**AFTER THE BUZZER Jim Thomas Part 1 Transcript**

Bob Wallace: Welcome to After the Buzzer. I'm Bob Wallace, a partner and attorney at Thompson Coburn LLP in St. Louis, MO, and Chair of the firm's sports law practice. Thompson Coburn is a nationwide law firm and also has offices in Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York and Washington, DC. We specialize in representing entities and people with sports interests, whether it's acquisitions, facilities, sponsorship or contract negotiations. Our attorneys are skilled in these areas as well as handling compliance issues. We try to bring you, on After the Buzzer, more than just scores. We try and bring insight into what goes on behind the scenes. The who, what and why decisions that are made by sports teams and organizations. I can think of no one who has followed and reported on the three W's more than our guest, recently retired sports reporter, Jim Thomas of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, who recently put in his papers after 48 years of working at the Post. During that long tenure as a sports journalist, Jim who started as a copy clerk and then moved to cover high school sports before heading to the University of Missouri Sports Beat. When St. Louis lost the Cardinals and began chasing the an expansion team, Jim began covering that story and eventually became the Beat reporter covering the St. Louis Rams. He covered that team from 1995 to 21015. After a year covering the NFL large, Jim began covering the St. Louis Blues. His career, therefore included championship teams in football and hockey. Jim was ever present with those teams. No one worker. Although he cut those, he covered no slack, he was fair and honest and well respected. Over the years, we became friends. A native St. Louis and a graduate of UMSL, it is my pleasure to welcome Jim to After the Buzzer. Welcome, Jim. It’s great to have you here.

Jim Thomas: Quite an introduction. I appreciate it. You and I go way back to right around the time when the Rams moved here. It's always good to see you, Bob.

Bob Wallace: Yeah, we were just talking about that. That we met at the Ritz Carlton in 1994, I had just been hired by John Shaw and I guess Mark Canis way back when the two people that were responsible for that. And I came and I was going to take Jay Zigman’s place -- because Jay didn't want to move to St. Louis and I was going to come and do what I have been doing for both the Cardinals and the Eagles, which was two player contract negotiations and then there was a change in plans and I moved over to doing the business side of the of the Rams. But this interview is about Jim Thomas, who's had a, you know, really a spectacular career and really had a front row seat to sports in St. Louis over the last 50 years. So I mean, what made you become a sports writer?

Jim Thomas Well, originally I wanted to be a political writer and cover government. My first two years before I graduated from UMSL College, first year of college I was at George Washington University, five blocks from the White House. My second year I lived off campus, which was a mistake, but anyway. I'd go by past the White House every day on the way to school and this was like during the Watergate time and in the afternoon when I was coming home from classes I could see Dan Rather setting up on the White House lawn to report on Watergate. So that was the plan. All the President's Men is one of my favorite movies.

Bob Wallace: Mine, too.

Jim Thomas: Woodward and Bernstein were very, I’m very inspired by them. I was actually the news editor my sophomore year, so that was one of the reasons I left GW. I had to keep a 3.0 average. I was in my sophomore year. I was just bitten by the bug. I was a news editor for the campus paper. I working like --

Bob Wallace: If you're on a scholarship and you have to keep a 3.0

Jim Thomas: 3.0. And anyway I was spending 40 hours a week working at the newspaper. So anyway, long story short, come back to St. Louis, 7-1/2 year plan. I finally get my degree. I'm working as a clerk. They called them copy boys then and I was going to school at UMSL during the day and working as a clerk at night and in St. Charles. The Post Dispatch at that time we're talking like mid 70s, late 70s. We were big, or the Post was big on like local coverage, like suburban. We had like a south edition, a metro east edition. And the biggest one was the St. Charles edition, St. Charles Post. It'd be like an 8 page wrap around. If you subscribe to the Post Dispatch you get 8 pages Monday through Friday of St. Charles Post news. Anyway, they had one full-time sportswriter out there, a fellow by the name of Steve Wayne who was just in town. He's had an amazing career. You should have him on the show. He's from Affton, went to high school with John Goodman out there.

Bob Wallace: John Goodman’s from Affton?

Jim Thomas: Right, Affton High School. He has worked all over world. He's working in Tokyo now, Steve Wayne. Anyway, he's the full time sports writer out there. There were only like 6 high schools out in St. Charles County then. There's like 20 now. There's so many, anyway, he says hey, would you like to be a stringer? We need to cover this high school football game, Duchene and St. Charles West. A stringer is someone, you just go out, you cover the game, you write a story and back then we were paid like $25 per story for a story. So while I – I did that on weekends, so suddenly it was 1980, Steve Wade is transferred downtown. They need someone to cover area wide high school for the whole paper. They can't hold interviews. They can't have a job search. They need someone to handle the St. Charles Post Bureau out there and they said, Jim, you want to do it? I had just -- the timing was -- I just got my degree from UMSL about two months earlier and I said sure and they said OK you're on probation. No one's ever told me 48 years later that I'm off probation, so I guess, I guess I'm still on probation. So that's how I started. So I just you know, I was always a sports fan. I just kind of stumbled on new sports.

Bob Wallace: That job was covering sports in St. Charles.

