

Fun While it Lasted

Chris English is a partner in Magnitude Capital, a Manhattan-based fund-of-funds. Since the early 1990's, the Montreal native and childhood Expos fan has held stake in a number of East Coast-based minor league baseball franchises. His most public role was as the President and majority owner of the Nashua (NH) Pride of the independent Atlantic League of Professional Baseball from the league's inception in 1998 through his transfer of ownership following the 2004 season.

Nashua (pop. 86,000) was the Atlantic League's smallest market and English came to find his club penned in by affiliated farm clubs 15 minutes to the south (Lowell Spinners) and 15 minutes to the north (New Hampshire Fisher Cats).

During English's seven-year tenure in Nashua, the club lured ex-Major League sluggers **Mike Easler**, **Bobby Tolan** and **Butch Hobson** as field managers and imported aging former stars such as **Sam Horn**, **Pete Incaviglia**, **Milt Cuyler**, **Felix Jose** and **Jerome Walton** to play for the club. The team was particularly successful under Hobson's direction, winning an Atlantic League title in 2000 and returning to the championship series again in 2003. Although the Pride struggled to attract 2,000 fans per game in their peak years, English worked successfully with civic leaders to implement two major renovations of Depression-era Holman Stadium, including a \$4.5 million facelift in 2002 which saw the addition of all new seating, luxury suite and concourse areas.

Chris English spoke with Fun While It Lasted about the business of independent baseball on April 6th, 2011.

See our interview after the page jump.

Disclaimer: the author worked in the Nashua Pride front office from 2001 to 2003 during English's ownership.

FWiL:

Who were your baseball idols as a kid?

English:

The Expos came to town when I was 9 so Rusty Staub – Le Grand Orange - comes to mind. I also liked the Dodgers so Maury Wills. And since I was a shrimp I quoted Freddie Patek in my high school yearbook. When Patek was asked how it felt to be the smallest guy in the majors and he said “A lot better than the smallest guy in the minors.”

I knew I was going to play major league baseball when I grew up so I always thought I'd break his record. When it became apparent I'd never play pro ball, I bought a team instead. Then to my amazement, at age 42, Butch (Hobson) signed me to play one game for the Pride and I DH'ed. I went 0-4 but went into the record books as the oldest player in the Atlantic League. Until Ricky Henderson broke the record. Damn you Ricky!

FWiL:

What was your first pro sports investment and how did you come to it?

English:

In 1991 a guy who worked for me cut out this ½ inch by 1 inch Wall St Journal ad that said “Minor League team for sale. \$5.3 million.” It was the Albany Yankees, a double-A team. He put me in touch with another potential buyer named Frank Boulton. The plan was to move the team to Long Island. Frank had the funding in place but the Mets lobbied then interim commissioner Bud Selig to invoke the “Best Interests of Baseball” clause to block the move even though the Stadium was well beyond what were then the Mets territorial rights. I guess it makes sense that it's in no one's interest to have kids on Long Island grow up as Yankee fans. As a Red Sox fan, I found the logic compelling, if un-economical for us.

FWiL:

How did you get involved with the start-up of the Atlantic League and with placing a team in Nashua?

English:

I read an ad in Baseball America announcing the league and saw Nashua as one of the founding teams. The league had a 516 area code so I knew it had to be Frank (Boulton) so I called him up and said I'd take the Nashua membership.

FWiL:

Although you lived nearby, took the title of team President, and spoke to the local media frequently, you seemed to take a fairly hands off approach to the day-to-day operations of the Nashua Pride, leaving a lot of discretion to your GMs. How would you describe your management approach to your ball clubs?

English:

Seriously flawed. I mean you guys basically ran my baby into the ground. Just kidding. No I'm not. After which the next series of owners dug up the corpse, mummified it for a couple of years and then – seriously – buried it deeper than we ever imagined it could go. It ended with home plate covered by a bulldozer <in 2009>, providing a perfect book-end to how we found the place in 1997.

FWiL:

A vocal minority in Nashua complained about the arrival of the Pride at every opportunity. *Nashua Telegraph* sports editor Alan Greenwood called them the C.A.V.E. People - Citizens Against Virtually Everything. How quickly did you realize you had a problem in town?

English:

Nashua's a funny town. I think the first sign of trouble was at a Chamber of Commerce meeting and <Pride General Manager> Billy Johnson was talking about how we would be hiring all these fan friendly, smiling staff to welcome fans and someone asked "Where are you gonna find them?"

But while the cave people were loud, my experience with the rest of the people of Nashua was really pretty positive. At the end of the day, the Pride brought a lot of joy to those in the community who valued it – it just wasn't a big enough market, squeezed between Lowell, Massachusetts and Manchester.

FWiL:

In the early 2000's, you were active in trying to build a stadium and bring pro baseball to Worcester, Massachusetts. Was the plan to move the Pride to Worcester or to put an expansion club there?

English:

After they announced Manchester*, it became clear we needed to move.

**Ed: The double-A New Haven Ravens announced their plans to relocate to Manchester, NH in early 2003.*

FWiL:

The Pride surged in popularity in its third season after you hired Butch Hobson and the team won the league crown. How important was Hobson to the team's survival in Nashua?

English:

Butch was awesome. On the field. Off the field. He'd run through a wall for you and he expected others to do the same. I would have run through a wall to keep him and the team in Nashua. The 2000 ALPB championship was one of the most entertaining years of my life. But no one could save Nashua.

FWiL:

What were the circumstances surrounding your sale of the club to a syndicate of other Atlantic League owners after the 2004 season?

English:

I think it was a herculean effort. The Atlantic league has always stood by its teams and, in the event it became clear that the market was too small, in several cases they allowed the team to move effortlessly to the <short season> Can-AM league. No city has ever lost money going into business with the Atlantic League.

FWiL:

You've invested in several minor league baseball clubs, both start-up and existing. What are the most important factors you look for in evaluating a minor league baseball investment?

English:

In terms of a start up, it's facility and demographics in that order – but obviously the population has to be big enough to support it. For an existing team, does the market have staying power? Has the business become institutional quality?

FWiL:

Of all the independent leagues, the Atlantic League has stayed truest to the model of building new stadiums in communities that have never had baseball, or have gone decades without baseball. In other independent leagues (Golden, Can-Am) we've seen a lot of ball clubs go into cities on the heels of a departing affiliated team. Do you think independent baseball can work in both of these very different scenarios?

English:

Sure. Obviously the former model is the better one. But it's nice to have short-season independents like the Can-Am league there as a catch-basin for those markets that turn out to be too small to support a 140-game schedule.