

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: The sports network ESPN owes its existence to Tulsa's own George Conner. After graduating from the University of Tulsa with a marketing degree in 1964, George went to work for Skelly Oil in downtown Tulsa.

When Getty Oil gained control of Skelly in 1974, George became a finance manager and was asked to study a proposed Connecticut-based Cable Television network committed to all-day, every-day sports programming. George approved the project and Getty Oil made an initial investment of \$10 million which grew to \$160 Million. ESPN went live on September 7, 1979.

Co-founder Bill Rasmussen stated: "I still firmly believe that, without Conner as the bridge to Getty money, there would have been no ESPN."

Listen to George talk about the beginning of this new concept of a 24-hour sports network and his role in establishing ESPN on the podcast and oral history website VoicesOfOklahoma.

Chapter 2 – 10:50 Hardworking Family

John Erling (JE): Today's date is April 30th, 2025. So, George, would you state your full name, please?

George Conner (GC): George Edward Conner.

JE: And where are we recording this interview?

GC: We're recording the interview at Zarrow Pointe Care Center...

JE: ...here in Tulsa, Oklahoma...

GC: In Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Your birth date?

GC: June 26, 1941.

JE: And that makes your present age...?

GC: 84.

JE: Where were you born?

GC: Oklahoma City, St. Anthony Hospital. And I was adopted.

JE: Before we talk about your mother and father, let's talk about your great-grandfather, George Washington O'Neill. Tell us about him.

GC: Well, my name came from him. They came from southeastern Missouri to southeastern Oklahoma. It was a covered wagon trip. It took a couple of months, I think, and several people died on the covered wagon trip. He ended up in the very first legislature and helped write the Oklahoma Constitution. The family settled in Clarita, Oklahoma, and that's where my first kind of—my parents were. My father was from McAlester. My mother met my father when my aunt invited her to a state fair in McAlester, and that's where she was introduced to my father, who was manager of the Coca-Cola plant in McAlester.

JE: All right, let's go to your mother. Your mother's name?

GC: Betty O'Neill.

JE: And then she was born and grew up where?

GC: I'm not sure on—oh, I think she was probably born in Missouri. I'm not positive on that, John.

JE: OK, what was she like? Her personality?

GC: I was really proud of my mother. My father didn't let her get involved in the Coca-Cola plant. She took care of my brother and myself, and she worked on our house. We had a beautiful big yard, and she even laid the steps down to about three levels where we had a barbecue. It's where we had a lot of the Easter egg hunts when I was in grade school. She'd hide the golden egg, and we had a lot of fun at our house on Country Club Road. It was just real close to the country club in McAlester. When my father bought the house that we were in, it was about \$100 a lot. We were the second house on Country Club Road. I think he could have bought every

lot on the road for like \$100. Easy to look back at what could've been done.

But I was very proud of my mother. Again, I'm emphasizing that my father did not want my mother to be in the Coca-Cola plant. He wanted her to devote all of her time to my brother and myself. Later on, when my father got sick, she ran the Coca-Cola plant. It happened while I was at TU at the time. My father passed away, and I would go down after classes at TU to help my mother at the plant because I worked there from tricycle up. I did everything at the Coca-Cola plant—every duty. When we bottled Coke, we would switch jobs every 30 minutes from stacking cases, putting them on the truck, and inspecting bottles to make sure there wasn't any foreign matter in the Coke when they came out of the washer.

So I went down to help my mother a lot, even after classes, because she really had not been involved at all and didn't know much about the Coke plant. But she did a fabulous job managing it. The Coca-Cola Company thought really highly of her. When my father passed away, they measured the success of a Coca-Cola plant by the 6.5-ounce bottles of Coke for every person in the county, including babies. When my father got sick, he was up to 76 bottles of Coca-Cola per person per year. About four or five years later, Mother had increased the count up to—I don't have the exact number—but like 250 bottles of Coke per year. The Coca-Cola Company was very happy. I think it was the most per capita of any of the Coca-Cola bottlers in Oklahoma.

She did a good job. She got a call from Paul Austin, president of Coca-Cola, one day, and he said, "Betty, we want to send you to Washington, D.C., to talk to Carl Albert," because there was a bill stuck in committee for about six months. My mother said, "Mr. Austin, I really don't like to fly that much. I think I can do as much by calling Carl Albert. And if I can't, you can send the Coca-Cola jet to McAlester and fly me to Washington." That was on a Friday. The following Monday, she got a call from Paul Austin, and he said, "Betty, I can't tell you how much the Coca-Cola Company appreciates what you did. The bill was killed this morning." It was a bill to tax every soft drink bottle cap sold. She got total credit. Mother said it just probably happened, but I think she was responsible for getting it killed.

JE: But she didn't go to Washington?

GC: No, she just called Carl.