Jim Thomas: Yeah, just the St. Charles sports. Back then there was just St. Charles, St. Charles West, Wentzville, there was one Fort Zumwalt, one Francis Howell, and that was it. Now there's like what, 3 or 4 Wentzville, 3 or 4 Zumwalts, Holt and we'd cover, yeah Holt, Liberty and we would cover Lindenwood a little bit. You remember? Of course, you know Earl Austin, Jr., he was the big star at the Lindenwood in basketball. Wes Unsell’s, nephew, I believe. I remember writing a story on him. We didn't back then the St. Louis football Cardinals would train at Lindenwood and we would leave that to the main down to – we’d do maybe one or two, right when camps started. I remember going to Lindenwood and doing the story when Mr. Hannifin was a coach, going in his office and he treated me like a long lost friend. He's in there. He's puffing away on the cigarettes telling story after story all of a sudden there’s a knock on the door and Larry Wilson enters and says coach practice is starting; you got to get out there. He was jabbering so much to someone he just met. You know how Hannifin is . Every time you think you've heard every story he tells, he gives you another one. So yeah, I just kind of stumbled into sports again. I'd always been a sports fan and everything like that but my dream was to, again, cover politics and government. So, that that started me in sports and one thing led to another and here I am -- there are times when it seems like it was like 10 minutes ago when I started and times when it seems like it was four or five lifetimes ago. We were using typewriters, typewriters back then.

Bob Wallace: Right.

Jim Thomas: My kids, my three boys, kid me that I was using maybe a chisel on a stone tablet.

Bob Wallace: Yeah. I mean when you write your kids don't know that -- my kids don't know about it. But you know, you used to write a paper for college, or probably even when you were doing that, you had to use auto correct or not auto correct –

Jim Thomas: The white out.

Bob Wallace: Yeah, you have to use white, you know. I think writing is, although they say people don't write as well, you have to be able to write -- I mean, if you tell me I can edit something 10 times, I'll write it 10 times and I think it gets better every time I –

Jim Thomas: You’ll polish it up. Where you didn't quite have that luxury at the old typerwriter.

Bob Wallace: Right.

Jim Thomas: They had what they called facsimile machines and you would use those –

Bob Wallace: We will use those.

Jim Thomas: Yeah, yeah but when I started covering Mizzo, you know, up there that was that was still before laptops. And you'd carry a little fax machine and fax your –

Bob Wallace: So tell me about going to Mizzo. So how is that so?

Jim Thomas: I was in St. Charles for about 3-1/2 years and then a year covering prep sports and then Mike Smith, former sports editor, just a fantastic writer. He was covering Mizzo and for some reason he went off the beat. This was 84 and I had never been up there for a game or anything and it's interesting, this is right around ‘84; ‘85.

Bob Wallace: Football or basketball you covering?

Jim Thomas: We covered both. But they had both -- they had also lost a Big Red St. Louis, football Cardinals writer. So they talked to me about covering the football Cardinals. Here I am going -- I don't know who we had at the time. We had some great writers back in Doug Rowe, Tom Barnidge, Jeff Meyer, all around that time

Bob Wallace: Dennis Dillon.

Jim Thomas Dennis Dillon was with the Globe. John Sonderegger was with him anyway -- they had an opening there and they initially talked to me about covering the Big Red in like 1985.

Bob Wallace: We would’ve crossed path’s then.

Jim Thomas: Yeah, but I just didn't think I was ready for it and I've always been confident but I'm like going from high school to covering the football Cardinals. And so I said, I don't think I'm ready. So instead they put me on in the Mizzo beat. And that was, yeah and it's still that way now. At the time it wasn't. We had a Mike Smith covered football and Dave Dolor, a writer -- just a great covered many Olympics. A great writer I idolized and he had such an energy and a snap to his writing. He covered basketball, but they unified it and I covered both and I got there just in time for Woody’s Wagon.

Bob Wallace: So Woody’s –

Jim Thomas: Woody was a fantastic recruiter, but as a coach, not so much.

Bob Wallace: You know what was funny was because when I remember, I was here. I moved here in 1981 and I remember when they hired Woody's Wagon and, you know, he came with a stellar reputation from the Steelers.

Jim Thomas: Yeah, yeah, he had he and I guess Bud Carson were both considered the architects of the Steel Curtain defense. Woody would never, you know, he was -- won four, the four Super Bowls they won in the 70s. Woody was there. He'd always have one of those big rings and he could work the room. He was an incredible recruiter. Tony Van Zandt, arguably the best running back in St. Louis history. They recruited him.

Bob Wallace: I remember I would go watch him play in high school, right? He was a great back.

Jim Thomas: So they recruit him. Ronnie Cameron, East St. Louis quarterback. He wasn't just a Parade Magazine All-American. He was the Parade Magazine player of the Year.

Bob Wallace: Cameron or Van Zandt?

Jim Thomas: Ronnie Cameron, I don't know about that.

Bob Wallace: Really?

Jim Thomas: Mark Keel was a Parade All-American. Rob Dryden had Tom Osborne and Barry Switzer. He was a big 6 foot 8 lineman out of St. Charles High School and they all -- I don't know they all for some reason didn't work out. The first time I went up to Mizzou, kind of my, it wasn't to write a story, but it was to get to know the guys. They had -- they called it the Mizzou Media Masters Golf tournament, and I go up there and you get to meet the coaches like I was paired on the foursome with the Woody and this was the night after there was a Lions Club All Star game in Jefferson City. They had it the night before and Tony Vanzant had hurt his knee, and that was my first experience the next day –

Bob Wallace: So you’re riding with Woody and he finds out that Tony Vanzant has a major knee injury?

Jim Thomas: Right, right, right. And Ronnie Cameron, one they misused him. They tried to make him a passing quarterback. He wasn’t a bad passer, but he used his running skills too. Rob Ryan was the best story. He just didn't – at 6 foot, he just didn't have kind of a heart for football. After like two seasons, he quit to be a bass guitarist in like a rock soul band. I go down, they're playing, his band is playing at with Laclede’s Landing. I go down, watch him and do this story on Rob Ryan, the world's largest bass guitarist. You talk about having incredible bad luck.

Bob Wallace: So who’s on Woody’s staff? Because ya know Missouri’s produced some good football coaches over the years, Andy Reid.

