

TAMPA BAY SUN

History of

In early March 1978 the Tampa Bay Times reported that the Tampa Bay area was being considered for a Women's Professional Basketball League (WBL) franchise. A team of investors included Seymour Weissman - Vice President of Century 21, Morris Claflin and Joe LeMac from Holiday on Ice, and local businessmen Ken Kleier and Edward Denker said they were "very interested."

After this initial rush of news, there was no mention of Tampa until the end of December 1978. On the 29th WEDU, a television station out of Tampa announced they would be broadcasting a game between the Iowa Cornets and the New York Stars on January 7, 1979. Other than Chicago's WGN and Iowa's regional tv stations there were no WBL games being broadcast. To have a game being broadcast in Tampa was a real league plus.

The WBL survived their first year (1978-1979) and supposedly had \$100,000 franchise commitments from six new cities, but Tampa wasn't one of them. The league's second season kicked off on November 15, 1979 with 14 teams divided into 3 divisions. By December 18, two of the new expansion teams, the Philadelphia Fox and the Washington Metros, suspended their operations. Neither team paid the \$100,000 price tag and neither had committed investors to support the team.

It didn't take long for problems to develop for a third expansion team, the Dallas Diamonds. On January 19, 1980, the Atlanta Constitution reported that after 18 games and losses of \$300,000 the 6-12 Diamonds ceased operations. Fortunately, officials from the WBL office jumped in and secured a new owner quickly and very few people knew of the "folding."

Even in the midst of these league problems the foundation work for a Tampa franchise was taking place. Bill Byrne, the founder and Commissioner of the WBL, was expected to resign as Commissioner (per the WBL by-laws about conflict of interest) and move with his family to the Tampa area to own and run the team. Therefore, he agreed to resign his position on January 30, 1980, so he could work with his Tampa researchers. As of January 19th, they had found five possible arenas to play in:

1. In Tampa - the Curtis Hixson Convention Center which hosted the Miami Floridians of the American Basketball Association a few years prior.
2. In Lakeland - the Civic Center
3. In St. Petersburg - the Bayfront Center, another Floridians playing site.
4. In Sarasota - the Roberts Arena
5. In Tampa - Univ. of South Florida Sun Dome (under construction at the time)

But things began to get more convoluted because several of the WBL owners felt Bill owed them another year as Commissioner, while others couldn't wait for him to resign. Byrne knew, after two years in the league, he'd needed to protect himself, so he gave no definitive answer. His marketing team showed that Tampa was a growing area, and they should be able to sell a couple of thousand season tickets.

On February 29, 1980, the two-year old Women's Professional Basketball League's (WBL) Board of Governors awarded a franchise to Tampa Bay. The 3rd year franchise cost was presumably \$500,000. (compared to \$50,000 in 1978 & \$100,000 in 1979). Over the next several months there was never confirmation that this payment was received. (The league office said it was confidential, and the owner might have paid \$5 or \$500,000.)

As early as March 6th, Byrne said he had 50-75 letters from people interested in investing in the Tampa franchise and he may sell off portions. His first goal was to establish an office by April 25th and have a Coach, a General Manager, a Marketing leader, a Ticket Manager, and a Public Relations dept. The plan was for this franchise to be "first class" all the way.

There were conflicting surveys about the area. St. Petersburg realtor Seymour Weissman (an original speculator from March 1978) told potential investors that Tampa would NOT support basketball. This feeling was confirmed by WTOG sports producer Jim Williams who felt that "basketball in the state is still in the embryonic state."

Experienced WBL employees like Bill Eaton (Director of Operations & Scouting) and Katie McEnroe (1978-79 Director of Public Relations) were sent to Tampa to secure office space & find playing sites. On May 1, 1980, Katie McEnroe was named Tampa's General Manager. Her experience as WBL's Director of Public Relations (78-79), and the General Manager of the Iowa Cornets gave the Tampa franchise the experience it needed.

In a March 1st owners meeting the owners agreed to the Tampa franchise, but it didn't want Bill Byrne as the owner. Their plan was to play with 13 teams in 1980-81.

While the owners didn't want Byrne as an owner, he proceeded with finding office space and trying to secure personnel. His original desire was to find a qualified women's coach and especially one that might have a college championship under her belt. He announced a "Name the Team" contest and that ticket prices would be in the \$2-\$6 range depending on the arena.