JE: Carl?

GC: And Carl was in London, in a meeting with the Queen. She talked to his secretary, who also was—both Carl Albert and his assistant were members of the McAlester Country Club. We saw Carl Albert down at the country club about every Sunday. She really got credit for that.

JE: We need to name your father. Your father's name?

GC: My father was Lee Conner.

JE: And then he grew up where?

GC: He was from Kentucky—Bardstown. He grew up in Bardstown. His home was right across the street from the Jim Beam home. I'm not sure how he ended up in Sherman, Oklahoma, working for the Coca-Cola plant there. Then he came from the Sherman plant to McAlester. The Coca-Cola plant in McAlester was started when it was Indian Country. My father did a good job until he got sick.

JE: So did he own that?

GC: He had a partial interest. I don't know how much. At some point, my mother sold the interest in the Coca-Cola plant. I think it was probably around '82 or something like that.

JE: Did you live on a farm?

GC: In the summers when I was 11, 12, and 13, I went to my uncle's ranch and farm in White Deer, Texas. Growing up, it's my favorite memories. I worked. My cousin would come in and wake me up at 5 o'clock, and I would walk around the house with my eyes closed as long as I could. His wife, Nancy, fixed a great breakfast, and I could even have steak. I drove a tractor—actually three different tractors—and a combine. We gathered hay. I just cherished the time I spent in White Deer. We'd be in the fields plowing, and I'd come home with my face covered in dirt. But I loved it. We worked 12 hours a day, but I really cherish that opportunity. My parents really taught me to work hard. I think a lot of kids today are missing out on that kind of upbringing, and that's why, in my opinion, a lot of kids just aren't getting that experience of having to work.

JE: And then speaking about working at the distributorship—didn't you work pretty much at all different levels?

GC: I did, yeah.

JE: From a child, 11, 12 years old?

GC: I did. Again, I kind of say I may be exaggerating a little bit, but not much. I started working in the Coke plant from tricycle up. I drove some of the trucks. I'd go to Tulsa to pick up a brand-new truck when they painted it and drive it back to McAlester. I was in sales—every part of the Coca-Cola business I was involved with. That's why I went back to McAlester to help my mother when she took over.

JE: So when you were a child, how many Cokes did they allow you to drink?

GC: I could drink all I wanted to. I know some people say Cokes may be bad for you, but my mother lived to 101 and a half. She drank a lot of Cokes.

JE: When did Diet Coke come about?

GC: Well, I don't remember exactly. Seems like I might have been in high school when it came out. I had the first bottle of Sprite that we bottled when it came out. Then Fanta came out—I was there for several different product introductions.

Chapter 3 – 6:45

Business Degree

John Erling (JE): OK, your education—where did you go to grade school?

George Conner (GC): Went to Washington Grade School in McAlester.

JE: And then high school—junior high and high school?

GC: McAlester Junior High and McAlester High School.

JE: And when did you graduate?

GC: In '59.

JE: What do you remember about high school? Were you active?

GC: I was. I was in Key Club. I was president of the Key Club, which was part of the Kiwanis. I was on the golf team. I'd worked up to number one on the golf team for my senior year. And I hurt my back in the Coca-Cola plant. When I went down to help my mother, one day we were short of people, so I stacked 67-pound bottles of Coke. I took them off the conveyor and shifted, and ended up doing that for an hour—instead of the usual 30 minutes. Then in the next day or two, I couldn't sit in class. So I went to McBride Bone and Joint, and they wanted to operate. I said, "I'm only gonna let you operate if I can get to play golf this year." And they said, "Oh yeah, you'll be able to do that." I haven't played golf since, John.

I was in the band, and the band director—he knew I was playing golf on the golf team—he said, "George, you got to choose between the band and golf." And I said, "I'm choosing golf." So he got me out of the band.

JE: So you graduate from high school in '59?

GC: Yes.

JE: So then what do you do?

GC: My brother was very, very smart—much smarter than I was—and he was the first merit scholar in Oklahoma. He went to MIT the first year. General Electric offered to pay his tuition anywhere in the world he wanted to go, and he chose MIT. He was third in his class at MIT the first year, and then he decided to switch over to Harvard. He ended up graduating from Harvard. He was three years older than I was, and he told me, "George, the only school you should consider is the University of Tulsa." So that's why I ended up there. He said, "George, why don't you go to TU for the first year, and if you want to go to a bigger school and parties, you know, you can." Anyway, I fell in love with TU and Tulsa. So I ended up graduating there.

JE: OK. Your brother's name?

GC: Richard Conner.

JE: Was he also adopted?

GC: He was from the same agency in Fort...

JE: ...Worth, but not necessarily the same parents?

GC: No, no, I have no idea who.

JE: Did you ever follow up to find your natural parents?