Jim Thomas: Well, the real staff was the one that followed him. Now Woody had, like Steve Miller, was recruiting -- Steve Miller, longtime just recently and I think he was activities or athletics director at Lafayette, but long time I think in Hazelwood Central. But, Steve Miller was there, I'm trying to think of some of his other they had, Bull Reese, who was a well-known coach. But so Woody, lasted four years, they bring in Bob Stahl, who had worked a miracle at Texas, El Paso. No history at all of football success. Years of winning, like two to three games. He goes down there, they play just 11 games back then they go 10 and 1. They're in the Independence Bowl. He's been named the head coach of the Tigers, but he agrees to coach UTep in the Independence Bowl. They say Jim go down there, even though he's coaching UTep. Go down there and do a story on him and you know a little bit about him and then the miracle that that he worked on in El Paso. I go down there, they're playing Southern Miss. I'm watching the game. They lose to Southern Miss. There's a pretty good quarterback I'm impressed with watching for Southern Miss. He was a sophomore's name. His name was Brett Farr. Now, I didn't know he was -- I thought he was pretty good, but I didn't know he'd become a Hall of Fame quarterback. But so Stall comes in and Stall – Stall was not the recruiter, but what a coaching staff he put together. Andy Reid was on his staff, NFL head coach. Dirk Cutter was on his staff, NHL head coach. Ken Flagel who was a coordinator. He might still be in the league, right? Defensive coordinator Dave Toole. Is he still with the Chiefs?

Bob Wallace: Yes, yes.

Jim Thomas: Special teams coordinators? Mart NFL head coach with Detroit. I may be missing one NFL like coach, but look at that. Look at that staff you put together and they never won more than four games. I don't know. I covered this first two years and then our good friend Vahe Gregorian took over. And then I moved over to the football feed, but yeah, they had a tremendous staff. Also, they had a guy in between jobs and he was the equivalent although he was well out of high school, like a graduate assistant. He would buy them pizzas and hang out and I don't know if he made much money, but his name was Steve Spagnola. They're all up there in Colombia at the same time, all these great coaches. How come they couldn't win any games you? Know how tough the big game was. Oh my goodness you know, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Colorado was really good. Well, I was up there for the 5th down game with Bill McCarthy and also there for the Norman Conquest. They lost 77 to nothing at Oklahoma, which I believe is still the worst loss in history. Now that's, Woody was there for that. I remember going into the hotel and uh I don’t know if was in Oklahoma City, which isn't far from Norman, so I go out with some of the riders. The bar is closed. It’s 12:30 or whatever. I'm back in the hotel, I go to my room and I need to get a -- I would always try to get a newspaper, so I go down the lobby. There's a news box and Joe Castiglione, former assistant AD at Mizzou at the time. I think he's still at Oklahoma.

Bob Wallace: Yes, he’s still at Oklahoma.

Jim Thomas: Anyway, he comes down there's a bar in the lobby and he says Jim, come on in, have a nightcap with us. So I go in and maybe 10-12 people sitting around the table in the bar by now it's like 1 o'clock it's a noon game. Woody Woodenhofer’s in there. I know Woody was known for, tipping it and liking the beverages. Woody, looks at me and says, Jim, you know I don't do this all the time. I'm privately a little -- because you're playing at noon, if you're the head coach, you probably got to be there, what 9, 9 in the morning maybe, maybe even earlier for the game. And, but I'm pretending oh no, it's no big deal and I'm off duty and whatever. And I remember Joe Castiglione's famous words that he says Jim, you know, if we can stay close early, I think this is going to be a heck of a game.

Bob Wallace: And this was 77 to nothing.

Jim Thomas: 77 to nothing. They had a coach there, Oklahoma named Merv Johnson. longtime Mizzou assistant it's 48 to nothing at halftime. It was a warm day and they had their two mascots, Boomer and Sooner, two like ponies. They pull a wagon around like a covered wagon every touchdown. 77 divided by 7 – 11 times, 11 touchdowns. I wrote that it was cruelty to animals. Anyway Merv Johnson sends his old school -- he sends him a note at half time saying you're in the wrong defense, you know? So he was he was trying to help him them out. Brian Bosworth, remember the Bos?

Bob Wallace: Yeah.

Jim Thomas: Great all American really didn't pan out that much in the NFL. Made some bad movies, too, right? Trying to be a movie star. So it's 48 to nothing. He's out of the game. I look across the way he's sitting, he's leaning on a fence, he's got his shoulder pads off, he's talking to fans, eating a hot dog. That's how much respect they had for Mizzou. So, and then and then the 5th down game. I'm up in the box.

Bob Wallace: Now that’s Nebraska, right?

Jim Thomas: That was Colorado.

Bob Wallace: Now who’s the quarterback?

Jim Thomas: 1990 they had Kent Kiefer, who was formerly at Arizona State. So Mizzou the week before this was Stall, 1990, second year or third year anyway, they're starting to get it going the week before at home they had upset Arizona State, which was then 24th rank. Colorado's coming in, which was nationally ranked and they had Colorado beat. Bill McCartney is the coach. Colorado marches down the field and I would always keep my own little play by play, you know, first down, wall is a three yard game or whatever, and I would

Bob Wallace: Wall was get beat.

Jim Thomas: Okay the wall is 8 yard gain, first down. So a stadium, where I knew how to get down quickly if especially if it was a close game, I would stay up in the press box and I knew how to get down there quickly. A lot of writers will leave, and sometimes it's a close game, they'll miss stuff because they're on the elevator or maybe they're going down the stairs. So I'm up there. I'm keeping my play by play. There's hardly anyone writers left in the press box and on 4th down 4th and goal I believe it was Charles Thompson both around that time, both Oklahoma and Colorado had a quarterback named Charleston. He spikes the ball on 4th down. Right. I said they spiked the ball on 4th down. I almost turned around the row above me is Mizzou like sports information department and almost turned around and said, you know, that was 4th down. But I swear to God, Bob, I said in my head, you're not the story, just cover what happened. So I turn around and watch it. And they run it on 5th down. By the time I -- a lot of the fans knew what was going on, by the time I don't know if I went down the elevator steps. There are hundreds of fans chasing the officials. They had a little locker room for the officials, they're chasing the officials into the official locker.