As of May 5, the unnamed Tampa team decided they were going to split their games between Tampa and St. Petersburg. It was really Byrne's desire to retire in the Tampa area, so he was looking for 2-3 investors to sell parts of the franchise too.

This is my favorite Tampa story - Byrne was positive he had found a solid investor in Thomas J. Kupke, who was the president of ETC Distributors. The newspapers pursued Mr. Kupke to see how deep his interest was. Kupke played it cool and didn't respond. But later he revealed that he was a father with a young daughter who enjoyed basketball. He had written a letter to Bill Byrne asking where he could see a game and how his daughter could get involved. His letter got him on a Tampa mailing list and because of his business position his name was being floated as a possible investor. Mr. Kupke had never met Bill Byrne, nor had he any interest in investing any money.

To many people, the Tampa area might have been growing, but attendance at South Florida's men's games was bad, a Holiday Tournament had to be cancelled for lack of interest, and even an NBA exhibition game was poorly attended. To the media, Byrne was just a hustler and a salesman. Bill agreed that it was his job to "sell the league."

Tampa was hoping to have a functioning office by April 25th, but by the 30th – no office. On May 12th G.M. Katie McEnroe arrives and by May 31st – still no office.

Originally it was determined that Tampa, as an expansion team, would have the first pick of the draft. This follows the pattern of the previous year when the six new teams selected before the last place, New Jersey Gems. Yet as of May 12th McEnroe learns that Tampa will instead have the 7th pick of the draft – the middle. Dallas was bad therefore they earned the first pick. Or was there an agreement with the new Dallas owner in January that they would be guaranteed the first pick no matter where they finished? Obviously didn't matter – the Diamonds stunk all year.

In the meantime, Katie McEnroe had left the Tampa area and left no forwarding address. She was frustrated to learn that the "in-depth" marketing study she had received didn't tell her that the St. Petersburg area was a retirement community. It was later discovered that Katie was spending her time in Denver. The papers couldn't determine if it was personal or exploratory.

June 15th had a simple quote for the Tampa public – "If Tampa picks in the draft, they are in. If they don't, then they won't be in the league next year."

The 1980 WBL Draft took place on Monday June 16 in New York City. Yet General Manager Katie McEnroe had not been in Tampa since May 24, so the question was who would be responsible for selecting in the draft? Through the newspapers, the team had already made it known that their first selection would be 6'5" Denmark native and Old Dominion graduate Inge Nissen.

A local successful (116-30 5 years) girls basketball coach, Tom Mosca, had written to Byrne to inquire about the Tampa franchise. Byrne met with Coach Mosca and asked him to accompany him to New York for the draft. Coach Mosca did his best to evaluate the graduating seniors.



Tampa would have been the first legitimate expansion team in the WBL. In the second year the league ADDED 6 new teams, and it would have been impossible to choose existing players from the other teams, when there were only seven functioning teams after the season. (The Dayton franchise had folded and was being transferred to California).

As for anyone who thought Nebraska was an expansion team would had seen that they drafted in the third position, the slot of the California Dreams. You can't be an expansion team and an existing team at the same time.

So, at the end of the 1979-1980 season, with an approved franchise coming into the league, each team should have made available 2-3 players to be selected so Tampa could be competitive. Instead, Tampa would have to stock up on draft picks and free agents.

Tampa draft choices were:

1 st Rd – Julie Gross	6'3"	center –	Louisiana State Univ.
2 nd Rd – Anne Gregory	6'0"	forward –	Fordham Univ.
3 rd Rd – Jen Bednarek	5'7"	guard –	Penn State Univ.
4 th Rd – Jean Rostermundt	5'9"	guard –	New Mexico Univ.
5 th Rd – Wanda Rudolph	6'3"	center –	Univ. of Pittsburgh
6 th Rd – Sue Richardson	?’?’	forward –	Old Dominion
7 th Rd – Sue Brown	?’?’	guard –	Old Dominion
8 th Rd – Lori Parrish	5'10"	forward –	Univ. of Utah
9 th Rd – Patty Sikorksi	?’?’	forward –	Rutgers Univ.
10 Rd – Adrian Denson	?’?’	forward –	Queens College

By this point of Tampa's existence, the publicity had been surprisingly accurate and well accepted. Despite not having a team name, an office, or a staff most of the information had been positive. Yet one writer, Jim Martz, took the time to research the negative possibilities of Tampa's draft picks

- #1 Julie Gross – had a viral infection & wanted to finish school
- #3 Jen Bednarek - had muscle pulls & an ailing back
- #5 Wanda Rudolph - didn't play in 1980 because of academically ineligible,
- #8 Lori Parrish - injured her knee playing volleyball.