GC: I didn't. I was always curious, but I never pushed it.

JE: Did your parents tell you eventually that both of you were adopted, I suppose?

GC: They tell me—my mother told me that she did. I don't remember that.

JE: So the University of Tulsa—you did one year, and then did you decide to stay?

GC: I did. I joined the Kappa Sig fraternity and ended up making a lot of good friends that are still friends today. I was also in Circle K, which was another arm of the Kiwanis Club when I was at TU. I was president of Circle K. Again, I was on the golf team and in the band.

JE: You graduate from University of Tulsa in '64?

GC: 1964.

JE: And what was your degree?

GC: Business.

JE: Why were you choosing business?

GC: I really thought that my experience with Coca-Cola was a good experience, and I just wanted to be better at it. I hurt my back in my senior year again, and the doctor said, "George, we want you to go ahead and don't interview with anyone until you graduate." So I hadn't interviewed with anybody up until a week before graduation. I went down to apply at Scaly Oil Company because Cary Freeman was in charge of personnel. So I went down and interviewed, and he said, "George, we've got to send you to the doctor for the physical, and I don't think you'll pass it." So I walked back into Cary's office, and he said, "You know, you passed it."

He said, "Now George, the only position I've got is in the audit department." And I said, "Cary, I'm not gonna be an eyeshade accountant." He said,

"George, that's the only position I've got right now. Let me put you there, and in a year or so, I'll transfer you to marketing or some other department." Well, I went back to Cary at some point and said, "Cary, I think I'm in a position with more exposure to top management and more rounded experience with all the executives, so just leave me there." I ended up working in every position in the audit department—from traveling auditor to supervisor—and later became head of the audit department.

At some point, they wanted to transfer me to the Treasury Department, and I was executive assistant to the treasurer for several years. I was the only individual in the Treasury Department that didn't have an MBA. So I was kind of honored that they chose me. I didn't know how I ended up there, and I later found out—it was probably a year or more later—that John Bumgarner is the one who recommended me for the Treasury Department.

JE: While working for Skelly—John Bumgarner, who I've interviewed—he was working for Skelly at the time?

GC: He was, yes.

JE: One of his first jobs too, I think.

GC: I later found out he was responsible for me going to the Treasury Department, which I thought was pretty special. There were about five of us in the Treasury Department, and we worked awfully hard and we played hard. I wouldn't trade that. That was a good experience for me.

Chapter 4 – 7:12

The Big Idea

John Erling (JE): But I think it was 1974—Getty Oil gained control of Skelly.

George Conner (GC): They did. They owned a big part of it prior to that, but then they bought the rest of it. That's when they transferred me to Getty Los Angeles, and I became finance manager for the non-oil part of Getty. It was called Diversified Operations, and we had all the non-oil activity at Getty. We had the vineyards in Bakersfield, the Getty Museum in Malibu,

and the Getty Castle in England. Whenever people came to Getty Oil with their ideas to use our money, our division is the one that looked at it, and I evaluated that.

Most of the ideas they brought to us—I didn't think they were really great ideas. But one came along with Bill Rasmussen, where I did think it was a good idea.

JE: What town did you live in when you moved to California?

GC: Marina del Rey.

JE: And you liked that, did you?

GC: Oh, I did. I told my boss, Stu Evey at Getty, who hired me, "Mr. Evey, I think I'm gonna like my job, but I don't think I'll like living in Los Angeles." And he said, "George, I'll bet you \$100 that I can't transfer you after you've been here, because you'll probably like it so much." And I did. I lived in Marina del Rey before I went to ESPN, and then after ESPN, I went back to Marina del Rey. So I lived there a total of six years.

JE: To set you up for the story about Bill Rasmussen—we point out that J. Paul Getty was the world's wealthiest man at that time, and Getty Oil had a whole lot of money. So that sets you up for Bill Rasmussen's story.

GC: It does. Stu Evey was kind of J. Paul Getty's right-hand man. J. Paul Getty told Stu that he wanted him to put some of the excess money at Getty to work in non-oil activities.

JE: Bill Rasmussen had an idea. And tell us about that idea and who he shared it with.

GC: Bill and his son Scott were going to his daughter's 16th birthday party, and they were stuck on the New Jersey Turnpike. Scott said, "Dad, why don't we do sports on television 24 hours a day?" So that was where the idea really came about.

K. S. Sweet was a venture capital firm in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, who put about \$12,125,000 into Bill's idea. They also had Jack Nicklaus as a client, and we were looking at buying the Kona Surf Hotel. I went over with Stu to look at the property, and we decided to bring Jack Nicklaus in to put

in a second 18-hole golf course once we closed the deal.

The people we were buying it from knew that Getty's and Skelly's word was as good as a written contract. But when they found out we were bringing Jack Nicklaus in, they got greedy and upped the price—about \$2 million. I said, "Stu, it's not worth it. Let's walk away from it." So we did.