Bob Wallace: I wonder if they could have overturned that because I mean literally the play shouldn't have existed

Jim Thomas Right. What happened was they forgot, you know, the old -- they forgot to flip it over. I think between second and third down. If I'm the coach, Stall later said -- I mean, even then, you've probably had 10 - 12 coaches as you know, with NFL teams, somebodies in one of their jobs is you keep track of the downs.

Bob Wallace: Right.

Jim Thomas Stall said yeah, he knew, but

Bob Wallace: But what?

Jim Thomas: I think he said – I’m trying to remember, he didn't want to get penalty. Who cares about a penalty.

Bob Wallace: Right. Call time out.

Jim Thomas: I would run out on the field. I would not let the next play be snapped. If it's fourth and goal from the one what’s the penalty. It's 6 inches.

Bob Wallace: Right, but it's also if it would be an after the play down, so they move them back 6 inches and it's through your ball. Right?

Jim Thomas: Right. So yeah, it was just. It was just amazing and Jack Watkins, now, long time assistant Commission with Valley. He was that the number two man in the Sports Information department at Mizzou and he was kind of in charge of the play by play. The official you would get a play and you remember that, I mean, the Rams would do the same thing in official box score list the play by play, the team stats. The official play by play that they handed out said 5th and goal on it. They had all the four downs. I kept that thing for years and then I don't know one day I'm cleaning out my basement and I threw it away. It would probably be worth some money, right? So that was a national story. That was the 5th down game and it was never, never the same. Colorado, by the way, went on to -- actually, there was no BCS game or playoffs. They shared the national title that year with Georgia Tech, so partly because of that fifth down, they want to the national –

Bob Wallace: That would have been a big upset –

Jim Thomas: And coming on the heels of beating 24th ranked Arizona State all of a sudden -- that was 1990; Mike Jones was on the team. Mike Jones of the tackle was on the team.

Bob Wallace: You know what I think I was at that Arizona State game.

Jim Thomas: They beat them pretty good. I mean, it wasn't like –

Bob Wallace: I was kind of an Arizona State fan from being out, with the Cardinals moving out to Arizona and I knew the people that.

Jim Thomas: It was like Kurt, Kent Kiefer I believe it was, because he had transferred from Arizona State. I think the year before he had beaten Mizzou at Arizona State. So yeah, those were some of the highlights of –

Bob Wallace: Tell me about basketball.

Jim Thomas: Well, basketball, football -- the players were great to work with; the games were not so good. Although they played a hellacious schedule back then. Mizzou football played Miami in his prime. Remember when Syracuse, with McPherson, the coach, and McPherson the quarterback they threatened -- they played them. They played Houston when Andre Ware was there. They played brutal schedule besides The Big Eight so basketball and the teams were fantastic. Dealing with Norm Stewart was

Bob Wallace: Who was on the team?

Jim Thomas: No, that was later. Derek Cheeter. That was Anthony Peeler, Gary Leonard from Belleville, who went on and was drafted by the Celtics. Doug Smith. Those were, I mean, they had Nathan Bunny, Lee Coward, Lynn Hardy. They had some great teams.

Bob Wallace: Not throwing old Norm under the bus. So what do you mean? He was hard to deal with?

Jim Thomas: Well, yeah, I think you heard this story. I was writing investigative stuff. This is around ’88, ‘89. And he didn't like it. And I came up to practice, brought my wife, and then he, I don't know, he was about a year old, Tim, oldest boy, Tim. We see Norm on the parking lot and he said, oh, that's a nice kid. Then I'm out there -- the idea was the wife would bring her up. I didn't have to write anything that day they had like a media day, watch practice, get my stuff, have some lunch with the wife and kids and head back to St. Louis. I go into the arena myself. I'm sitting there under a basket and all of a sudden Norm comes and he's just you're trying to hurt me, you're trying to hurt my family because of the investigation and finally, he says, just out of blue. I know someone who can take care of your one year old and I'm, like, shocked. And I'm like. Are you kidding me? And so anyway.

Bob Wallace: What were you investigating? What was the story on?

Jim Thomas: Recruiting violations in Detroit and they ended up –

Bob Wallace: Oh, that was - who was the guy?

Jim Thomas: Doctor Detroit Rich Daley

Bob Wallace: Rich Daley, right.

Jim Thomas: Great guy to deal with it. Ad he recruited everybody at the time. Remember Derek Coleman from Syracuse? He was in on everybody, but anyway, partly some of the writing, I did and Jeff Gordon did a lot of reporting. They went on and the Kansas City star was all over. They go on probation, but this thing with my as weird as it sounds, Sports Illustrated did a little story on it. There were stories on it in the Dallas Morning News, the Des Moines Register. I'm trying to think of some other papers.

Bob Wallace: Did he ever apologize?

Jim Thomas: No, no. And years later and I'm not going to say who there was someone in that building that told me yeah, I heard the whole thing. He just denied and said, oh, you're crazy because at face value, it sounds so outlandish. So I covered him that next year. There was a lot of pressure from the some people at the paper to take me off the beat because –

Bob Wallace: You’re part of the story then,

Jim Thomas: Right, and then they go on probation and the next year that I'm getting fans yelling at me that the public relations directors sits me right in front the Sports Information Director. Moves me where I'm sitting right in front of the Pep Band. I have a tube in my ear the whole game. He's laughing about it, you know? So it was -- but I stayed there the next year. Some pressure from the paper to take me off the beat. That's how I ended up covering football. I covered the year after the probation and then –

Bob Wallace: So that's what ’92, ’91?

