

Fun While it Lasted

Glenn Davis is one of America's premier soccer broadcasters. He has served as a commentator for ESPN's World Cup broadcasts in 2002 and 2006 and will be part of NBC's Olympic coverage in London this summer. Davis also has a long-standing gig as play-by-play broadcaster for the Dynamo of Major League Soccer in Houston, where he makes his home. He also hosts *The Soccer Hour with Glenn Davis* on Sportstalk 790 AM in Houston.

With the \$110 million BBVA Compass Stadium about to open for Major League Soccer in downtown Houston this spring, we wanted to talk to Glenn about a very different era in Houston (and American) pro soccer. We wanted to talk to Glenn about his own playing career during the dark days of the mid-1980s.

When Davis came out of college in 1983, the nationwide North American Soccer League was on its last legs. It would fold a year later. On the world stage, the United States failed to qualify for the 1986 World Cup. It was the ninth consecutive time that the Americans were left out and would mark the bottoming out point for the U.S. men, who have qualified for every tournament since.

Davis turned pro with the Pennsylvania Stoners of the American Soccer League and began a soccer odyssey familiar to many American pros of the era, moving all over the country and splitting time between the indoor game and various short-lived, low-budget outdoor leagues.

He spent the longest stretch of his career with the Houston Dynamos, a club which at some points couldn't even find a pro league to play in. But the Dynamos - and clubs like it - helped keep the sport alive during the 1980's. Davis looks back fondly on his playing days in this interview and explains why those hard-scrabble clubs of the 1980's are an important building block of pro soccer's American success today.

Glenn Davis spoke to Fun While It Lasted on March 8th, 2012

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Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

Glenn, with the opening this summer of this beautiful, 22,000-seat soccer specific stadium in downtown Houston, I thought it would be interesting to look back at the Houston soccer landscape when you were turning pro in the mid-1980's. That was a rather dark time for professional soccer in the United States.

Davis:

In some ways, it's interesting that you're reaching out about this right now. I think we could do a better job of that here locally than we have, to be honest with you. I try as much as possible to try and educate - not overbearingly - about the history of the game in Houston. It started with the NASL and the Houston Stars at the Astrodome in 1968 and then **Kyle Rote Jr.** and the Houston Hurricane a decade later. And then the Houston Dynamos in the 1980's - it's all part of the history that brought us to where we are today with MLS.

FWiL:

When you came out of school in the mid-1980's, you had the opportunity to go play for the Pennsylvania Stoners of the American Soccer League.

What were your aspirations then as a young American player? Today, a young player might aspire to represent the United States in the World Cup or they could work to play in Major League Soccer. It must have been a different set of expectations that a young American player could have back then, with the NASL headed out of business and the U.S. not a factor on the international scene.

Davis:

You know actually it wasn't - I don't think it's any different from young guys growing up now. As a New Jersey kid, I went to New York Cosmos games at Giants Stadium. I had been a part of all that energy and seen the quality of the soccer. Me and all my friends - we all wanted to be professional soccer players and whatever was out there, we were going after it.

Looking back at what was going on with the outdoor game when I got out of college in 1983, we could see that the game was in a downturn and the NASL was having troubles. But for young players coming out of college - like me and a lot of my friends - we were just about trying to play at a higher level and become professional soccer players. We didn't concern ourselves so much with the health of the sport at the time.

FWiL:

So you still felt like there were going to be outdoor soccer opportunities and you wouldn't be restricted to playing indoors?

Davis:

The outdoor game was it for me. The indoor thing to me was almost a different sport. I played briefly in Columbus, Ohio in the American Indoor Soccer Association. I don't think there's any question that the outdoor leagues were in real trouble and for a while there in the 80's the indoor game actually took over for the outdoor game.

But there were guys from the NASL and young ambitious guys who all wanted to keep playing somewhere. So you ended up in places that had very accomplished players like the Pennsylvania Stoners in the American Soccer League or later in Houston with the Houston Dynamos. You had guys who had played in World Cups and internationally on these teams. Those both ended up being wonderful experiences for me.

FWiL:

So after a summer in Allentown, Pennsylvania with the Stoners you ended up in Houston playing for the Dynamos of the United Soccer League. Looking at the roster, it looks like several of your Stoners teammates made the move down to Houston. Is there a connection between those two teams somehow?

Davis:

Yes, the assistant coach for the Stoners - a guy named **Gary Hindley** - got the Dynamos Head Coaching job. So he took a handful of younger guys from the Stoners down there, like myself and **Solomon Hilton** and **Lesh Shkreli** who was a Yugoslavian who had played in Greece. In Houston we got mixed with guys with some pretty large reputations. **Jose Neto** was there who played for the San Diego Sockers. **Manny Andruszewski** played for Southampton in England and for the Tampa Bay Rowdies. At one point, we had **Wim Suurbier** who was obviously an older man at the time. But he was the starting right fullback for Holland in the '74 World Cup. The list goes on.

A whole group of us moved down here and we got melded together. You weren't making big money playing in the American Soccer League or the United Soccer League in '83 or '84, but for a young guy, you're going "Wow! I'm getting paid to play!"

FWiL:

What could you earn playing in those leagues back then as a young player?

Davis:

Oh, God...I don't know...my salary probably ranged from about \$1,200 a month to tops, maybe \$2,000 a month. And maybe you got some relief on your apartment.

FWiL:

On your website, there are a couple of entries where you speak very fondly of **Peter Kane** and **John Gaughan** who owned the Dynamos. Can you talk a little about them and their commitment to soccer in Houston in those days?