The K. S. Sweet people said, "Bill, why don't you go talk to Getty Oil?" He had gone to seven other companies to try to get the money for his venture because he was out of money, and they all told him no. So that's how Bill Rasmussen ended up with Mr. Evey at the very start.

Bill came to LA and met with Mr. Evey. He presented about a 20-page proposal of his idea for sports on television. After Bill left—before he even got in the elevator to the first floor of the Getty Building—Stu had me go up to his office. He handed me the proposal and said, "George, take this." This was 9 o'clock in the morning. "Take this back to your office, and I'll call you in the middle of the afternoon."

I went back to my office and said, "Janet,"—my secretary—"whatever this is, Stu is pretty excited about it. I don't think he'll give me till the middle of the afternoon for my opinion." Sure enough, he called at 11:45 and said, "George, I'll meet you up in the club." We had a bar and restaurant on top of the Getty Building.

So I met him in the lounge and the bar. He had a scotch and water, I had a rum and Coke. He said, "George, what do you think?" I said, "Stu, this project is worth looking at." And he said, "George, start on it."

From that instant on, I went back to my desk—I didn't touch any paperwork on my desk ever again. I was involved in evaluating ESPN.

I spent three weeks in December of '78. Stu told me that Bill had to have a yes or no answer by December 31st, because he was out of money. He had used every credit card and loan he could get. The bank said no more money, and he was at his limit on credit cards.

Stu said Bill needed an answer by December 31st. I said, "Stu, we can't give

a yes answer by December 31st, but we can say 'no, maybe.'" So December 31st comes. I traveled all around the country in those three weeks.

I met with a professor at the University of Chicago who supposedly knew all about cable. Bill and I met with him in Chicago and realized that Bill and Scott knew much more about cable than the professor did.

Stu asked me what I thought. I said, "Stu, it's worth looking at." So I said, "Bill, when Bill calls and wants an answer, tell him that if he has to have an answer today, we've got to tell him no. But I like the idea, and I think you do too. So let's fund the payroll and other expenses until we can finish looking at it."

Stu sent me back to Connecticut in March of 1979 to finish evaluating whether we'd buy ESPN or not.

Chapter 5 – 5:50

Doubters

John Erling (JE): But we've got to talk about this as a concept—it had never been thought about: 24 hours of sports. So it would then be called the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, or ESPN. But it was a concept that you had to sell to people, and you had to make a decision—are people going to want to watch sports 24 hours a day?

George Conner (GC): The networks said we were crazy. It would never work. They said we couldn't do a football game with the number of people we were going to produce it with. But we weren't union—we didn't have to have three people on every camera. They literally laughed at us at what we were doing.

From the instant I got involved and went back to Bristol, everybody was so excited about what we were doing. The media started picking up stories about it, but it took a while for that to really germinate. I never, ever, John—I never wavered in my belief that it was going to go.

I cannot adequately explain how exciting it was to walk through the Bristol headquarters. It was electricity. You didn't have to talk to anybody—you could just walk through it. Sid Peterson came out and said, "George, I wish I could take this enthusiasm back to Getty Oil. I've never seen anything like it." So Sid Peterson was a big supporter. He was chairman of Getty.

JE: But you did have the naysayers, very much—ABC, NBC, and CBS. I mean, we should point it out—Dallas Cowboys general manager and president Tex Schramm told you that it wouldn't succeed.

GC: That's right. A good friend of mine from McAlester, who I grew up with, was with the Dallas television station and did all the Dallas Cowboy games. He invited me down for a Cowboy game—it was actually a game in Los Angeles between the LA Rams—and he introduced me at a pre-party to Tex Schramm.

I said, "Mr. Schramm, George Conner, Getty Oil. We're looking at putting sports on television 24 hours a day." And he said, "George, there's already a lot of sports on television." At that time, it was Wide World of Sports and maybe just a few others. He said, "I don't think that makes any sense." He was real negative. He was about the only one that was super negative out of all the people I talked to. I talked to TV producers in Hollywood and a lot of college coaches, but he was negative.

JE: So if he was the only main one, it didn't cause you to pause on this?

GC: It didn't cause me a second pause.

JE: Right. So was the initial seed money like \$10 million?

GC: That's what Bill asked for, but we didn't approve that. When Bill called and wanted to know whether we were going to proceed, Stu told him no—but we're going to fund payroll and some other expenses until we finish evaluating it. So we didn't give him \$10 million. What we did is fund the expenses we had to, to help get it going. So it wasn't \$10 million—we ended up putting much more than \$10 million eventually.

JE: So you needed talent salaries, production personnel salaries, equipment purchases, and all those things needed to all...