Jim Thomas: My last year on the beat was 91. So anyway, what I was told was hey we're trying to get this expansion team. We need somebody to cover it. NFL expansion why don't you cover it and do some stuff on the league. Get to know the league. You can go to the combine, you can go to the Super Bowl, pick out a game every week, an NFL game, and go to the NFL game and also write –

Bob Wallace: That’s when the paper was making money and they –

Jim Thomas: But they still, what in 91 and maybe a little bit of 92 and 93, especially 91, they say, hey, if you can couple a college game with a NFL game on the same weekend, like, say, cover, Notre Dame playing Florida State and then go, go watch the Bears game or whatever and –

Bob Wallace: Did you like doing it?

Jim Thomas: And I did it and I covered like 40 games, 40 football games that year, which was amazing. You know, covered Florida State, Miami, I coupled that just to couple it, I coupled it with the Tampa Bay game and they were still in the creamcicle uniforms and they were bad with Sam White, the PR guy for Tampa says why are you covering us? Well, they've actually started like 3 and 0. So I thought it would be historic. My wife had no idea where I was from week to week. Finally I told her you, don't know where I am do you? I could have a whole another family, a mistress and you wouldn’t know. But it's weird, in life, you know one door closes and another open. So I covered the expansion and got to know Walter Payton, who was -- he was involved with the St. Louis expansion group. I remember going up to, this was after the expansion then fell apart, I go up to New England because they were thinking of moving. James Bush Hartwein, who was involved in the St. Louis expansion, during that process he had bought the Patriots and the people where oh he’s going to be moved them to St. Louis, especially since they didn't get expansion.

Bob Wallace: The opposite -- $10 option didn't work. Remember when Schemoehl bought the –

Jim Thomas: Oh, that was that was for ‘87.

Bob Wallace: That was back in ‘87.

Jim Thomas: Yeah, this was for when the expansion thing fell apart, you wouldn't believe how many NFL meetings I went to with the same group of reporters, too, Pete Prisco, Liz Clark, David Williams. Williams was with the Memphis Bed at – Memphis, Pepper Rogers Crisco was working for Jackson. Liz Clark was in Charlotte. We’d go to all these meetings. They wouldn't do much of anything. And anyway, the St. Louis bid falls apart. Jerry Clinton, the beer distributor, was the original guy, really moved the ball forward.

Bob Wallace: Without them, there would’ve been no Dome.

Jim Thomas: No, no. Walter Payton was along just kind of for prestige. And I got to know him pretty well. He was quite a character, quite a goof ball. He'd always come up and pinch you in the butt from behind and goofy, he was, a goofball. He was a fascinating person, but I later found out they gave him a free 10% just to let his name go to events. Expansion lasted so long that the expansion fee outgrew Clinton's financial capacity to do it. He had the lease they brought in Ortwein as a money man, and Ortwein said, wait a minute if I'm going to be the money man, I want control of the lease. So that's what led to that. So they voted Charlotte in October of ‘93. They wanted St. Louis, Jacksonville had dropped out. They had dropped out because they had a personal seat license-like sale, and the results were great in St. Louis, Jacksonville, they were very sluggish. Tagliabue talks Jacksonville into staying. After they named Charlotte they give St. Louis another month to get its act together. They never could so in November, it's Jacksonville is named to the franchise and I go in and I meet Mike Smith, I think is our sports editor then. The guy replaced covering Mizzou and he says, hey we want you to be our number two guy with the baseball Cardinals, which was a big deal. I've never -- many sports writers, it's their life dreams from St. Louis. Never my dream. I liked kind of having the downtime in the summer, which I did when I covered Mizzou and I did when I covered the NFL, even when I covered high schools, there was no high school in the summer.

Bob Wallace: Right.

Jim Thomas: So you took some time off and I said to Mike Smith, I was sitting at the table and I said, you know, I think there's some talk about the possibility of the Rams moving to St. Louis why don't we give this one more year and then let's revisit this. And so we're right at the end of ‘93 going into ‘94 and now and he says OK. I want to say right about this time I go up to New England to do a story about boy, could they move here? What's the team like? And I think his name was Gil Santos, long time radio TV guy covering the Patriots, he has to be on the pregame show on the radio and he's nice as could be talking to me and then as soon as I get off the air, instant, it turns to me and says why are you trying to steal our team? I'm not trying to steal anybody’s team. I'm just trying to do my job. So anyway, first time I meet John Shaw, it's at Arrowhead Stadium, 1994. The Rams will playing the Chiefs and typical shot it was DeMarco Farr's first game. He replaced Sean Gilbert. Montana was in his last year playing with the Chiefs, and that's when DeMarco had his infamous when he goes into the game, he looks across -- and he's nose tackle, so he's right across and says, hey, you're Joe Montana. You know, like all excited. And Montana looks at him like he's nuts. Hey, the first time we see Shaw, Bernie Nicholas, a longtime columnist now radio star and Shaw looks at us, I can't do a good Shaw voice, but he says what are you guys doing here? We're not moving to St. Louis. We’re moving to Baltimore. So I went to six, I think I covered 6, I just started like tailing the Rams. I covered six games. I went to all kinds of league meetings or meetings in St. Louis. What was it called? Fans Inc then?

Bob Wallace: Yeah.

Jim Thomas: And all that and lo and behold.

Bob Wallace: So John who we all can laugh about because he was a character. But he was the really the person who made the decisions for the Rams back then.

Jim Thomas: He then in fact the owner. No disrespected to Georgia at all. She trusted him.

