

Fun While it Lasted

By his own admission, Jim Oldham didn't know much about the World Basketball League when he signed on as the league's Director of International Public Relations in early 1991. The 27-year old was fresh off a four-year stint in the media relations department of the New England Patriots. During Oldham's last season in Foxboro, the Patriots were dreadful on the field (1-15) and several players became infamous off of it for the sexual harassment incident involving *Boston Herald* reporter Lisa Olson.

So Oldham was receptive when a chance connection at a Patriots exhibition game in Tennessee led to a new job opportunity in the upstart World Basketball League. The WBL had nine far-flung franchises scattered from Saskatchewan to Boca Raton that were in serious need of media attention. The strange little league was more popular in Europe - where it conducted annual barnstorming tours - than in Springfield, Illinois or Worcester, Massachusetts or the other small cities where the WBL set up shop.

The league's biggest media hook was its central gimmick - the WBL was a league for short men. Players had to be under 6' 5" tall and during its early years the club brought in consultants from the accounting firm Coopers & Lybrand to oversee the measurement of players. Despite such measures, there was constant speculation over players cheating the limits, such as Vancouver Nighthawks forward **Andre 'The Giant' Patterson** who was listed in college at 6' 8".

The WBL collapsed in a scandal in 1992 when it was revealed that league founder **Mickey Monus** financed the league's millions in financial losses with funds embezzled from his Phar-Mor discount pharmacy chain. Oldham was gone by that point, but he points proudly to the talent on display during the WBL's short history (1988-1992). The league helped launch the careers of diminutive NBA regulars **John Starks**, **Tim Legler** and **Mario Elie** among others.

Oldham served as the first Director of Communications for the Colorado Rockies from 1992 to 1999. Today he stays involved in sports as an instant replay official for the NFL.

Jim Oldham spoke with Fun While It Lasted about the World Basketball League on February 17, 2012.

FWiL:

You were the Director of Public Relations for the New England Patriots for four years in the late 1980's. So I guess the obvious question is: why leave the NFL to go to work for a start-up minor basketball league for short men?

Oldham:

At the time I had just gone through a 1-15 season at the Patriots. There was a coaching change, a new team President coming in, and we had just gone through the **Lisa Olson** scandal. It was one of those things that just seemed like the right move at the time.

Secondly, because of <WBL Commissioner> **Steve Ehrhart**. He really impressed me. He set up the World Basketball League office in Memphis, which was close to where I grew up in Northeast Arkansas and went to school at Arkansas State. So it got me back close to home as well.

FWiL:

Did you have a previous connection with Steve Ehrhart?

Oldham:

No. I never even knew Steve. I knew very little of the World Basketball League at the time. **Rudi Schiffer** is the one who put us together. The Patriots had played a pre-season game in Memphis and Rudi was coordinating everything at the Liberty Bowl down there. Rudi had worked for Steve at the Memphis Showboats in the United States Football League. He knew Steve was looking for a media relations manager and he passed my name along.

FWiL:

In your role as PR Director for the World Basketball League, were you responsible for pitching stories about the league to national media?

Oldham:

Yes, exactly. At the Patriots, I was just focused on one team. To be perfectly honest, we didn't really engage in proactive PR at all at the Patriots. The NFL is tends to be more reactive PR than proactive. You had media there all the time and you didn't need to go out and try to place stories in the newspapers.

I went from that to the WBL where we had to be very proactive. It was my job to get us as much national exposure as I could using some of my contacts, whether it be with *USA Today*, some of the networks, people in different media circles, to try to get them aware of what the World Basketball League was.

It wasn't just the United States. We had teams in Canada. And I found that actually the league was almost better known in Europe than it was in the United States, mainly because of the goodwill tours that the WBL All-Star teams used to do overseas, playing some of the top professional European teams.

FWiL:

Did you find that the hook for media coverage in the United States tended be the fact that all of the players were under 6' 5"? Was it viewed as a "gimmick" league that all of these players were short and there we no centers?

Oldham:

Well, yeah. You did whatever you could to do to find something to differentiate from the NBA. We had guys like **Alfrederick Hughes** who was the leading scorer in the NCAA at Loyola of Chicago <in 1985> and a former first round pick but couldn't get a sniff in the NBA because he was 6' 5" tall and played with his back to the goal. He had an interesting story and that was a hook.

We had some great outside shooters and we played more of a European style in terms of lane configurations and the placement of three-point lines. We did whatever we could do to gain attention. We even created a special basketball that was painted like a globe, kind of taking a page from the old American Basketball Association.

FWiL:

I remember seeing that ball on SportsChannel America as a kid.

Oldham:

That's right. SportsChannel was our national TV exposure back then.