GC: Very, very expensive. When I recommended to Getty that we do it, I said, "I'm only recommending we do it if we hire the very best people, get the best equipment we can, and have very talented people. Otherwise, I'm not recommending we do it."

JE: So how are we going to get this ESPN so that the rest of the nation can view it? And that would be through a satellite company and cable. So there was a Connecticut-based cable TV network—yes, you tell me about that.

GC: In Plainville, Connecticut, there was a—I'm trying to think of the exact name of the cable company—but anyway, they leased some space in their office. They ended up expanding and ended up up in the attic at one point. I think when we hired Chris Berman, he went up to the attic for the interview.

At that point, the media people in ESPN were producing massive news releases to promote what ESPN was—because people didn't know. The telephone operators in Connecticut, when people called for information and wanted the phone number for ESPN, the operators would say, "ESP what?"

It wasn't long until they figured it out. They had so many phone calls. Scott Rasmussen told me that when they would go to lunch, they would leave the phone off the hook so that the line would be busy when people called—so they'd get the impression that, boy, are they busy out there.

JE: Was Chris Berman the first personality that you hired?

GC: He was. Chet Simmons and Scotty Connell hired Chris Berman, and they hired a number of people. It was really a short period of time. Scotty and Chet brought a lot of the NBC people over to ESPN.

Chapter 6 – 3:13

Transponders

John Erling (JE): Let's talk about the satellite—and leasing transponder space. We'll just call it space on the satellites.

George Conner (GC): Yes, it was transponder 7.

JE: And RCA owned that, yes?

GC: RCA Americom. Bill went to RCA and wanted to find out if it would cover the entire state of Connecticut. And RCA told him, "Bill, it'll not only cover the entire state of Connecticut—with a large enough earth station, we can pick it up in Hawaii." And Bill said, "Well, how much does it cost?" And RCA said, "Well, Bill, how many hours do you want?" Bill said, "How many hours does HBO have?" And then, "How much is it?"

I think it was about three-quarters of a million dollars. When RCA told him that it would cover Hawaii with a large enough earth station, Bill didn't have any money—but he said, "I'll take one." They took a liking to Bill—he's got a great personality. They saved it for him. They didn't think he had any money—we hadn't committed to fund it at that point.

Maybe two or three weeks later, there was a front-page article in The Wall Street Journal about what transponders could do and how they were going to change television. RCA was inundated with hundreds of calls from companies that wanted a part of it—but they didn't get a part of it. The RCA people saved it for Bill.

I went back to RCA to see how serious they were, because that was the key to it—being broadcast. We could've sold the transponder rights for several million dollars right away, because everybody wanted to get in on this new cable television and satellite opportunity.

JE: Right. But then you had to—you needed to start bringing in some money. And so that would be advertising. You were going to potential advertisers selling a concept.

GC: That's right. And we had no Nielsen ratings, which was the way we measured TV at that time. So it was literally just a concept.

I remember Bill came into my office one day and said, "George, we just got an advertising contract from Budweiser—I think it was \$2 million." Bill and I said, "Hey, this is going to be easy." It wasn't easy. It had to create a lot of media attention. But they were the first big buy at ESPN.

JE: It was the largest buy in cable television history. "This Bud's for You" and "Weekends Were Made for Michelob." So that was a great relief. But then other advertisers came along and probably said, "Oh well, we'll give you X amount of dollars." It was a nominal buy. But then maybe when Anheuser-Busch came on, they said...

GC: That helps us.

JE: We need to be there.

Chapter 7 – 7:05

September 7, 1979

John Erling (JE): September 7th, 1979, at 7 p.m. is the launch date. Talk to me about some of those days leading up to that date.

George Conner (GC): We were working—when people came on as ESPN employees, they had to catch up real quick or we didn't have time for them, because things were moving so very fast. Bill had chosen September 7th, 1979, partly because we were on Transponder 7, as the date he wanted to go on air. And we hadn't even started building the building yet at that point. So it was a real challenge.

We worked up until midnight and 1 and 2 o'clock in the mornings, almost every day. I was there for three and a half years. About three weeks before we were scheduled to go on the air, Chet—who was our president—called Mr. Evey and said, "Stu, there's no way Bill and George are going to get this on the air by September 7th." Stu called me and told me what Chet said, and I said, "Bill and I are confident we're going to get it on the air by the

7th.”

Well, we were cutting it kind of close. We had about 10 minutes before we plugged into the cable—from the control room into the truck that would send the satellite signal to Transponder 7. So we were cutting it pretty close, but we did get on the air September 7th, 1979, at 7 p.m.

JE: And you were right there in the studio?

GC: I was in and out of the studio, and then I went over to the Holiday Inn. We had a big party for the ESPN employees, and we watched it from there. We were on the air—it was after SportsCenter ended. We did an interview with Chuck Fairbanks, and maybe five or ten minutes into the interview, the screen went black. To snow.

