

Fun While it Lasted

Mark Steffens is a long-time coach in the American professional soccer scene. For the past 15 seasons, he has served as Head Coach of the Charlotte Eagles of the United Soccer League's Charlotte Eagles, leading the team to twelve playoff appearances, seven USL title games, and league championships in 2000 and 2005.

Steffens played Division 2 soccer in the early 1980's with New York Apollo and New York United of the American Soccer League. He began his professional coaching career in the indoor game, latching on as an assistant coach on Dr. Joe Machnik's staff during the final season of the Major Indoor Soccer League's New York Arrows franchise in the winter of 1983-84.

Two years later, Steffens returned to the indoor game and the MISL with a Long Island-based expansion club, the New York Express. What followed was a chaotic and challenging half season, which saw the Express struggle on the field and at the box office before abruptly shutting down during the MISL's midseason All-Star Break.

Along the way, the Express dismissed Head Coach Ray Klivecka after an 0-10 start and pressed Steffens into service as the club's interim Head Coach - sort of. While Steffens coached the Express during matches, the club engaged in a strange and protracted flirtation with Don Popovic, a four-time MISL champion coach. The arrangement saw Popovic conduct Express training sessions for several weeks while Steffens coached the matches themselves - the "interim coach in name only" as Steffens.

Ultimately Popovic departed without signing a contract and it was left to Steffens to hold the veteran club together as the Express organization continued to disintegrate.

Mark Steffens spoke to Fun While It Lasted about his time with the New York Express on May 30th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

How did you come to join the Express in 1986?

Steffens:

In 1984 Joe Machnik hired me as his assistant coach with the New York Arrows. We lost in the first round of the playoffs that year and then shortly after the season we were told by our owner that we would be moving the franchise to another city. A few weeks later we were told that the Arrows were going out of business.

<Arrows goalkeeper> Shep Messing and a few other people in the New York area began talking about bringing back a New York franchise and playing exhibition games the next indoor season to prepare for the 1986 MISL season. Shep's hard work brought that to fruition. The team was named the New York Express and I was again brought on as an assistant coach thanks to Shep.

FWiL:

You've gone on to enjoy a long head coaching career, but I imagine you didn't expect it to begin quite so early, pressed into service as an interim coach for the Express at midseason. Can you describe how that came about? Did you take away any lessons from that difficult season that impacted your coaching career in later years?

Steffens:

Lessons? Of course I learned many lessons. Every situation in life is a lesson. It depends whether or not you learn from it. You are being shaped and molded every moment you live. In all things I look to hold onto the good things and toss out the bad. My filter to determine what I needed to keep in my coaching style is the Bible. It's a book that has been challenged for hundreds of years but remains the best seller each year. I have read it many times over and the lessons that Jesus taught were incredible; totally different from what society teaches today. I sift every experience through His teachings and try to use each good one to better my life so I can impact the lives of my players. I have borrowed a saying from Joe Erhmann, a former great player in the NFL. He now coaches a high school football team in Maryland. A book was written about his life called "Season of Life" by Jeffrey Marx. The saying that I use from that book has been part of my coaching philosophy for years....I am not just a soccer coach going after wins.....I am "building men for others." If you keep this in mind as you coach you look at things through a different lens.

The main lesson I learned was kind of forced on me. Being the assistant coach to big name players such as Ricky Davis, Shep Messing, Hubert Birkenmyer, Freddy Gurgerev, Renato Cila, Mark Liveric, Luis Alberto, Val Tuksa (I could go on and on) was amazing for me. They rarely went to the Head Coach with their problems. They mostly came to me. I learned to befriend them but not cut down the Head Coach. There is a fine line that I really cherished. I was able to get to know the players at a much deeper level than almost anyone else. I built long lasting relationships and still stay in touch with a few of them to this day. I could go on and on about other lessons but it would take up so much time.

FWiL:

The Don Popovic saga sounds rather bizarre - he ran Express training sessions during the week, but refused to sign a contract to coach the actual matches. I've read that he sat in the stands as a "consultant" and relayed directions down to the bench. I imagine these were being directed at you, as the interim coach. What did you make of the whole situation?

Steffens:

Bizarre for sure! That only lasted for one match I believe, two at most. He sat behind the glass and relayed changes to one of the players and sometimes directly to me. He didn't change a lot of things, just a player switch or two. This was more difficult than being the assistant coach because I was only an interim head coach in name only. I felt I had a lot of responsibility now but no authority to carry it out. I was very thankful when things changed. After this went on for two weeks at most, the management couldn't come to terms with Popovic for some reason. Then they named me head coach for the rest of the season. It was a big relief to me because I now felt I had the authority to make calls on my own and I thrive on that kind of responsibility.

There was never any bitterness between Popovic and me. He is actually a great guy. I spent some time with him at a few coaching conventions a few years back and really have come to appreciate him a lot. He has a fiery personality when coaching but a soft heart when away from the field. A totally misunderstood individual I believe.

FWiL:

The General Manager and his right hand man bolted for the MISL's Dallas Sidekicks two months into the season. Was there a similar scramble by the Express players and their agents to try and find the escape hatch out of Long Island?

Steffens:

Not to my knowledge. They were committed to get through the hard times and try to make the organization a success down the road. We all knew things were getting more difficult by the day but I think most of the players and management tried to persevere. Of course right at the end, when everyone knew we would be folding soon, players starting looking out for their own skin and looking for employment opportunities with other teams. I couldn't blame them. The boat was 95% under water at that time.

FWiL:

How did you and your teammates get word that the team was going to shut down at the All-Star Break? Was it expected, or did the guys figure the team would get through the year one way or another?

Steffens:

At first it was not expected but as the season keep going on we all started hearing rumors of the ownership losing a lot of money and wanting to sell. As you know, Shep Messing was involved from the start and was management as well as a player. At the end, he and one of the owners spoke to the team announcing the decision to pull out of the MISL. It was heartbreaking to all but we could read the handwriting on the wall a few weeks before. Shep was very professional throughout the entire ordeal.

FWiL:

Do you have a favorite story that you can share from that season in New York?

Steffens:

I think the "interim coach" one is my favorite. I didn't appreciate it then but it was one of the lessons that made me grow and mature as a coach & person.

Overall I would say that I enjoyed and valued my time with the Express. I saw people being treated poorly and I saw people being treated well. This stood out to me like a sore thumb. As I was observing all of this I saw a huge discrepancy between the two and didn't like it at all. I vowed that I was going to treat people with respect and dignity....because everyone deserves that. I've learned to value and appreciate everyone that I come in contact with.

Relationships are extremely valuable to me; I count each one as precious. I'm thankful that those values began with the New York Arrows & New York Express.