

Fun While it Lasted

John Tull has nearly 25 years experience in professional and college sports management, beginning with an internship for minor league baseball's South Bend Silver Hawks while a graduate student in sports management at the University of Indiana Bloomington in 1988.

In the years since, Tull has worked as a sports marketing and management executive in the East Coast and International Hockey Leagues, the Major Indoor Soccer League, and other minor league and entrepreneurial pro sports properties. Today he is the Manager of Business Development for Penn State Sports Properties.

We wanted to hear about John's first experience as a General Manager with the Peninsula (VA) Pilots, a hard-scrabble Carolina League baseball club we've previously profiled on Fun While It Lasted.

Peninsula was described as the worst minor league organization in the country by *Baseball America* shortly before Tull arrived in late 1988. Tull found War Memorial Stadium in shambles and a team that rained out an unusual number of games because it didn't even own a tarp. By opening day of 1989, after a series of defections and firings, Tull found himself the last man standing. Less than a year removed from his first internship, he was the General Manager of a Carolina League baseball team, the same circuit featured in the Hollywood hit of the previous summer *Bull Durham*.

John Tull spoke to Fun While It Lasted about the Peninsula Pilots and Harry Caray impersonators on December 10th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWIL

How did you get involved with the Peninsula Pilots in 1988? Did you have any previous sports industry experience before you were thrust into the GM role?

TULL

I graduated from DePauw in 1986. I was finishing my Master's at Indiana University-Bloomington in 1988 and working as intern in my hometown of South Bend with the South Bend White Sox for the 1988 season. This internship completed my Masters degree.

The South Bend White Sox were a brand new team playing in the brand new Stanley Coveleski Regional Stadium. 1988 was our inaugural season and we were owned by Jay Acton and Eric Margenau. I did everything from sell advertising to line the field, water the field, pull the tarp, make hot dogs, change kegs, assist with concessions inventory, calculate labor cost each night, manage souvenir inventory, etc. Pete Bock, a friend of Miles Wolff, who owned the Durham Bulls, was asked by Eric and Jay to come to South Bend and evaluate the staff. This is in the summer of 1988. He gave those guys a report that I was a hard worker, smart kid, jack of all trades, and would be management material. John Baxter, the GM of South Bend came to me and said: "JT, we love the job you are doing. You can either stay on in South Bend and sell tickets and ads and help with concessions etc, or you can move to Hampton, VA as the Assistant GM of the Peninsula Pilots and help hold the fort down."

I was told that the Pilots played at old War Memorial Stadium and that we were going to work on making a go of it there with the idea that <Acton and Margenau> were also looking in to building a stadium down the road in Wilmington, Delaware.

Since I attended grad school to get in to "Sports Management" I decided to load my little Mazda 323 and headed to Hampton. I arrived there in the fall of 1988. When I got there, the very first day, the GM they hired for me to work for resigned. He said he could not work there. Then they hired a new GM within a few weeks who arrived in December. By February they had fired that GM and made me GM. So I went from Intern to GM in one year. Crazy times!

FWIL

You came to the club in late 1988, a few months after *Baseball America* called the Gil Granger's Virginia Generals the "worst" and "wackiest" club in America. Jay Acton and Eric Margenau had bought the club and renamed it, but you still inherited the Generals' reputation. Can you share a few stories you heard about the Generals and the general condition you found the team in when you arrived in Virginia?

TULL

I arrived in Hampton, VA in October of 1988 to find a ball park that was in terrible shape. The bleachers were broken, the little concession stands were trashed and it looked like no one had played baseball there for a very long time. We were the new Peninsula Pilots who were going to play as an independent team that first year in 1989 under our field manager Jim Thrift. We had a lot of work ahead of us ranging from rebuilding the bullpens, fixing up the concession stands and restrooms and making the park presentable.

I can't recall exactly what the relationship was like between the Grangers and the Peninsula Stadium Authority. All I remember is that I saw a picture of Gilinda Granger in a black cowboy hat and remember thinking that the "good guys and gals are supposed to wear white". Having said that allow me to clarify that I might have met Gilinda once or twice and she was always very nice to me. I do recall rumblings from the Kansas City organization about the issues they had sending players to Hampton and it was not good! How hard it was to paint our Red, White and Blue colors over those Generals colors at the stadium. But my right hand man Herbert "Tiny" Woolston and I dug right in to get the park whipped in to shape the best we could.

FWIL

Talk a little bit about your experience during that first summer of 1989.

TULL

We opened in April of 1989 with me as the GM. I had just opened the brand new South Bend Stanley Coveleski Regional Stadium the year before with sell out crowds and big promotions etc. I knew this would be a challenge. There were some in the Peninsula who didn't take to me at first because I was from Indiana. I did need to get to know the territory which was very important in trying to win the trust of the Southeast Virginians.

I was able to learn about all aspects of baseball operations. I ordered team uniforms, helped rebuild the bullpen mounds, cleaned out the concession stands, learned how to make the rest rooms presentable, hired part time staff, managed payroll, etc. On any given day I would meet with Jim Thrift to discuss travel plans for the next road trip, submit bills to our office in New York via a 1986 fax machine that was slow as molasses, organize and order all of the concessions food and beverages to ready for the home stand. I had a couple of interns and my right hand guy Tiny, who did everything from hose down the pigeon dropping-infested bleachers to clean the restrooms, while I made sure the part time concession staff was putting enough hot dogs on the grill to feed the 300-400 people who were going to show up.