And I said, “Jesus, I thought we’d be on the air a little bit longer than this.” Turns out Bill and Scott and I—we went into the control room after we went off the air at 2 a.m., looked at the log, and we were off for maybe a minute or a minute and a half. But it seemed like an eternity, because I was so hopeful that things were going to go good. And they did. That was just a hiccup, and I don’t think we’ve had any big hiccups ever since.

JE: And then you had personalities like Jim Simpson...

GC: We did. And Bud Wilkinson.

JE: Right. So you went live September 7th, 1979. How big do you think the audience was?

GC: It wasn’t very big around the world. I don’t remember exactly—maybe 30,000 or so.

JE: Yeah, well, today—and maybe it’s even bigger than that—68 million households. ESPN+, 25 million. And it’s worth now—maybe more than this—\$24 billion. And I’m sitting across from the man... you could have dumped this. You could have told them this thing is not going to work. You were their bridge to the money of Getty.

GC: John, I was willing to stop it at any point that I got uncomfortable—but I never, ever did. I never even came close to getting uncomfortable. I knew

my job was on the line. I was responsible. And I would have told Stu, "Let's don't put any more money in." But I never did get to that point.

JE: Were you always that confident? In the middle of the night? Didn't you ever wake up?

GC: Because again, if you knew how excited everybody was around ESPN—and they were working so hard to make it work. They worked hard. They had fun. And there were a lot of very talented people.

JE: Because those very talented people probably wouldn't have come on if they didn't believe in it. So it was also giving everybody confidence. "Oh, Jim Simpson came on. These people came on..." So it helped the confidence.

GC: It kind of mushroomed. We hired individuals—they walked into our office every day to apply for jobs. One individual came in from Yale University and applied for a job. His name was George Bodenheimer. We hired him in the mailroom—probably \$7 an hour—and it was a closet. Literally, a closet. A small closet.

His dad was a very prominent attorney in Hartford, Connecticut. He called his dad that night and said, "Dad, good news, bad news. I got a job. It's at ESPN, but it's in the mailroom." George ended up in every position. He took my company car to get my boss at the airport. He was in sales, affiliate sales. He ended up becoming the longest-serving president that we had. A super nice guy.

I think after he left ESPN, he worked for Sirius XM. But a super nice guy. The two presidents before him weren't very nice to Bill Rasmussen. When George came in, he told the people there, "You've got to treat the original founders nice." And that's when it really changed.

They didn't like Bill for some reason. And that totally changed when George said, "You guys have got to be nice to the people who started this."

JE: In addition to the major sports then—we think about how you put the spotlight on sports that weren't covered, like karate and polo and billiards...

GC: Well, we had to save money. That's why we went with some sports that didn't cost very much. We ended up getting better sports as time went on and we became better known.

JE: And then you helped schools—colleges, universities—spotlight their athletic teams?

GC: Well, we did. And it really has to this day—funding a lot of the sports deals.

JE: Of course, for them, the schools—this is a tool to attract future students, not just athletes. "Wow, I want to go to Michigan," and all that kind of thing. So then, how much did Getty end up investing in ESPN?

GC: John, I don't remember exactly, but it might have been \$140 to \$150 million.

JE: They said the return on the investment exceeded \$300 million.

Chapter 8 – 3:00

Why Bristol

John Erling (JE): So is it Bristol where the headquarters...

George Conner (GC): It is. And everybody said, "Why Bristol?" That's because Bill took an option to buy a piece of land in Bristol, and that's where we ended up building ESPN—only because Bill had an option to buy some land there.

JE: I'm sure a lot of people wonder about that. I know I did too.

GC: Oh, everybody did. Bristol—why Bristol?

JE: How big a community is Bristol?

GC: I went to a city council meeting in Bristol because the people there didn't want to put in an earth station. They said it was going to kill some birds. So I went to the meeting, and I got up and said, "I'm George Conner with Getty Oil, and we're looking at putting money into this venture. If you knew what I knew, you ought to approve ESPN making the purchase." But they were very negative.

I cannot tell you how much Bristol appreciates the amount of money we are paying them now in property tax and everything else. When I got to Bristol the very first day, there were eight people. That was the entire company. And today there are about 3,800 employees on the Bristol campus—and thousands more around the world. We have offices in New York, LA, and overseas. We've got several different channels now. But it's done pretty well.

JE: I didn't follow—why was Bristol against it?

GC: They were afraid the giant earth station would kill some birds.

JE: The earth station—you mean the satellite...

GC: The satellite dish, yeah.

JE: The receiver—and so they thought it would kill a few sparrows, is that it?

GC: But again, I couldn't have been more positive. I said, "I guarantee there are a lot of other towns that would snap this up in an instant if they knew what it was."

