

Interview with Nick Sakiewicz:

**CEO and Operating Partner – Keystone Sports & Entertainment
(PA - Philadelphia Professional Soccer)**

By Greg Miller

As any pro sports fan knows, Philadelphia is one of the most passionate sports markets in the country. OK...being a DC sports fan that had to endure yet another heartbreaking series loss to a Philly team (Capitals were eliminated by Flyers in NHL playoff last week), referring to fans of teams from Philly as “passionate” is the nicest thing I can conjure up (the choice words I am suppressing will wait for our next encounter).

And now, we can add to our list of big-time rivalries with the arrival of soccer. Philadelphia’s new Major League Soccer team will begin play in 2010 (marking a return of pro soccer after a 28 year absence).

To a large degree, the Philly Soccer ownership group’s success can be attributed to attracting a very familiar name to pro soccer: Nick Sakiewicz (pronounced Sah-kev-itch).

Recently, I had the opportunity to interview Nick while watching D.C. United in the CONCACAF Champions’ Cup game at RFK Stadium.

Interview Introduction:

- Nick Sakiewicz is a modest and hard working man. But make no mistake, his ambitions for soccer and for the new Philadelphia team are lofty. As the new CEO of the newest major league sports franchise in America, he’s focused on putting together a winning organization. His stated goal is to create a first-class organization both on and off the field. From my interview and some digging on the Internet, I have learned that Nick has the credentials to do just that.
- Accomplished Executive: Nick Sakiewicz is a founding executive of Major League Soccer and part of the League since its inception more than 12 years ago. Nick is a two-time winner of the MLS Executive of the Year award. He has served as the president and general manager for both the Tampa Bay Mutiny and the Red Bull New York (formerly the NY MetroStars).
- Notable recent accomplishment: Nick was recently successful in gaining a stadium development for the New York Red Bulls. Since then, he has been working diligently on the Philadelphia project. But his biggest accomplishment would have to be that he is credited from turning around the NY MetroStars from worst to first and making them the bone-crunching dynamo they continue to be after he has moved on.
- Education: University of New Haven. In four years as a goalkeeper at UNH, Nick earned All-New England honors in 1980-1982 and NCAA All-American honors in '81 & '82. Nick still holds every major goalkeeping record at the school. Nick was also on the 1980 US Olympic team (a hard-working team that never got to experience the Olympics due to the boycott on Moscow).
- Post Graduation Pro Soccer: After graduating, Nick played with F.C. Nantes in the French First Division in 1982. He also played Major Indoor Soccer back in the states for New York Arrows before heading to F.C. Belenenses of the Portuguese First Division. He later played for the Tampa Bay Rowdies in the APSL during the 1989 season.
- Move to Coaching: Nick served as an assistant coach and goalkeeper coach at the College of Boca Raton (now Lynn University) from 198 until 1990, winning an NAIA National Championship

in the '87 season. He served as the first goalkeeper coach for the Southeast Region in the Olympic Development Program from 1985-1989 while also serving the Florida Youth Soccer Association as goalkeeper coach.

G.M. Where is home?

Nick: Northern New Jersey (currently resides in Kinnelon, NJ)

G.M. Where will you live now that Philadelphia has won the expansion team?

Nick: I am definitely moving the family to the Philadelphia area and am currently focused on Chadds Ford area

G.M. Please tell us about your family...

Nick: I am married to Isabelle who I met in Lisbon Portugal while playing professional soccer their in 1984. We have two boys, ages 15 and 9 - Nick and Max.

My parents are both first generation Americans but are from different countries. My mother is from Poland and my father from the Ukraine. I have a brother who was a superb soccer player for Loyola in Baltimore but blew out his knee on the turf. He now lives in San Antonio, TX.

G.M. Who are some of your favorite Soccer players?

Nick: Current professional player would have to be Ronaldo. A favorite from the past would be Diego Maradona.

G.M. And thoughts on favorite teams?

Nick: That is a little harder. Of course, here in states I am going to say Philadelphia. Around the globe, I would start with Manchester United but also would say that Barcelona and Arsenal are others I enjoy and follow.

G.M. Can you share some thoughts about the style of soccer we can expect from your new team?

