

Washington Post Live  
Michael Tollin Interview

[Due to the audio quality of the interviewee on the phone recording, indiscernible notations are in the transcript.]

Will Hobson: This is Will.

Cathy: Hey, Will. It's Cathy. How are you?

Will Hobson: Good, Cathy. How is it going?

Cathy: Good. One moment, I'll have Mike for you.

Will Hobson: Okay.

Cathy: Well, you're on with Mike.

Will Hobson: Hey, Mike.

Michael Tollin: Right, Will.

Will Hobson: Hi. How are you?

Michael Tollin: Good.

Will Hobson: Good, good. First off, I'm a reporter working on a story, which I'm sure Cathy told you. I'm recording this conversation. Is that all right?

Michael Tollin: Yes.

Will Hobson: I know you've got a crammed schedule there, so I'll just give a brief introduction here. The *Post* this year we're working on basically a deep biographical examination of Donald Trump. We're going to be rolling out a number of stories that really just tell the story of his life from the beginning through the present day. I'm a sports reporter, so the chapter of his life that I'm working on is Trump, the Sportsman. I'm

also doing another chapter about his various media relationships in Tabloid Donald which chronologically is kind of at the same time period as really before and then just after his USFL years.

Basically we're calling tons of people who had been around Donald throughout his life. My prime goal is any anecdotes, or scenes, or moments that when you talk to people about your memories of Donald that they come to mind. That will be great. And I have some specific questions about his USFL time. Does that all make sense?

Michael Tollin: Yeah.

Will Hobson: I guess, first off, what's your first memory of Donald Trump? When did you first cross paths with him?

Michael Tollin: Well, it would have been in Trump Tower in 1984. He brought the team from J. Walker Duncan, the original owner of -- he had gotten the New Jersey Generals. He inherited Herschel Walker and a not very good team that I believe it only won six games in its first season. And he had already built Trump Tower. He was clearly a guy who is looking to raise his personal profile and build a brand splashing Trump in giant gold letters on a tower and arguably the prime location in all over the world. It certainly jumpstarted his efforts, and buying a football franchise was sort of a natural progression.

It became clear to me and my colleagues that this had much more to do with self-aggrandizement, narcissism, and his efforts

to find a way to get a team in the National Football League. In no way was he really buying into the mandate or he sees himself playing football. So it's all sort of his own personal gain, much of which became clear was contrary to the best interest of the United States Football League.

Will Hobson: Was there like a big press conference or something announcing his purchase of the Generals?

Michael Tollin: I don't remember that at all. I don't think I attended it. I remember going to that [indiscernible] press conference there in the lobby surrounded by fountains and marble and all kinds of, you know, testaments to his own personal glory. What I remember is him famously giving the quote: If God meant football to be played in the spring, he wouldn't have invented baseball.

So why did you join the party, man? This is a spring football league, okay? So if you don't believe in it, why are you here? Well, those are the answers I already alluded to. He wasn't invited to the big dance, so he thought of getting through the backdoor way of getting into the USFL.

If you looked at the recent sports history, the NBA had incorporated ABA teams and the NFL had incorporated AFL teams in their respective mergers. And so I think he felt like if he could put appropriate pressure on the NFL, that the Generals

would be one of the teams to be welcomed into the NFL even though there were already two New York-based teams.

Will Hobson: That's something I was actually interested in. Was it ever explicitly said that he was prevented from getting an NFL team, like the NFL said you will never get a team in this league?

Michael Tollin: It was more anecdotal. It was a lot [sounds like]. I think we all assumed it based on who he was and the kind of guy he was in his public profile. It didn't assume there could be any chance that he'd be approved by the majority of the NFL ownership. I can't speak to a specific conversation. There was a discussion in the late '80s about him trying to buy the Patriots. I don't know, again, the specifics. But that was actually years ago and long gone. If you think about what to expect from their owners, he doesn't fit the bill really. He's not a team player. It's all, you know, what is he going to do? Call them the Trump Generals? It wouldn't have surprised anybody if he did.

Will Hobson: Did he know football, the sport like discussion-wise?

Michael Tollin: There are a lot of things he doesn't know that he blusters his way through if he talks loud enough and evasively enough. You sort of forget what the question is or

what the topic is. I mean we've seen that obviously in all its glory over the last how many months.