JE: I often wondered if there was any time along the way that somebody else would try to launch something too.

GC: Well, the day we met with the NCAA committee in Kansas City, there were two other cable operations that wanted to talk to Walter Byers, hoping they would get the rights. They were right outside the door when Bill was making the presentation. I knew there might be some competition, but I thought they wouldn't do it as well as we were going to do it. And that was partly because of the Getty money, and also because both Chet and Scotty wanted it to be the best. We hired the best people.

JE: So there was never any question at that meeting?

GC: I mean, they could have given the rights to somebody else, and it would have been a completely different story.

Chapter 9 – 6:50
On the Beach

John Erling (JE): Then you stay there with ESPN for a while. How long did you stay with ESPN?

George Conner (GC): I was there for three and a half years. My boss called me and said, "I want you to transfer back to Getty LA. I want you to be in charge of building Getty's headquarters building with MCA Universal." I'd been there about two and a half years when he made that call. I said, "Stu, I can't leave at this point. It's just not running smooth enough." So he said, "George, I'll call you later." He called me one year to the day, same time, in Bristol, and said, "George, I still want you to transfer back to Getty LA to be the man that works with building the headquarters building for Getty." So I went back.

JE: We should point out—I keep saying that you worked... you really didn't work for ESPN. You were always a Getty employee.

GC: Yeah. But I would also, you know—I had a title of finance manager. I was VP of ESPN, yeah.

JE: So you had dual roles there. Right. So then you went back to LA to work for Getty?

GC: I did. They gave me eight going-away parties. At the last one, I was almost killed in a bad automobile accident. I wasn't driving, but I was in a Ford Bronco, and we hit a tree—went off an icy road dead center, close to the ESPN headquarters. My face was cut up, my ankle was crushed, my knee was crushed, my wrist was broken, both arms. I decided to leave Getty after ESPN because nothing could be as exciting as what we did, and I had worked up until midnight, 2 o'clock, for three and a half years.

I was up against the dashboard, and I heard the ambulance coming, and I said, "I better stay on the Getty payroll a little longer because of the medical plan." I had a bunch of operations in Connecticut. The doctors told me they didn't want me to fly back to LA. I said, "Well, I'm a Getty person, and that's where Getty wants me, and I'm going back." So I went back in almost a total body cast. I arrived in LA on Cinco de Mayo—May 5th, I

think—at LAX Airport. I stayed in Marina del Rey and ended up renting an apartment there on the beach.

JE: Any side effects from that accident to this day?

GC: Well, yeah. The doctors told me I'd probably never walk again, and I decided to prove them wrong. I got an apartment right on the beach in Marina del Rey, and I walked on the sand in my bare feet because it helped ease the pain. The people who lived on my street could hardly stand seeing me walk down the sidewalk to the beach because they knew how much pain I was in. And I was in a lot of pain—but I ended up walking OK, pretty much.

JE: So then you remained with Getty for how long?

GC: Maybe eight or nine months. Then I walked in and told my boss I was leaving. They said, "What?" Because I had a good job, they paid me well, and my future looked good. But I was ready—I was kind of burned out. I wanted to rest. So I said, "I'm going to take a year off." I had a number of offers from the people I was working with at MCA Universal to build the headquarters at Getty. And I said, "Hey guys, I'm flattered, but I want to take a year off. Maybe when I want to go back to work, you'll be around." I decided to take a year off—and that one year turned into five years living at the beach. Susan Anton and Dudley Moore were just down the street. Suzanne Somers was about a block away.

JE: Suzanne Somers?

GC: She just passed away recently, I think.

JE: She did. Yeah. And were you out there waiting for her to come out a lot?

GC: Well, you know, I'd wave to her. But it was pretty exciting.

JE: So what did you do with yourself? You can't just be on the beach every day for five years. What did you do with yourself?

GC: My mother worried about me. But I played the stock market—from about 5 o'clock in the morning until it closed. Then I'd ride my bicycle up the beach and have a hot dog in Venice at the hot dog place. Then I'd play on the beach until the next morning. I'd get up and work on my stocks. I did OK.

JE: That sounds like an appealing life.

GC: Well, I was just at the right time, and I was very lucky, John.

JE: Well, when you left Getty and all—you were well set in life. You didn't have to do another darn thing, did you?

GC: Well, I didn't. But I always kept busy.

JE: You needed to. You had that in you. But then, at one point—Texaco, I remember this—Texaco took control of Getty Oil in 1984.

GC: They did. They called me—I was out on the beach in Marina del Rey by the ocean—when they called and told me that they had sold ESPN, I think for like \$130 million to ABC/Capital Cities. Then it was later bought by Disney.

JE: I remember when Texaco took control in Tulsa...