Nick: Much like the style of soccer we are watching here tonight (D.C. United was playing Pachuca of Mexico during our interview), I like to see players that work to get the ball; team play that is high-tempo. A team that never forgets the fundamentals but matches that attribute with good physical play. The teams I have coached in the past are known for making things happen and being the aggressors. I believe that is something you can expect that we will develop in Philly as well.

G.M. When do your actually start forming the organization and selecting players?

Nick: The selection part is already underway. In addition to the players, we will have 10 coaches, another 40-to-50 managers and as many as 200 staffers working concessions, parking, ticketing and ushering. It's a big organization that we are forming and it takes a well planned effort to get it done in just under two years.

In the midst of all the planning is scouting for talent to source the 18 senior players and 10 development players that we need to have ready for training camp in February 2010 (just 19 months from now). We are fortunate that Philadelphia will be the host of the NCAA College "Super Draft" in our inaugural season. And of course, some of my favorite colleges for recruiting will include UConn, Virginia, St. John's, Portland, UCLA and Santa Clara. But already I have my eyes on some great freshman players from this year just to be ready.

While it's true that it's a business and that a stadium and administration are important to the whole project, the show we put on is the game we play ...and we measure our success on our winning record.

G.M. Will you source talent outside the US?

Nick: We have the opportunity to bring on 9 foreign passport players. With my background in the

league and networking, we have great contacts within Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. I hope to land some high roster players from efforts in these countries.

More practical and more locally, I am excited about the 250 youth players (ranging from just 8 years to 16 years of age) that we will be working with in and around Philly. We are putting together a Youth Academy and that is not only good for the team, but good for the community and improving people's lives – even if they don't go on to professional soccer.

G.M. I have read that as a coach and general manager you like working closely with players and teaching them the intricacies of the game. Will you be active in that same way with the Philadelphia team?

Nick: I believe that passing on knowledge learned from years of playing at the highest levels of professional soccer is every bit as important to the work I do with the Youth Academy as it is with the pro team we establish in Philadelphia. While I won't usurp our coach, I believe I can continue to stay close to the game and players even as I "kick" myself upstairs. In all honesty, I wouldn't enjoy my job without the interaction. The secret is that the troops spark more energy within me than I could ever do for them.

G.M. In addition to the game of soccer the project is quite staggering in its scope (see endnote for summary of project). Beyond the winning team and working with area youth, is there anything else you wish to share about the project?

Nick: Along with the ownership group, I am passionately committed to doing things in a major-league way. In just seven weeks since we won the team, we have already received commitments from 4,000 people for season tickets. I don't intend to let these people down. We will create a development that makes the community proud. It will be the people's team, with a world-class stadium.

As of now, the team has no nickname, no jerseys, and no team colors. Despite the lack of identity, it does have the "Sons of Ben" – a wildly enthusiastic fan club already over a thousand members strong. Compared to some of the other markets out there, Philly will be way ahead when it comes to fan support.

Interview Postscript: While not on Nick's resume, I was able to uncover reports that he once made a living as a Chippendales dancer in Totowa, NJ. And if you believe the stuff that people post about him on the Internet, he is also a French pastry chef and modeled for romance novel covers. Whether true or fiction, stories like these are sure to add to the intrigue.

Join me in welcoming Nick Sakiewicz to the Buccini/Pollin and PMHS team! I know that PMHS has quite a few associates that would welcome the opportunity to serve on the task force to open that beautiful new stadium and be a part of Philadelphia's soccer revival. Whadya say Nick?

Endnote - Philadelphia Soccer Stadium, Team & Market Facts:

A 20,000-seat soccer-specific stadium in Chester, 13 miles from downtown Philadelphia and accessible by public transit and Interstate 95, is the centerpiece of a \$500 million waterfront development project along the Delaware River. The stadium is expandable to 30,000 seats in the future.

Philadelphia will be the 16th team for Major League Soccer. The campaign for identity for the new team is expected during the Fall and will determine color, logo, shield and name of team.

Philadelphia and the adjacent Delaware Valley area is the nation's fourth largest population center with an estimated 6.5 million people and is also the fourth-largest TV market with nearly 3 million households.

