided that the travel was just going to be too burdensome for my family and it was time to take my career elsewhere.

FWIL:

Did you find that your future baseball employers were receptive to you bringing the character back periodically when you wanted to?

AMES:

After I got injured, I was fortunate enough to get hired in the front office of the North Shore (MA) Spirit, who were entering their second year. They really wanted to infuse more excitement and dynamic promotions into their schedule. They hired me on as their Director of Fun.

I was able to continue performing for them and worked out my own separate deal as Monkey Boy with the Spirit, even though I was a full-time employee. I had an independent contract with them to do 10-15 performances with them in 2004, and they gave me a couple of weeks off to do some appearances around the country as well. It was a pretty good situation but the team itself was hemorrhaging money. After working for the Spirit for a year, my wife's family was moving to Florida. We decided we were sick of winters and wanted to try the

Florida lifestyle.

I received an opportunity to work for the Fort Myers Miracle in the Florida State League. And that was that. That was pretty much the end of Monkey Boy because the Goldklang Group <owners of the Miracle> had never really been that big a fan of the act.

(Laughing) It was sort of one of those wink-wink, poke-poke situations. They had said 'Well, you know, if you buy a booth at the Veeck Seminar, we would be more receptive to having you perform at our ballparks.'

So at the end of 2002, I think, we decided to spend a few thousand dollars on travel, accommodations and booth fees to go to their Veeck Seminar. Of which I got zero performances booked out of that from the Goldklang Group teams themselves. So after I joined the Miracle, that kind of put an end to the Monkey Boy situation, because they just weren't really big fans of my act.

FWIL:

And now Jon Goode of the Lowell Spinners is bringing you back to Nashua to do a Monkey Boy appearance for the Nashua Silver Knights college wooden bat league team that the Spinners operate up there.

AMES:

Jon Goode asked if I would be willing to come up and perform. It will be nice to come back to Holman Stadium. It might not be the Pride anymore, but hopefully the community will be behind it and it will be an opportunity for the Silver Knights to sell some more tickets. It should be a good, fun experience.

FWIL:

After 13 years, coming back and performing again where you got started, do you feel at all like you're in the 'greatest hits' phase of your career? Where you're like Journey going out on the road to hit the sheds in the summer and play all the hits that people remember from when they were young?

AMES:

<Laughing>. Yeah, maybe we'll bring up some new stuff too.

There's a couple of things that I'm excited about. First, hopefully people remember the act and hopefully we can bring the character to a new generation of fans, because I'm sure there are a lot of younger fans who have no idea who the World Famous Monkey Boy is.

The second part is my wife and I haven't been back north in quite a while with our family. We're planning on going up as a family and I'm looking forward to having my kids see me the perform. They're now at a time in their lives where they want to know what Dad did when he was younger. I'm excited to have the kids be part of the experience and hopefully try to get them out on the field with me too.

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