GC: Because when they sent me to Getty LA...

JE: ...they became a huge sponsor on KRMG. Probably our biggest client. They just about ran the station. Ron Blue was so taken with them. I distinctly remember that—Texaco.

GC: And John, I of course remember that time. I listened to you early in the morning.

JE: Yeah, it was a sweet time. It was a good time. Why do you think the Getty people trusted your judgment so much?

GC: I know when I went to Getty LA and was going to be working for Stu Evey—I don't remember exactly, but they told me he probably didn't have confidence in me at first. They said, "You'll know." And I knew pretty quick that Stu had confidence in my judgment. Because he didn't initially—you know, he was kind of standoffish. And then I knew that he listened to me. And obviously, when I made a recommendation, I think he listened to it.

Chapter 10 – 6:14
Best Memories

John Erling (JE): Well, as you worked on ESPN, it was always quality, quality. And you probably drew that...

George Conner (GC): That was when my father—when I was in junior high—the Coca-Cola people came. My father told me when they left that everything associated with Coca-Cola has to be first class. Keep your uniforms clean, the trucks clean. And I applied that to every business I was involved with. It had to be the very best. And I said, “I’m only recommending that Getty do this if we hire the best people. It’ll take expensive equipment. Otherwise, I’m not recommending that we do it,” because most new businesses do not succeed.

John, I thought of the one I was trying to think of earlier—Dick Vitale. Scotty Connell was the one that hired him. Scotty talked to Dick, and Dick wasn’t very enthusiastic about it. I think his wife kind of talked him into it. Scotty said when Dick first came on, he was talking over the producer that was talking in his ear. It took him a long time to get used to it—but he finally did. Dick Vitale was a great catch, and Scotty is the one that hired him.

Scotty Connell—he was in charge of production. I really liked Scotty. He was the quality guy and had several awards from his production at NBC.

JE: But Dick Vitale—did he come in the early days of ESPN?

GC: That was a little later, yeah.

JE: And he still is on. He’s been fighting cancer—two bouts of cancer. But he was on recently, and I think he’ll still be able to do a limited service. You think about what a great, iconic person he became.

GC: He is. He’s a character.

JE: Right. If we start looking back on your life—are you able to talk about the best memories of ESPN?

GC: I think the unbelievable excitement of the people and how hard they worked, and that they believed in what we were working toward.

JE: Is that excitement still in your spirit?

GC: Absolutely. It was a new concept—it hadn't been done before. And again, there were a lot of people that thought we were crazy. But I never wavered. And most of the people working for us didn't waver, I don't think.

JE: So Bill Rasmussen, who is a co-founder—his text to you: "I still firmly believe that without you as the bridge to Getty money, there would have been no ESPN."

GC: And Peter Fox wrote a note to that effect when he published the book.

JE: Do you still go walking down the hallway thinking, "I did that"? You turn on your TV—"I did that."

GC: Well, it's hard to comprehend, John. But again, I was just very fortunate—right time, right place—to have that opportunity.

JE: Yeah, but to have the wisdom too. All right—the future of ESPN. We have artificial intelligence coming along. Are you able to look into a crystal ball and talk about how artificial intelligence might influence ESPN?

GC: I'm sure it will have a change. It's already made some changes at ESPN over the years. But I don't know what's going to happen to cable. It'll evolve and make some changes. I think we've got good people back there who'll hopefully make good decisions.

JE: I'm going to draw from the book we've been talking about—by Peter Fox—because he talked about AI: how it could personalize recommendations, be used to recommend sports content to viewers based on their interests, viewing history, and social media activity. It can also provide more in-depth analysis of sports games and events. So we haven't seen yet how this is fully going to influence ESPN.

Let's share some of your wisdom—advice for young people who are listening. Maybe they're thinking about a startup, or just in general.

GC: I've advised a number of people who went into the workforce. I said—even if you're thinking of not enjoying the job you have and want to make a

change—do the best job you can for your employer up to the very last day. If you work hard, you'll have an opportunity to advance. Even if you don't like it, give your employer 100% of your work every single day.

JE: How would you like to be remembered?

GC: Well, I don't know, John. I don't think about that. I'm really not a media person that much. I'm really proud of ESPN. I think about ESPN every single day—and many times a day. It's just kind of magical that I was there at the time.

JE: Well, those of us who are sports nuts—and I am one of those—I will look... I turn on ESPN every morning for an hour at 6 o'clock. I have to catch up on everything. I will now look at it in a different light. And I will always think of George Conner when I do that.

GC: Thanks, John.

JE: And you're a hero to the sports fans. And here you are—living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. So thank you for sharing the story.

GC: You're welcome, John. I enjoyed telling the story.

JE: Yes, you do. And you're good at it—very good. Thanks, George.

GC: Thank you, John.

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