Bob Wallace: Right, she trust him. He thought they were moving to Baltimore. So what happened?

Jim Thomas: I think he was just playing. He was just playing with us. So we cover all news, it's getting closer and closer. I found out the St. Louis group brings in Kronke because Georgia says hey, because they weren't making any money there and she says hi we need some more money in here. She needed more money to live off of. They bring in Kronke and I have found out from some of the Kronke people that he agreed to do it on the condition that they get the team. He agreed to buy upwards of 40% of the team. So I'm just sitting on this, it's off the record

Bob Wallace: Wasn't part of that and that they would move to St. Louis?

Jim Thomas: Right. I'm just sitting on it. It was off the record and that's how, as a reporter, you don't violate. So I was trying to get an interview with Kronke. You all know he shot. Media shot. All of a sudden, it’s a Sunday in mid November and he's on Mike Bush, the Sports Plus on the couch and I'm furious. I am furious. I'm like screw these guys, I'm going to get a second source, the old Woodward and Bernstein always have two reliable sources and I get one. I get one from the league. And I just burned the source with the Kronke because it's pissed off. I've tried to get that interview forever and I time it specifically it runs in Thanksgiving Day paper, where if you're John Clayton or whoever, it's harder to reach people because it's a holiday. So and so I print –

Bob Wallace: Had the story for a day and a half?

Jim Thomas: Right. And I remember Clayton calling and saying boy, this is weird. It's almost like you wanted to run this on Thanksgiving so nobody else could track it down. He literally tells me that in the phone call. I said no, I don't know what you're talking about. So Channel 5 comes on and Freeman Bosley, then the mayor is on there, like discrediting the story. And blah blah blah. This is totally false. Well, Bernie calls Mike Bush and Bernie still used power but back then remember the power he had in this town and he says hey, no this is legit. So the 5 o'clock news, Bosley is ripping me. The 10:00 o'clock news. Maybe they still run the Bosley thing, but Mike Bush says but I know Jim Thomas and he's a rock solid reporter on this story. So the whole thing had changed. So that's Thursday, Thanksgiving Day. That's Sunday I'm in San Diego with the old Jack Murphy Stadium, covering the game again. We covered like six of their games and I think the last four just because it looked like they were close to moving. I had barely put my laptop on the -- this is Sunday after Thanksgiving 1994 in the press box when TJ Sanders of the LA Times comes up to me and he says they're not moving to St. Louis. What are you talking about? They're moving to Baltimore. And what was it January they announced they're moving to St. Louis and that Kronke had agreed to buy up to 40% of the team.

Bob Wallace: So was Kronke mad at you for –

Jim Thomas: Some of his people were and they never really shared anything with me ever again. So you burn the source. That's the only time I've done that. But I was really upset.

Bob Wallace: So now what was your impression of the Rams as you were going through the John and –

Jim Thomas: John was -- I've never seen -- part of the reason I love sports writing is there's so many characters and you meet so many characters. You're a character, Bob. Rick Smith, the PR guy was a character. Got to meet him. John Shaw, Georgia. All of them. I was watching, I like westerns and I was watching a late night western the other night and I'm looking at the credits and it says music by Dominic Frontier. One of Georgia's wives or husbands. So anyway, I'll never forget the announcement. It was at the Convention Center. Big pep rally balloons and everything, and then you got to go behind curtains and that was seat and you got the meet Georgia. And it was like we're all lined up all the media and it's like you're meeting Santa Claus or something. You're going in there because there's just her sitting on a chair. I remember her flirting. She's cordial with me. And I love Georgia. She was fantastic. But she was really laying it on that thick, kind of flirting with Bernie. She was dumb like a fox because she knew Bernie was the man from St. Louis sports and she was kind of currying his favor a little bit. Can I tell you a quick Georgia story that has nothing to do with anything? Leslie Visser, back during the greatest show, all the big timers, we make regular stops in St. Louis, Andre Kramer, Leslie Visser. Visser comes in and she's in the media room and she says your desk is a mess. You need to clean this up. A week later I bumped into Georgia and I'm telling her that and she says she says, Jim, don't worry about it. A sloppy desk is a sign of a creative mind. So Georgia always had a way to make you feel better. I remember Georgia talking to Tony Banks after – remember he skipped the flight from Miami to be with his girl after -- he was disconsolate after a 14 nothing loss down there in Miami. So anyway, the first practice day is Wednesday. He gives a really half hearted apology. The very next day we would get Rich Brooks just off the field. So we're talking to Rich Brooks the next day, Thursday, all of a sudden, we see Georgia walking out to the field. Tony was still out there, and sometimes the, you know, the players will work a little longer after practice. She's talking to him. 2 minutes later, Tony Banks comes up to the reporters and issues the most sincere --

Bob Wallace: Really?

Jim Thomas: -- at least he came across this way, heartfelt apology about skipping the team flight and

Bob Wallace: You know what? I never knew that story because she really did not do that –

Jim Thomas: No, she didn't hardly meddle at all.

Bob Wallace: Right? She would talk to the players about how their mother was doing or, you know after the draft she sent flowers and stuff. But she never really was the heavy.

Jim Thomas: No, she did that. I don't know what she told him. I never know, but so, as you know, January, we're all happy then, when was it March? The League voted it down. Although I remember the late Bud Adams then they were still the Houston Oilers. And I guess they were -- pretty sure they were thinking of moving then too and what they said was he said well we all want the St. Louis lease. That's what they called it. The lease terms were so favorable. Did you help negotiate those lease terms, Robert?

Bob Wallace: No, they were already in place when they came in. I tell people we were not – I was on the tail end of the negotiations. I always said we weren't that smart. Nor was St. Louis that dumb on that lease. It was really a protection so that we didn't -- because it was owned by the City and you know, public entity, we didn't want the stadium to be like Veteran Stadium.