Martz also felt that, "The Suncoast as a big league upcoming sports market will suffer." He concluded his remarks with, "There goes the neighborhood."

In a quick move the Tampa franchise traded their 2nd pick Anne Gregory of Fordham (New York City area) to the New Jersey Gems for an unknown commodity. This might have been a smart move, if we knew what Tampa was supposed to receive for such a high pick. Ms. Gregory played 25 games, averaged 14 minutes, 4 pts and 3 rebounds a game in 1980-81.

But nothing was going to deter Bill Byrne's efforts to put together a competitive team. He said he was close to signing 10-12 free agents and that some of them were all All-Pros. Afterall, who wouldn't want to come to Florida? When the papers asked why Tampa didn't get the first pick of the draft, he said it was a ruling by the Board of Governors. Yet he also knew that several owners wanted to stick it to him.

Tampa was scheduled to play in the:

Eastern Division: with the 1980 Champion New York Stars, the New Jersey Gems, the New Orleans Pride, and the St. Louis Streak.

Midwest Division: would be the Chicago Hustle, Iowa Cornets, Milwaukee Express, and Minnesota Fillies.

Western Division: would be the Colorado Wranglers (formerly California Dreams), Dallas Diamonds, 1979 Champion Houston Angels, and San Francisco Pioneers.

As the Univ. of South Florida arena promised to be ready by the beginning of the 1980-81 season they offered 90 open dates. The consensus was that a single site was better than multiple sites. The league met in Chicago to prepare the 80-81 schedule. Coach Mosca had been conducting business from home as he waited for Byrne to come in and finalize the staff positions. The team wanted to make August 1 the release date of all team information. As of early July, all the drafted players had been contacted and all were interested in playing, except Wanda Rudolph who wanted to play in Venezuela.



On July 14, 1980 the still unnamed Tampa team named their new General Manager Steve Brown. As the General Manager of the New Orleans Pride, he had done an amazing job of publicity. At this time Byrne was using the offices of Paul Coulter & Gary Ford to do his business and was claiming this location as the Tampa business office.

On August 14 the WBL Tampa team was named the SUN and their colors would be Orange and Yellow. The Tampa Bay Sun's first regular season game would be on Friday December 5th against the St. Louis Streak at the Sun Dome.



The Tampa Bay Sun hoped to benefit from the market research that showed the Suncoast had some of the country's most enthusiastic fans. General Manager Steve Brown hoped that South Florida coach Lee Rose would help promote the Sun in the Tampa area.

Byrne said the franchise had been paid for (\$500,000 – really?) and would be “run with class.” Byrne said that he expected the WBL to have 22 teams by the 5th year.

The league office demanded that each team show financially they had \$150,000 of operating capital by August 31, 1980. The average WBL team budget was about \$400,000 - \$500,000, yet it was documented that Iowa only spent about \$200,000.

The papers noted that Tampa would play in two of the 12 Nationally Televised WBL games in the coming season. There was also speculation that the WBL office would move from New York to Tampa in order to accommodate Bill Byrne's involvement. Of course, the by-laws wouldn't allow Bill to own a team and be the Commissioner, so the team would be placed in a “blind trust.”

While the WBL's 1980-81 schedule had been released, including a four-game December home stand for Tampa, it was speculated the Sun Dome would not be ready until February 1981. (It opened Nov. 29, 1980)

Bill Byrne planned to arrive on August 21 with a \$50,000 checkbook ready to begin work. The team had no phones – they were using an answering service.

On August 20 Coach Tom Mosca went to work – at Robinson High School. He still had no signed contract with Bill Byrne or the Sun, even though his lawyer drew one up and sent it to Byrne for a signature.

General Manager Steve Brown wanted to have a more veteran line-up than a first-year laden club. So, he traded their 1981 1st round pick to the Colorado/Omaha Wranglers on August 22 to obtain the rights to former Olympian and Tennessee Volunteer, Cindy Brogdon. Cindy was the 2nd player drafted in the 1979 WBL draft by the California Dreams, but she chose not to play so she could keep her 1980 Olympic eligibility. Cindy was looking forward to playing in Florida and taking advantage of the 3-pt line. She signed her contract Sept. 17 for \$22,500.