The interesting thing about the World Basketball League ball was that the manufacturers had a really hard time developing it so that it wasn't too slick. Very similar to what the NBA went through when they just made their changes a couple of years ago - you'd put it out on the court and players hated it because it was just so slick once the guys got a little sweat on their hands.

It took several different variations until they actually found a ball that worked, but we only had 2-3 of those good ones. So those balls would get shipped to the sites where we had the SportsChannel games, just so we could get the television exposure for the basketball itself.

FWiL:

You were in the nerve center of the WBL at the league office in Memphis, where many of the league's more experienced executives worked. But later on the epitaph of the league was that the whole league revolved around the league's founder **Mickey Monus** and his money. Monus operated out of Youngstown, Ohio where he had his franchise and the headquarters of his Phar-Mor drugstore chain.

Was Monus a guy that was prominent to you at that time, or was he just another owner behind the scenes up in Ohio?

Oldham:

No, Mickey Monus was quite prominent. Everybody knew that he was one of the driving forces behind the league itself. But Steve Ehrhart had most of the dealings with Mickey. I had very little to deal with him because that was outside the scope of my PR role. But you knew that Youngstown as a whole was kind of the epicenter for the World Basketball League. Everything kind of began and ended up in Youngstown.

FWiL:

Do you have one or two favorite stories or memories you can share about promoting the World Basketball League?

Oldham:

Well, we weren't the first people to ever do this, but I remember during the SportsChannel broadcasts we always tried to move fans out of their seats into the camera view so that the crowds looked bigger on TV than they actually were.

The European trips were interesting. Being 6' 5" and under, we were looked at as a strange oddity when we went over there. At the time, the NBA really didn't want to have anything to do with the top European clubs - the Bayer Leverkusen's and other teams that are quite prominent today. Back then, I think the NBA kind of felt they were above that.

So we were this American team traveling through Europe with some recent college players that were pretty well known at the time. We were really treated in Europe like we were the NBA. They packed the arenas to see the Americans come over and play. They knew we didn't have the Michael Jordans and Magic Johnsons, but they were excited to see the Americans play. Then we would come back here and might have 500 people in the stands. There was a real dichotomy between how we were received in Europe and how we were received at home.

FWiL:

Were there one or two players that stand out in your memory because they had a big personality or there were a great interview? Who were the go-to-guys that you tried to spotlight when you had an opportunity for national coverage?

Oldham:

Alfredrick Hughes, of course, was one of them. Mainly because of being the leading scorer in the NCAA during his senior year. And he was an engaging personality when you spoke to him. A lot of people when they took a look at him questioned whether he was really under 6' 5". He was probably right there on that edge and we might have given him the benefit of the doubt saying he was really under the height limit.

We had **John Starks** and **Tim Legler** in the WBL before they made it in the NBA. Legler was a great player in the World Basketball League. We had some good players. I grew up outside of Memphis during the USFL. Looking back they had some great players on the Memphis Showboats. A lot of guys went to the NFL. Reggie White made it to the Hall of Fame. I can say the same thing about the World Basketball League. Were we in the class of an NBA? No. But there were some players who went on to the NBA and had very good careers, like John Starks. Particularly the shooting guards.

Mixed in with the typical antics of a start-up minor league, there were some very good players.

FWiL:

It's funny you mentioned whether Hughes was under the height limit or not. A lot of these "tweener" players might have been lying college, claiming they were taller than they actually were. Now to play in the pros, they may have been lying in the other direction to get in under the WBL's height limit.

In a way, the whole height limit issue seemed like a great attention getter for the league. There were always rumors that players and teams were cheating on their height measurements. From a PR standpoint, it seems like a great way to create a form of harmless controversy.

Oldham:

You know that was one of the things that Steve Ehrhart really taught me. I came from the NFL where everything was black and white. There were rules and you either followed them or you were in trouble. When I got to the World Basketball League, that's when I truly realized that sports is entertainment. You know what, if a guy was an inch over the limit at 6' 6", the only one that cares was the coach on the other team. We were there to provide an entertainment. No matter what happened with the World Basketball League during my time there, I always felt that it was very entertaining basketball.

FWiL:

How did you come to move on from the league in 1992?

Oldham:

Steve Ehrhart again. I was really enjoying myself - I was having a good time in the World Basketball League. Then Steve was named President of the Colorado Rockies expansion franchise in Major League Baseball. He talked me into joining him and I became one of the first employees of the Rockies.

Today I'm an NFL instant replay official. I've been doing that here in Denver since 1999 when. I still had my old contacts in the NFL and the NFL was actually trying to use old PR guys from the league for these jobs, because they had been around the sport and they weren't going to be in awe of anybody. It's a pretty great side job.