Donald liked to ask questions, he just didn't necessarily listen to the answers. Do you think Walt Michaels is the right coach? Do you think I should go after that [indiscernible]? Do you think he needs help on defense? And you'd be so flattered to be included in those kinds of high level player personnel or strategic positions, but you'd realize he's just hearing himself talk. It's a question he probably read about in the news or the *Post* or his large clippings that are put on his desk every morning by his assistants in his office surrounded by framed portraits of himself with whoever he did the [indiscernible] photo with.

You know, he would be on the phone, I remember being in the office. He would be on the phone with Howard Cosell. He'd be asking Howard questions. I remember him conducting business in the office and a rack of men's shoes from Barneys would show up and will have clothes [sounds like], the best in the business. Now he points to -- just send me that one. Now he's just purchased \$10,000 worth of men's clothing.

Will Hobson: They would just roll the rack in?

Michael Tollin: Yeah, they'd roll the rack in and try to watch it.

Will Hobson: How many suits would he buy in one sitting like that?

Michael Tollin: Well, actually three or four out of a dozen or so. You can do the math with the figure of a couple of thousand dollar suits. He never offered me one though, it's several. If you saw the film in the beginning, you'd see the footage.

Will Hobson: No, I didn't.

Michael Tollin: When we were up in the luxury box, it's the Meadowlands and the Generals' game. He knows there was nothing unusual about the box. We were situated in New York. He was splashy, a good copy, so it's natural for us to go up and do three cheers from there. We were certainly falling right into the game plan.

Will Hobson: What was your life situation then? How old were you? You had just started --

Michael Tollin: I was 28 years old. I ran Halcyon Days Productions, H-a-l-c-y-o-n. We were the equivalent of NFL Films. We worked with USFL, with NFL Films, plus the NFL. We were its official exclusive production company. We did a weekly show on ABC affiliates. We did Halcyon [phonetic] films for the teams. We did features for ABC and ESPN coverage. I was a kid and like a lot of the players, we were all making it up as we went along, but we're having a great time and believing in the

concept. It always felt like everybody except the one guy who just didn't quite get the memo.

Will Hobson: Did he ever mention his playing days, when he played football when he was a kid?

Michael Tollin: No. It's hard to imagine.

Will Hobson: It's in one of the books about him said that he was a punter actually back in the day.

Michael Tollin: I'm not aware of that actually. That's funny. I would check it like everything else, credibility and jeopardy.

Will Hobson: I was going to ask how he interacted with his players and coaches.

Michael Tollin: Oh, he'd walk in the locker room with that imperious smirk on his face, his chin tilted upward, and put out hands. After wins, he'd do a lot of high-fiving and backslapping. I never saw him give a speech or have any kind of in-depth conversation. He would just like to make his presence known. It's worth mentioning that his team, it improved. I think they won, you can check it, but I think they won 13 games, and in '11 they made the playoffs. But also it's important to note that his team never won a playoff game. Not only that it didn't have a championship, but they didn't ever win a single playoff game.

I started doing interviews just as they started asking me when he was first taken seriously as a candidate, and I said not to worry. He starts fast, but he doesn't finish. Hopefully he'd be out of the race after Iowa and New Hampshire. It wasn't the case, but it might take it to, it might take us to Cleveland to be rid of the nuisance.

Will Hobson: What did he do during the games? Was he sitting in an owner's box?

Michael Tollin: Yeah, he's sitting there. Like haven't you seen a little bit of that? Oh, he's very boisterous and a big show off, cheering when he could figure out what was going on. And Ivana was there, she was dressed to the nines. The owner's box is very, you know, it's a funny dynamic. It's far and it's passé [sounds like]. People covet those invitations. We were there. We must be filming. We didn't go often, but a lot of -- a couple of times. He certainly watched the games and he has a general idea of what was going on.

Will Hobson: Who was he usually around? Who were his close friends or confidants on the team?

Michael Tollin: That I don't know.

Will Hobson: Was it just a jury of one then in terms of deciding I'm going to throw a bunch of money at LT; I'm going to sign Doug Flutie even though I just signed Brian Sipe last year?