Tampa also traded a 1981 3rd (or 3rd & 5th) round pick to San Francisco for Liz Silcott (30 ppg and a 1980 WBL All-Star).

On Tuesday Sept. 2 a significant event took place to prove to the community that the Tampa Bay Sun were to be taken seriously. They held a Try-Out camp at MacDill Air Force base from 9:00-11:00 & 2:30-5:00. The camp was conducted by Sun Coach Tom Mosca & G.M. Steve Brown. 42 players showed up and 30 were invited to come back Wednesday for day two of the try-outs. Of those 30 – 21 returned.



An alphabetical list of players (by last name) participating:

Paula Alderson, a 19-year-old who technically was ineligible and had already attended a Dallas Diamonds August 2 camp at Carson-Newman College where she was about the 20th best player out of 26.

Randi Burdick (WBL New Jersey 78-80, 9.0pg and Minnesota 79-80 2.2pg)

Tutti Calhoun Carter

Carol Chason who just showed up, but was asked to leave because her rights belonged to the Houston Angels

Sue Ann Christie

Linda Connell

Accronnetta Cooper (WBL Minnesota 78-79 2.4pg, Washington 79,2.1pg)

Sheryl Faubion (came in from Tucson)

Venita Griffey (WBL St. Louis 79-80,5.0pg)

Melinda Hale (Slippery Rock)

Kim Hoyt

Cornelia Ward Jones (part of AIAW champ Delta State – freshman starter 4 years ago)

Kathy Kilgore (Clinch Valley College – who also attended the August 2 Diamonds camp and was rated the 7th best player)

Jackie Langley (Univ. Tampa)

Michele McKenzie (WBL Dayton 78-79, 9.9pg, California 79-80 6.4pg)

Jane Mierik (came in from Minneapolis)

Laura Mooney (Univ South Fla)

Angelia Newsom

Charlotte Nicholson (Univ. Georgia)

Janet Owens (Univ Maryland – starting guard)

Cricket Samuels

Valerie Snyder (Queens College)

Cathy Wall (Atlantic Christian College - who also attended the August 2 Diamonds camp and was rated the 9th best player)

Also trying out was a Ft. Myers News sports reporter (Michelle Himmelberg) who was there to experience things first-hand and get plenty of pictures. On the sideline watching was New Orleans All-Star Sandra Smallwood. She was there, because Steve Brown was trying to work out a trade for her.

At the conclusion of the two-day try-out six players were asked to return to the team's training camp in October. The six were: Paula Alderson, Randi Burdick, Tutti Calhoun Carter, Sue Ann Christie, Accronnetta Cooper, and Cathy Wall.

While the publicity from the try-out was excellent, the reporters were distraught that owner Bill Byrne wasn't present. Steve Brown explained that he was in charge of operations and that it was necessary for Bill to be away securing funding. After all the league was only 2 years old, and Bill was probably responsible for raising funds for half the teams.

Brown revealed that he was working out a deal with San Francisco to bring in 6'1" Kim Hansen, who was the 4th best rebounder at 10.7 per game in the 79-80 season. This deal ended quickly when the Chicago Hustle traded their 1981 3rd Rd. pick to San Francisco the next day, September 4th.

The positive publicity about the Sun continued September 10 when Ft. Myers News-Press free-lance reporter Michelle Himmelberg's article, "Trying Out to Gain Inside Info" came out. For those interested in learning how difficult a try-out camp really is would enjoy the intensity of this article.



Cindy Brogdon Prepares for Coming Season
...around strength will help make Sprint team better player

On the 26th the Sun signed their 4th player – Randi Burdick. We know that Cindy Brogdon signed on Sept. 17, but the other two players are speculated to be Valerie Snyder from Queens College and Melinda Hale from Slippery Rock College. Each of them "committed" on August 26.

On September 29 the WBL owners met to show their ability to finance (at least \$150,000) and run a team in 1980-81. Of the 13 teams 4 were unable to continue. Teams that would not be a part of the WBL's 3rd season were the 1979 Champion Houston Angels, the 1980 Champion New York Stars, the 1979 & 1980 runner-up Iowa Cornets, and the former Milwaukee Does (who became the Express in May 1980).