Jim Thomas: And get run down.

Bob Wallace: Get run down. We wanted it to be like Busch Stadium. So Busch Stadium was the standard back then. This is the old Busch. What the Cardinals always did was they always put money back into the stadium and if you looked at Veteran Stadium in Philadelphia, they didn't do it. So we wanted some guarantee that this stadium would be maintained. And so we came up with this, you know, top tier thing.

Jim Thomas: Yeah and that was the escape clause for Stan Kronke and it was the top 10% it still would have been tough to meet. Boy, I wish it would have been negotiated as maybe top half.

Bob Wallace: Well, it would have been -- basically, it was impossible to beat because when they did it, nobody anticipated that there will would be 24 new stadiums built during the period of the –

Jim Thomas: And I've told John Shaw in effect the Rams are to blame for that only because they engineered the move. There was -- my impression maybe you have a different impression because you were around the league owners and big leagues much more than me. They were kind of shocked. Oh my, you know, teams that maybe needed a stadium or whatever our cities that, oh my gosh, if the Rams can move from LA, the nations, what second largest market in St. Louis – anybody. That started a whole move of new stadium construction and everybody wanted the St. Louis lease.

Bob Wallace: I'm not sure everybody got the St. Louis lease.

Jim Thomas: No, and I don't think.

Bob Wallace: And I don’t think everybody got the escape clause that St. Louis got. Nor you know, at some point, you know, they had to pay half the game day expenses, you know, and that was $100,000, like the time I left in 2000 then it was over $100,000 a game. Closer to two than one. So yeah, the St. Louis lease was -- everybody did use that as -- quite as I've said, we weren't that smart, nor were they that dumb. You know, it was -- we got lucky. I mean, there was some foresight into keeping the stadium the way they wanted it.

Jim Thomas: So I remember that the league voted down and we're all shocked and but then that was in March and then a month later, they have a special meeting in Dallas. John Shaw walks in with a briefcase with a lawsuit threatening to sue the league sure didn't like lawsuits, and like 28 votes magically switched sides. Excuse me, that was down in Dallas, but people, some people like fans, they were so disappointed by the -- there was such joy in January, March such there, they didn't believe it that in in April when they voted to – they were like really? They’re coming to St. Louis and then –

Bob Wallace: So I started in June, I probably got hired in April or something, started in June. I remember when the team rolled in with the trucks. We had a paraded at Kiener Plaza for the trucks coming in and the equipment coming, and then so the first two years the Rams are here, you have Steve Meyer and Rich Brooks, and the first year they're playing and practicing at Matthew Dickey.

Jim Thomas: The boys in the hood. They were the boys in the hood,

Bob Wallace: So what was that like? Was that strange being –

Jim Thomas: It was fun. It was a little strange. They had a little gym that they kind of used for lunch and it was so intimate. I remember everybody was so friendly, they'd come back, you know. Sean Landeta would come by during lunch and just shoot the breeze with the punter for the Rams. I remember talking to Wayne Gandy, who was the left tackle before Orlando Pace and he's from -- went to Auburn, I believe he was from Florida It's late in the year. They're playing Buffalo and Bruce Smith and occasionally I'd wait on Friday and pick some players off if I missed them on the lot, pick them off as they’re coming out, he's coming out to his car. There's a very light snow, just a little kind of dust covering. He's with his playbook now, he's wiping off his windshield and he says, Jim, how do you driving this stuff. Again, it was just a dusting. It wasn't even barely any accumulation and first off, I'm thinking, he's probably smearing that playbook where he's supposed to be learning how to block Bruce Smith that day, and then I just said I would just buckle your seat belt and obey the legal speed limit. But it was a lot of fun.

Bob Wallace: I think it was Chris Miller or one of the players that came here. They remember getting off the bus and being cheered by the by the vans, and they said in LA they probably would have tripped us and booed us. It was such a welcome for the team to come here.

Jim Thomas: For the first I think it was the first week or two they practiced at one of the Parkways, Parkway Central and then they went to Maryville because Pat McBride had a soccer camp. But their first practice at Parkway Central and I was over – was it Maryville Central?

Bob Wallace: No, I think it was Kirkwood wasn't it?

Jim Thomas: No they had a scrimmage there. But it was a Parkway and there was a meeting room set up at Maryville and I’m there writing and but apparently when they got off the bus, they were cheered. There was it was a radio station stunt. There was like a woman in a bikini who gave Kevin Carter a kiss or something. So I'm at practice and I'm recording first, first completed pass, we were all so ga ga, versus Dwayne White, the road raider, vomit and I write and it’s in there first vomit. That's the morning practice. The afternoon practice. I go there. The running gasser, Chris Miller, cantankerous but fun. It’s a shame he had all the concussion issues that season. He’s running down that way. He stops and he looks at me and he, someone must have told him it was me that wrote it. He says, hey, are you going to write who vomits today at practice? I was a little taken a back. But it was funny. You know Jerome Bettis, who was so good with the media. I remember –

Jim Thomas: But there was a fifth round pick from Kansas offensive guard named Ken Lanaker. Like held out a couple of days.

Bob Wallace: And he got to his right.

Jim Thomas: Exactly. You stole my punchline. When he finally shows up he's got like a ram underneath an arch tattooed on his –

Bob Wallace: How do you think he feels about that today?

Jim Thomas: Yeah, so I don't even know if he made it through the season or made it through camp, so then he's stuck with that.

Bob Wallace: OK, let's move on because those were other than the first four games we played at Busch Stadium –

Jim Thomas Right? 4 and 0 and then 5 and 1 and then lose the last game at Busch. Same old sorry ass Rams with Dana Stubblefield, the end of seven and nine, and then Brooks goes and Vermeil was a shock.