Davis:

Yeah, Peter and John were the two owners. These guys knew there was no financial return on professional soccer back then - this was purely driven by passion. They were both multi-millionaires. One was in the oil industry and the other was in telecommunications. They were wonderful and they believed in the sport. They were an odd couple in a sense. Peter Kane was an Englishman. John Gaughan was a guy from Pennsylvania who moved to Houston and sort of symbolized that go-get-it attitude that Houston embodied.

They both sunk a lot of money into the sport and I just remember how enthusiastic they were about their team. They traveled with us around the country when we played. They were hands on. They were very invested. At games they would be outside the locker room slapping guys on the back as they went onto the field. From that standpoint, looking back now, we were really fortunate to have those two guys.

We always got paid on time, which wasn't always the case for other teams. Back in Pennsylvania, it used to be a running joke that when they put your paychecks by the locker, guys started rushing out of the showers to be the first to get out of there. You wanted to be the first at the bank, because we didn't think there was enough in the account for all of the checks to clear.

FWiL:

The team you in Houston that first year <1984> was quite good. You ended up in the league championship series.

Davis:

Yeah, we had a slow start. But it came together. We had a great Brazilian striker named Jose Neto, who was the MVP of the league that year. **Beto Dos Santos**, who is now the uncle of Gio and Jonathan Dos Santos of Mexican National Team fame and Barcelona, played in midfield for us. He was a great young player fresh out of Club America in Mexico. We had a little winger of Portuguese descent named **Manny Neves** who had played for the San Diego Sockers.

We had a good team. The league had something like eight teams, so you got to know these players intimately because you played them so many times.

FWiL:

What kind of following did the Dynamos have in Houston?

Davis:

Well, we were resigned to probably page five of what were two newspapers at the time. I think the only time we ever got on the front page of *The Houston Post* was when we got into the Championship and played Ft. Lauderdale down in Florida.

We were playing in high school facilities. Sometimes we'd go on the road and play in a football stadium like the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville and there would be 5,000 people in a monster stadium that held 70,000 people.

There was a small group of people that followed the team, but you know it's such a different landscape now. When I do television work today for Major League Soccer and go into these buildings it's just absolutely mind boggling. Nobody even in a passing conversation back in the 1980's would have ever thought of or mentioned the idea of a stadium built specifically for soccer.

FWiL:

Do you have a couple of favorite stories or memories from the road from those days?

Davis:

Yeah, you know I think a book could be written about those years. There was some amazingly funny stuff.

Here's one good story for you...In 1983 when I was with the Pennsylvania Stoners, we traveled to play a team called the Carolina Lightnin' in Charlotte. The coach of the Lightnin' was **Rodney Marsh**, the former Queens Park Rangers star and Tampa Bay Rowdie. His assistant coach was one **Bobby Moore**, the 1966 England captain who hoisted the World Cup. They had so many injuries they activated Bobby Moore to play that night against us. Bobby was probably 43 years old and he obviously can't move. He's kicking everything and everybody that he can get close to. And we're just going "Oh my God - it's Bobby Moore."

I remember we had a 2-0 lead and we absolutely crumbled in the final ten minutes with their fans going nuts. They had probably about 7,000 or 8,000 fans in this cool little stadium in Charlotte. I think it was called the Memorial Stadium. We totally collapsed as a team and lost 3-2. I remember our owner on the bus back to the hotel and screaming at one of our players. I think a lot of us were just still in shock that Bobby Moore was playing that night.

FWiL:

How did you transition into broadcasting after your playing career ended?

Davis:

Like a lot of guys I banked on the leagues getting better and improving and they really never did while I was playing. But I think in the end a lot of us thought in some small way we were pioneering a bit and bring a little cavalier spirit to the game here. I got into youth coaching which I did for many, many years.

Then in 1994 I got an opportunity locally. I was asked to be an analyst on Fox. I knew Major League Soccer was coming in 1996 and I figured there'd be more television coming. I wanted to learn the craft. I wanted to learn how to become a real broadcaster - not just a soccer guy on there talking. I got some great encouragement from producers and people inside Fox. I was fortunate to be around people who wanted to help me and I applied my work ethic I developed being a soccer player. Slowly I started to get more and more work. Now I've written for a major newspaper, hosted a radio show, do games for ESPN and NBC and local games.

I'm doing the Dynamo local package on Fox and Channel 2 in Houston. I'm doing the Olympics and men's and women's qualifying for NBC. I'm doing World Cup qualifies this June for ESPN, along with some MLS games.

It's a steady diet of work and I take it very seriously. I believe I have the best job on the planet.

Davis:

I'll tell you...you think about places like Seattle and Houston that are thriving today. Think of how the <club owners> were back in the 1980's that were spending money to put teams together and keeping the sport alive here. All those years in Seattle keeping the A-League Sounders alive during the 1990's - that all played a part in the success of a team like the Sounders today.

FWiL:

I grew up not too far from Fenway Park in Boston. In junior high school, I used to take the bus down to Nickerson Field to see the old Boston Bolts play in the American Soccer League...

Davis:

Then you would have seen me play for the Albany Capitals. I scored a goal there at Nickerson. In fact, I started out in college at Boston University and I lived in that dorm that overlooked the field. I was there with all of the B.U. hockey guys that played on the 1980 Olympic team...**Jim Craig** and **Jack O'Callahan** and those guys. They were wild. You thought you were wild at the time, but we had nothing on them.

I'll tell you...there are so many great stories about soccer in the 1980's. I think of the people and players who came through Houston with the Dynamos. The people down here in Houston don't know about that for the most part. In a lot of way, they think the sport began in 2006 when the Dynamo arrived.

I try to keep the connection with the history alive. Not to dwell on it, but to subtly keep it alive because I think it's important. And now we have the Dynamo and they've obviously added a lot to it. This town has a soccer history.

Back in those days playing pro soccer you bounced around. I don't regret any of it. Not one second. And it makes me appreciate where the game is today.