Michael Tollin: I don't know. I don't remember if Walt Michaels was involved in player personnel, or if he was just coaching. I don't who remember who the general manager is. I know Jimmy Gould was a guy that was involved with Donald. He's been quoted. There's a little bit of traveling chorus - myself, Steve Ehrhart, these are probably guys on your list, Charles Steiner. You should to talk to him, he's the announcer for the Dodgers. He was talking about Donald. He was the announcer for the Generals. Jimmy, Charlie, Steve Ehrhart. He was like the lieutenant commissioner under Chet Simmons and kind of became the people at the flame. He's the one who houses the three dollars [cross-talking] and 76 cents check in Memphis. So those are the guys who would know better.

Dom Camera is another guy who's the marketing director for the USFL. A smart guy. A good guy. He was there the whole way, that's Dom. Those guys tend to be a little more sympathetic than me. I'm a little more, I don't know, whatever it is. I'm just little more willing to speak my mind. I have a pretty clear sense of who he is as a person. I think ultimately it's the things you want from a team owner and more importantly from a presidential candidate - leadership, vision, and humanity - and he's pretty much bereft in all three.

Will Hobson: There are specific anecdotes that have been reported about the USFL but, given that you're mentioning your

documentary, I wanted to see if you've heard these or not. There's an anecdote of Donald ordering -- like Flutie was hurt for a playoff game and like calling down on the sideline. He's ordering Flutie on the field and the coach refusing, did you ever hear about that happening?

Michael Tollin: No, I don't remember it.

Will Hobson: The other one is like trying to fix a playoff matchup to be more favorable, like trying to lead to rejigger the seedings so that the Generals would plan a different set of playoffs. Have you heard that?

Michael Tollin: No, I don't remember that either. But it doesn't surprise me.

Will Hobson: I talked to Steve briefly. I'm going to talk to him in more detail tomorrow, Steve Ehrhart. Steve has mentioned this mock trial thing the NFL did before the actual trial in New York. Have you heard about that?

Michael Tollin: Vaguely.

Will Hobson: From anyone other than Steve?

Michael Tollin: No. It's a vague memory. When you say mock trial, I wouldn't have been involved in it.

Will Hobson: Outside of Donald buying the league and the trial itself, are there any other particular -- if you're doing like a timeline of important dates in USFL history, are there

any other really pivotal times? Like one of those owner's meetings I'd imagine?

Michael Tollin: Well, listen, I've already made my case in the film. I feel like the critical factor in its demise began with John Bassett's illness because Donald was able to strong-arm the owners into replacing Chet Simmons with Harry Usher who -- I liked Harry, but I didn't agree with his strategy which was spying into and trying to execute Trump's strategy of forcing the NFL's hand by claiming antitrust violations and ultimately waging the lawsuit.

There are many of us who believe there were missteps along the way, like going to 12-18 teams in year two, diluting the talent and getting a diminishing the level of play, focusing more on ABC than ESPN in terms of hitching their wagons to a media partner. ESPN was a perfect partner. They were a fledgling [sounds like]. USFL was critical programming to them that I think could lead -- could have grown along with ESPN. It could have been signature programming.

There were mistakes made and there were definitely cracks in the armor. I believed they were struggling a little bit, but I still believed in the concept. John Bassett, I think, was the key proponent. And when John was found with two brain tumors and ultimately was going to fight for his life, he could no longer participate in league meetings. It was easier for Donald

to bully the other owners there. The letter from Bassett to Trump that was tweeted [sounds like] originally by Jeff Pearlman --

Will Hobson: I saw that.

Michael Tollin: -- who's writing a book, that's fantastic. I just found that in a clip because I told Jeff I would look through some artifacts for him and I saw that. So I go, there you have it. So ownership was weakened. They were kind of on their heels. This guy has a way of getting his way mostly by bullying.

And so when they basically said this is all we've got, which -- if you talk to Charlie Steiner, he'll be very eloquent about the failure of the vision in the long view they had, that the USFL maintained. When the NFL went on strike, there was an enormous opportunity for some sort of arrangement being made with the NFL with the USFL players which they [indiscernible]. So they kind of shot themselves in the foot by just standing and putting all their eggs in the lawsuit basket. That's the way I see it.