Some of my memories from that 1989 season:

Watching our manager Jim Thrift put together a hodge podge group of baseball players ranging from New York Mets and Yankees prospects to independent players. We had some former Durham Bulls and Kinston Indians including Tim Kirk who I believe had a cameo in *Bull Durham* as a pitcher.

Our owner Jay Acton cut a deal with the Hiroshima Toyo Carp to bring in three very talented Japanese prospects. The experience with the Japanese players and ownership group was amazing.

I remember calling games at 3pm in the afternoon because we had no tarp. Then I would watch dozens of cars pull up at 6pm under sunny skies thinking there was a game. Not hundreds of cars but dozens, but still dozens was too many as you felt bad for the folks driving in thinking there was baseball.

I was 26 years old, managing a small ticket office, concessions, stadium operations, player development with Jim Thrift, the accounting, stadium ops etc. My right hand guy Tiny was great but it was a long hard summer. I think we had the worst record in baseball. I remember constantly running to a Farm Fresh to purchase ice because we always ran out.

I stayed positive the entire time! Had to make good with what we had.

FWIL

We've got to hear more about the Pilots P.A. announcer who sang "White Rabbit" in the voice of Haray Caray.

TULL

That was Terry Armour, our beat writer from *The Daily Press/Times Herald*. Terry filled in as PA announcer once in a while. He was a character. One of the funniest guys I knew .

Sometimes Terry would break out Harry Caray doing *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* for the crowd. One night during the 7th inning stretch instead of *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* he started singing Jefferson Airplane's *White Rabbit* over the PA instead. Looking back it was funny. At the time it was funny too.

Was it the right thing to do? Probably not. My ex-wife wife helped me out a lot too and also did some PA which was not that well received by the War Memorial Stadium crowd either.

Lessons learned by a young GM.

Terry was a very good friend of mine back then and we remained friends when he went back to Chicago and I went back to South Bend and then off to hockey for the next 12 years. God rest his soul! Terry died in 2007 at age 46.

FWIL

Do you have a few more favorite stories you can share from those two seasons in the Carolina League?

TULL

There are so many stories.

In 1989 we were supposed to have the Famous San Diego Chicken perform at the game. His picture was on the pocket schedules and everything. Things were so bad that the owners backed out and did not want to pay Famous Chicken's fee. So I had to cancel him. Instead I brought in Doodles the Chick-Fil-A chicken. Some of the fans were upset.

In 1989 we were horrible but we had taken the first two of a three game series from the "mighty" Durham Bulls at the end of one of our home stands. I called any radio station that would listen and the TV stations and the paper and said that anybody that brings a broom to the final game of the series would get in for \$ 1 because the Pilots were going to sweep the Bulls. We maybe had 50 brooms at that game with a crowd of about 300 and the Bulls beat us something like 9-2 or whatever. After the game Grady Little, the manager of the Bulls, saw me outside the clubhouse and said "how did those brooms do for you tonight"

Dale Long worked for Major League baseball and would travel the minor league parks and submit reports on the field conditions and the lighting. I remember thinking there is no way this stadium will pass any standards tests. We always did.

I remember meeting Chief Bender, who was the farm director for the Cincinnati Reds during the Big Red Machine years and for many years after. I entertained him for a couple of days so he could see if the Reds would want to affiliate with us. It was great talking baseball with him. To my surprise he got Johnny Bench to sign the cover of our 1989 Peninsula Pilots program, which featured Bench, and mailed it back to me as a thank you note.

In 1990 we had Brett Boone and Jimmy Campanis and they were both trying to become the first third generation Major League players. Bret Boone made it. He was a skinny little kid from USC who had great hands and just started popping the ball out of the yard.

Meeting Catfish Hunter who shows up by himself to sit in the bleachers and watch a little baseball in 1989. Maybe 400 people at the game. He said he was going to the Outer Banks to fish and wanted to catch a ball game. Sat and chatted with him for a few innings. Great guy.

FWIL

First jobs in sports are almost always influential for many years afterwards. What lessons - self-taught or imparted by others - did you pick up during those two summers on the Peninsula that stuck with you throughout your career?

TULL

I learned so much as I was one of the youngest GM's in baseball at the time. I learned about all aspects of operations in 20 months!

I learned that you must do your best to understand the territory. Don't act like you are from there if you are not. I took some hard knocks because I was young and inexperienced. I learned to become a better listener, I learned to adapt to my surroundings better and become a better communicator.

My entire time on the Peninsula can be summed up as great learning experience in the communications and PR department. I worked with Stadium Authority officials, Hampton and Newport News officials, league officials, Wilmington Delaware officials, NY Yankee people, Mets people, Japanese baseball officials, the Mariners, media from the area, etc.

There was so much going on that I learned fast and hard how to adapt to a variety of personalities. Made me stronger, helped build my character, helped me learn how to handle adversity, taught me never to give up.

I learned about customer service. I learned that whether there are 400 fans or 4000 you have to entertain the fans, you have to provide a good product, a clean stadium.

I left Peninsula thinking there are not too many situations I can not handle! I moved back to South Bend in November of 1990 to run the Silver Hawks and I hit the ground running.

No regrets!.

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