

Fun While it Lasted

Micah Buchdahl followed a conventional path into the sports industry. Start with a couple of student internships. Move to the long hours/low-pay entry-level job right after college. Then leverage your burgeoning network of contacts to land that breakthrough gig - the one with "Director" in the title and the base salary that's a slightly bigger number than your age.

What happened next was anything but conventional. In the fall of 1986, the 23-year old signed on as the Director of Public Relations for the expansion New York Express of the Major Indoor Soccer League. The league had a lot riding on the Express - it's third (and final) attempt to establish a beach head in the nation's largest media market.

Six months later it was all over along with Buchdahl's soccer career. The Express folded at the midseason All-Star Break, after blowing through a trio of head coaches and \$3 million while winning just three games. Along the way, Buchdahl was punched and stabbed by his own players, fined for referring to his own Head Coach as "the Devil" on a game broadcast and - ultimately - promoted to acting General Manager of the bankrupt club. In the chaotic final hours of the Express, the young exec hoarded what was left of the team's office equipment in his home, holding it hostage for five weeks of missed paychecks.

The equipment was still in Buchdahl's garage a year later when he enrolled at Temple University's law school. Buchdahl later worked as an Associated Counsel for the Philadelphia Flyers and as Director of NBA Photos, a marketing division within the National Basketball Association. Today he is President of HTMLawyers, Inc., a Pennsylvania-based consulting firm specializing in marketing & business development for law practices and serves as Chair of the American Bar Association's Law Practice Management Section.

Micah Buchdahl spoke to Fun While It Lasted about the New York Express on May 26th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

How did you come to get involved with the New York Express and the Major Indoor Soccer League?

Buchdahl:

I had interned for the Baltimore Blast in high school, where I was the statistician for Baltimore broadcasts on the MISL Game of the Week with Al Trautwig on the USA Network. In college I interned for the Philadelphia Fever of the MISL and later at the league office, which at the time was in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

When the Express formed in 1986, the General Manager Kent Russell, who came from the Blast, called me at the Washington Capitals and asked if I knew anyone interested in being his PR Director. Kent said the job could pay \$40K, with many additional benefits. I was earning a whopping \$15K as Assistant PR Director for the Caps. I said for \$40K I'd do it - and I did.

FWiL:

How did the bankruptcy of the MISL's New York Arrows in the same market and same building a few years earlier impact your ability to promote the club?

Buchdahl:

The Arrows really just folded from a lack of fan and corporate support. Despite having one of the greatest dynasties that you would ever see in any sport or league, led by "the Lord of all Indoors" Steve Zungul and Shep Messing, they never got great support on Long Island. On the road, kids like me loved to hate the Arrows - as a Baltimore boy, I hated Shep and the Arrows just liked I hated the Yankees and anyone who played for the Yankees.

Trying to get support for the Express, following the Arrows, was a nightmare. Whether I was pitching *Newsday* or a potential corporate sponsor, all I heard back was how bad their dealings with the Arrows were. But I was a pretty convincing guy.

FWiL:

Talk a little bit about the public stock offering. The Express owners had a plan to fund the team by selling \$5.3 million in stock to finance the first three seasons of play. Many teams have failed to raise operating capital in this fashion despite far more modest revenue expectations. As a young guy working the daily grind in the front office, did you have any sense of how poorly the stock sales were going as the season got under way?

Buchdahl:

Let's just say the money never really existed and the "game plan" for selling the stock was less than stellar. We burned through a ton of cash in a very, very short period of time. Before the season even started, I think many people knew that there was a little smoke and mirrors happening with the financing, but I also think Shep thought he could convince someone to give us the money needed. My guess is that the Commish (another guy I loved) would tell you that he knew we were doomed, but there was so much riding on New York for the league that we had to try and make it work.

FWiL:

Did you have that one "uh-oh" moment when you realized what you had gotten yourself into with the Express?

Buchdahl:

Tommy Mulroy was one of our players and also the community relations guy. Tommy took me back to the airport after my interview with the Express. He dropped me off at the wrong place. He told me later that I should have gotten "the message" - Run. Run back to DC.

To this day, I never regret the experience I had with the Express and the MISL. Some of the people I met in those days are lifelong friends, others were key references for future jobs, but mostly, I think of the stories and the shenanigans and I always smile. The MISL was one of the coolest things I've ever had the privilege of being involved in. I still always send me regards to Shep Messing through JP Della camera (the great soccer broadcaster and our broadcaster with the Express). As you know, pro sports has its pluses and minuses, but I still miss it - even though I earn more money, work less and have a great wife and kids. Which might not have happened had I stayed in sports.

FWiL:

How would you characterize Shep Messing's role with the team? Owner, President & Goalkeeper is an unusual job description.

Buchdahl:

There is no question that Shep Messing is one of the great personalities in the history of U.S. Soccer. The two of us fought like crazy. I can think of dozens of stories of the two of us going at it. But that was the beauty of Shep - instead of firing the young kid who mouthed off at him, he appreciated the gamesmanship. We were always playing mind games, trying to outmaneuver each other. There was a time in the MISL when he was an incredible goalie. I rooted for the Blast and I hated him. But by the Express days, he should have retired. Instead, he created a team and made himself the starter. But he really was the owner and President. Unfortunately, most of his energy went into trying to find money, once the franchise got rolling. But he has this incredible gift of being able to look you in the eye, tell you something you know is completely false, and yet you don't get mad. I wouldn't work for him again. But I'd give him a big hug and smile if I saw him.

FWiL:

On the field, the Express were a pretty terrible club, despite having a number of guys like Rick Davis, Mark Liveric and Fred Grgurev who had great success for other teams. What gives? Was the team's lousy record (3-23) affected by the financial chaos surrounding the club?