It's interesting, people think they lost the lawsuit. Well, they won the battle and lost the war, as you know, the judge ruled the NFL was guilty with the antitrust violations. But how did he come up with that crazy settlement? I think a lot of it has to do with the mood in the courtroom. You know,

all [indiscernible] Donald Trump could somehow turn the behemoth of the NFL into an underdog and that's what he did because he hired Harvey Myerson, the flashy Madison Avenue attorney. It was set in New York instead of Birmingham, or New Orleans, or Memphis, you know, the USFL stronghold. So somehow the NFL was able to portray itself as the downtrodden league who is being beleaguered and deceived and the sentiment shifted in that direction. Hence, yes, they were guilty but there were no appreciable damages being awarded.

Will Hobson: Were you present at any moments at that trial?

Michael Tollin: No, I didn't go. I had to get on with my life. I've haven't seen him in 24 years between the end of the league and the interview with [indiscernible].

Will Hobson: So that actually leads really nicely into what I want to ask you, which is in that interview there's some animation. Like there's a back and forth that he agreed to talk and then didn't agree. What was the run-up in getting his cooperation with the documentary?

Michael Tollin: Have you heard me say that and you just need me to chat [sounds like] you or have you not heard it?

Will Hobson: I've seen it in other medium. I have not heard specifically what --

Michael Tollin: Well, I mean I just couldn't because I don't have a lot of time. I did a podcast with Bill Simmons, which you can get online. It's just about a week-and-a-half-ago. It took us forever. It's about an hour. I went on to talk about Trump, but we talked over an hour before we got to Trump. So about the hour mark, go past it. We finally get to Trump and I tell about the endless chase and how and why he's actually relented. It actually goes deeply into kind of how it came about and what has transpired. That was really what I was --

Will Hobson: I'll check the podcast to save you time. One question I do want to ask, I don't know if it's covered in that podcast, can you tell me when that letter arrived from Donald and like where? Just describe like to your house, to your office, was it in an envelope with Trump Organization?

Michael Tollin: Yeah. It came in the mail to my office in Studio City in California. You've seen it I guess, right?

Will Hobson: Yeah, I've seen the letter.

Michael Tollin: Yes. So you know he didn't actually write any letter. He just scribbled in black sharpie on my letter. It was sent via regular mail. I received it in my office. I sent another letter back still trying to get him to come to the premiere. I said you'll hear me describe what led to the letter, which is me telling him that I was trying to be

objective and fair. And I invite him to the premiere on the letter that I wrote, which essentially he got an invitation. He wrote the way he did. Well, back then social media was in its infancy. There's no Twitter, no Instagram. I can't remember what started that first time. I remember specifically that it was picked up on page 6 of the *New York Post* and in *TMZ*. Then later it was entered into the Donald Trump hate mail. I'll say that of course it's a source of great pride.

Will Hobson: The date on that letter, because the picture's online, actually it says you sent -- it's like 2000 which doesn't really --

Michael Tollin: Yeah, 2000. That was a typo by my long-gone assistant. It's 2010. He's now long-gone because of that. By any means, yeah, it was 2010. Oh, wait. No, no, no. That's not right. It's 2009. It was the same year, yeah. The film aired October 2009. The letter was sent in the summer of -- whatever the date was, it was correct. It's just the year --

Will Hobson: Yeah. The date is September 15, 2000 on the letter.

Michael Tollin: Yeah, that makes sense, about a month or six weeks. It's sort of near.

Will Hobson: The letter sent the 15th, premiere is in October. When did you get this letter back from Donald?

Michael Tollin: Pretty soon, like actually about a week later. He came back quickly.

Will Hobson: Anything else we didn't discuss, any other anecdotes or Donald memories that we didn't get into that you think I should know?

Michael Tollin: You don't need any more political statements. No, I think that's about it. I think you'll get some other people talking, but challenge them is all I can say. They'll want to remember, remembering him fondly. Challenge them to really challenge their memories. Do you have Charlie's phone number?

Will Hobson: I do not. Do you have it just handy?

Michael Tollin: Yeah. XXX-XXX-XXXX, but of course, you're going to start it, but I think he'll want to talk to you. Hold on one second. All right. Are we good?

Will Hobson: We are. Thanks so much for your time, Mike. If there are any final questions, I'll just pop an email with Cathy. All right?

Michael Tollin: Okay then. All the best. Good luck.

Will Hobson: You too.

Michael Tollin: Bye.

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