Interim Commissioner Sherwin Fischer, who took over in September, when Byrne resigned said there was a criteria that needed to be followed before a team could be considered functional. New York and Iowa could not meet the WBL Board of Governors financial criteria. Yet Fischer believes Milwaukee, Iowa, and New York would be back for the 1981-82 season.

The Tampa team passed the financial test, though they did not have an office or a staff. With four teams ceasing operations this would allow up to 48 players to be declared free agents and to join other teams. The speculation would be that with basketball being a cold weather sport, those free agents from mid-western teams might find living in Tampa to be very attractive.

Yet on October 16th, the Tampa Tribune claimed neither Bill Byrne nor Steve Brown had been in Tampa for close to a month and there was no office yet. This alone killed any possibility of taking advantage of signing free agents.

Up until October 20th the league believed that Tampa had an arena, a television contract, and an office. They also thought the Sun had 10-12 players signed, though no contracts had been received in the league office. Yet this could have been an oversight as the league office was moving from New York to Chicago.

Coach Mosca realized other teams had begun practice and the Sun had neither players nor an office. But at least Byrne paid a \$600 phone bill at the Mosca residence, because Steve Brown had been using Mosca's house as an office.

The October 23, 1980 Ft. Lauderdale News gave an excellent summary of where the Tampa Bay Sun stand:

The coach has yet to sign a contract, the owner and general manager are missing and the stadium won't be ready until February. There is no publicity man, no ticket manager, no tickets, - not even a team office. The players - whoever they are, wherever they are - have no idea when to report, and there is no one who can tell them.

With the same cloak of mystery that took place when the Tampa Bay Sun was created, they died the same way on October 24, 1980. Bill Byrne sent a telegram to the League Office asking for a transfer to Boston and to cease the Tampa Bay team.

Who were these new Boston investors? The Boston group of investors were represented by an attorney named Scott Lange. Scott confirmed the buyer was ready to take over the team. Yet the new prospective owner was actually someone who had been turned down earlier in the year when he applied for a franchise. It would seem the original asking price of \$500,000 was beyond reach of the owner, but if Byrne was selling Tampa at a discounted rate than maybe now, he could afford it.



This took place Thursday October 23, 1980, and was confirmed by Interim Commissioner Sherwin Fischer. Coach Mosca wasn't surprised when he was told by GM Steve Brown. Mosca was told that Boston had investors, an arena, and was ready to go.

What exactly did this Boston group buy? 1st round draft pick Julie Gross of LSU would join the new Ladies Professional Basketball Association, and 3rd round pick Jen Bednarek wisely took a job with Southern Illinois Univ. Star player Cindy Brogdon hadn't heard from anyone in 3-4 weeks. Therefore, after the sale she declared herself a free agent, because she signed a contract with Tampa, and not Boston. On November 6, she signed a contract with the New Orleans Pride.

As for Coach Tom Mosca before the sale he had a contract drawn up and sent to Bill Byrne, who never returned it. During the months of Sun activity Mosca probably lost about \$5,000-\$7,000 for his efforts. He continued his work, because Byrne always assured him that "next week" things would be finalized. Coach Tom Mosca may obtain a lawyer to recoup some of the time and money he gave to the team as an unpaid coach.

It was difficult to believe how the League was deceived at the September Board of Governors meeting where financial info had to be presented. Four teams folded and Tampa was a "very strong member of the nine" producing statements.

How was the sale of the Sun and the loss of their team received by the papers

This saga of the Sun has had a rather foul odor from the beginning. But the smell is even worse now because serious questions have arisen as to whether Byrne ever intended to field a team here.

There exists the very real possibility that Byrne purchased the team from the WBL at a cut rate price with the idea of selling it for a nifty profit while keeping league officials in the dark about his real motives.

The current price for a WBL franchise is apparently about \$500,000 but league officials refused to say whether Byrne had paid that much.

From the beginning not all the local media was convinced about Byrne's intentions. Some began to ignore him quickly when Byrne showed a lack of insight of the area by asking questions about playing sites and where certain cities were in relation to Tampa.

On November 4, 1980, the Tampa Tribune headline said it all:

Sun Officially Sets on Tampa WBL Franchise

So Concludes the Story of the TAMPA BAY SUN