Buchdahl:

Most of our players were way past their prime. We had a cavalcade of former NASL and MISL superstars - but the key word is "former". Mark Liveric punched me on "media day" after we got into an argument, and he was pissed not to be featured on the cover of the media guide. He once stabbed me on a plane ride with a fork. But he also bought me drinks and invited me to his house for New Year's Eve. I loved him.

I don't remember how old Freddy Grgurev said he was, but it was probably like 50. And he would smoke cigarettes on the practice field.

The whole plan for franchise success was built around Ricky Davis - not the greatest player at that stage, but one with the great American-born name, demeanor and name recognition. I loved Ricky. If I asked him to go talk to a girl scout troop at 6 AM on a Saturday, he'd do it without saying a word.

The "Ricky Davis Incident" was the first crisis of my Express career. When I signed on with the team, I was told that Ricky was coming. We would build around him. A few days before the media event to introduce him, I was told he had changed his mind. I was a kid in my first big job, with my first huge media event coming...and I was not going to end up without my super star at the super star press conference. We had announced that we would introduce the top American-born soccer player. I remember Kent Russell and Shep asking me if it would be a problem if we just said that we had meant Kevin Maher. I said we'd be totally screwed.

I'm not sure about the statute of limitations in this regard, but let's just say that I made sure Davis got there.

What happened was the St. Louis Steamers told Ricky that we had no money and would go bankrupt before the season was out (crazy, right?). They had convinced him to stay in St. Louis. At the same time, the Steamers had problems of their own. They did not have a lease for their arena and there was a "secret memo" regarding an alternative arena and dates. "Someone" who had worked in the NHL contacted a writer at *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and leaked the memo - which put the stability of that franchise into question. Ricky came to New York. The President of the Steamers called me at my aunt's house and was none too pleased. But I was just a kid. I don't know how the memo leaked, but they started it.

FWiL:

What happened with Don Popovic? The Express brought him in for a month at midseason to coach the team but he was not allowed to sit behind the bench because he refused to sign his contract.

Buchdahl:

When they decided to fire the original coach, Ray Klivecka, another sweet guy, Shep figured Popovic could at least win a game or two. He knew how to win. But winning alone does not work in the MISL. You need to be media friendly, court the fans, etc. Popovic was part of all these teams that folded. I hated him. He hated me. He demanded that I be fired one night in the locker room. I told him off. I think Shep was just grasping for straws and Popovic was one of them.

Great story...I was doing color for our radio broadcast. Both the play-by-play guy and the color commentator were college kids. The color guy made a joke about bombs at the airport when asked about his radio equipment and was detained. So I filled in. I said that Popovic was the Devil and that he folded more franchises (5) than he won championship (4). That was some great color commentary. No wonder I became a lawyer instead. Anyway, the Commish <Bill Kentling> was listening and did not appreciate my remarks. A few days later I was in the press room at Madison Square Garden for a New York Rangers game. I think the MISL Communications Director, my buddy Dan Leary, told Kentling he could find me at MSG. They had me paged in the press room. Kentling asked me if I had called my coach "the Devil" on the radio. I said yes. It was one of a few "fine" moments for me.

FWiL:

By the end, you were acting GM of the Express. Can you describe the final weeks/days/hours of the club?

Buchdahl:

I was trying to convince the staff to keep working, even though we had not been paid in a month. I was busy denying there were any issues with us to the media. But the final day was crazy!

I was living at my late Great Aunt Elly's house in Great Neck. Kentling called me late at night and I still remember his exact words: "It's over, babe." I then called one of my closest friends, Bill Glauber at *The Baltimore Sun*, and made sure he did not get scooped. The MISL was a big beat in Baltimore. I then got on the phone with Ricky Davis. Ricky told me that I better get to the office immediately, before the office was padlocked. I would not be able to get my personal belongings out.

I went in, loaded up some "stuff" and continued working. However, I still had not been told by Shep or our owners that we had folded. They had us working business as usual. It was a free-for-all in regard to taking "stuff". Tommy Mulroy was running down the street with a sofa on his back. Late in the morning, the owner's secretary called me to say her people needed to pick up our copier. I asked why. She said it was none of my business. Someone took a baseball bat to the copier before they arrived. I can't remember who that was. But it got the owner to come and pay us a visit. A lot of other stuff happened. And I remember it all. But I still won't repeat it.

FWiL:

I find that I rarely draw out the best stories by asking financial questions. So I'll just ask if you would share a couple more of your favorite stories from those days with my readers...

Buchdahl:

I don't want to say I made up attendance numbers at Nassau Coliseum, but it always had two 7's in it. I can't remember why. But I would look around and try to determine how big a crowd I could get away with - because the *Newsday* beat writer said he better never catch me lying about them.

We had one of those "God and country" nights where you sell a lot of tickets to certain religious groups and have a little show after the game. It was my idea. Sold more tickets than anything else we had done. The owners came in and told me that they have some very Orthodox Jewish people coming to the game that night - possible investors - and they would be offended by some of the planned festivities. I started my argument with "I'm a Rabbi's kid and I came up with the idea." But when I was finally out of steam, I just screamed..."the game is on a Friday night! Orthodox Jews are not coming to a soccer game on the Sabbath!" I did win that fight.

I got into an argument with Dennis Connor at one of our last games, against the San Diego Sockers. He was just off winning the big boat race (America's Cup or whatever it was). They wanted him to be an "honorary coach" behind the bench. I said no. He was just hammered at the time. He wanted to know who the Hell I was. I was the acting GM of the New York Express of the MISL. Who was he?

We tried to sign Hulk Hogan to a 10-day contract.

We almost coaxed Pele out of retirement to play for us (for a lot of money. He was about 100 at the time).

Botched visas nearly made all of our players ineligible for the season opener.

It was so much fun.