Bob Wallace: That was a shocker to you?

Jim Thomas: Yes, I think, I know our headline was Dick Vermeil question mark when he was hired. John Shaw told me the day before, the day before that he was hired that he was talking to Vermeil and he said, but you can't write that. But all I didn't write it. Again, other than that one case you offer, unless you can get it from somebody else. Also, I'll be totally honest, I didn't believe it. I didn't believe.

Bob Wallace: And he was the ultimate leak anyway wasn’t he.

Jim Thomas: No, I told him and Charlie Army as well. So many times they made me look smart over the years because they just couldn't keep their mouth shut. So it's Dick Vermeil. We're all stunned. I'll never forget the first Vermeil press conference.

Bob Wallace: Oh it was unbelievable wasn’t it?

Jim Thomas: It was like it was shown on live TV. They had a 30 minute time block. They had to cut away. He went the entire 30 minutes without taking your question, even Ernie Conwell said he was watching the tight end and he said I was ready to run through a wall but then after a while, I got exhausted, you know? So it was a steep learning curve, ’97, ‘98 and John Shaw told me that he felt a little guilty about pulling the plug on Brooks after two years and that helped him keep Vermeil after two years. We thought he was – remember, the three hour practices and all that, and the miracle of ‘99.

Bob Wallace: Were you shocked?

Jim Thomas: At the miracle of ’99? Yes, I was shocked that they somehow talked him into and his still – still would’ve picked him. But they went from three hours to maybe 2 ½. In training camp they had less padded practices, but oh my God, that off season that’ 98, ‘99 off season. You bring in a Marshall Faulk, you draft Tory Holt, you traded for Faulk, you get Trent Green in free agency and very underrated Adam Timmerman in free agency.

Bob Wallace: I thought Adam Timmerman might have been the best signing we had. I mean other than –

Jim Thomas: Bryant Young, the defensive tackle of the 49ers used to just destroy the Rams and they like we need to bring someone in the interior that can neutralize them. And Timmerman was the answer. I remember sitting it was at Joe’s Stone Crabs in Miami where the Super Bowl was. We're out to dinner. And Sam Kronke never invited me and Bernie out to dinner. We’re out to dinner with Shaw and me and Bernie. And you know how Shaw was? He would always ask questions.

Bob Wallace: What's your idea?

Jim Thomas: Who should we bring in for quarterback? And me, stupidly, who'd I say, Jeff Hostetler. Bernie says Bernie Michalis says Trent Green. Well, it turned out to be Trent Green. Also, you know, that was the offseason they brought in Martz who had worked with Green in Washington and Martz was ready to become Dave McGuinness's coordinator in Chicago but McGuinness, remember he got upset that they announced that he was hired before they had a deal. Was it Chicago or Arizona?

Bob Wallace: Chicago.

Jim Thomas: And so that that dropped out and that's what made Martz available so in camp you kind of in the first preseason games, you kind of had to think God, these guys might be pretty good. Because the offense was always, you know, decent to pretty good. You know, you had to Keith Lyle and Todd Light and the secondary you had Kevin Carter and DeMarco Farr. And what, I guess this would have been Ray Agnew but then they bring in all this offensive power and you really thought something might have happened. I'll just say very quickly too, remember, Faulk didn't show up for what, a week or two in the camp and Vermeil was upset and you remember Barry Sanders had stunningly announced his retirement that same time. We're walking off the field, and we talked with Vermeil, a few media at camp, and then it was just me and Vermeil walking back. He was so furious that Faulk was – Vermeil lived for practice and he said, why don't you start a rumor that that that we're going to get Barry Sanders. He wanted, I guess get back at Faulk. I later found out that –

Bob Wallace: I don’t that would’ve matter to Marshall to be honest with you.

Jim Thomas: I later found out, at least according to Jay Zigman, he told Faulk, listen, they didn't know how the new and improved practices were going to be. They just said, hey, just take your time coming in, take a week or two. It was that management's request that Faulk –

Bob Wallace: I'm not, you know, it's sort of like we all discovered Kirk Warner at some point, you know, everybody was taking credit for Kurt. I'm not sure that that -- we were nervous that Marshall wasn't there. As I remember you know where you.

Jim Thomas: I'm sure you had to be

Bob Wallace: Because those are the days where holdouts became very nasty.

Jim Thomas: I remember watching practice in ‘98 and Charlie Army, you guys were so friendly to the media, at least the media that were there. And it's not like you gave breaks, I mean on occasion, but we were just good human beings. And I remember after practice, it's late in the season and I'm like, Charlie, what the hell are you going to do at quarterback, you know? And he says hell, we got a quarterback out there that's better than anybody. I said better than Tony Banks, he laughed. I said who? And he said Kurt Warner. Now media, we all say we're smarter whenever you can watch a million practices and everybody look good.

Bob Wallace: Right. They’re not hitting anybody.

Jim Thomas: So I'm like, yeah, OK, if you say so, Charlie. So when Green goes down with that Rodney Harrison hit in the San Diego game, I'll never forget Isaac Bruce was on the sideline. He wasn’t on the field slamming his helmet on the turf. I looked, I don't know if it was Bernie Nichols or Tom Wheatly and I said they'll be lucky to win four games. That was my prediction on the ‘99 season.

Bob Wallace: We were like we’re cursed. We're sitting in the box. It's completely quiet. You know the next day when Dick gives us –

Jim Thomas: We will rally behind –

Bob Wallace: I remember so I had a staff meeting for the non football people, I said don't walk around with your head down.

Jim Thomas: Really?

Bob Wallace: You got to say hello to the coaches. Sort of –

Jim Thomas: And that wasn't easy to do. That was crushing.

Bob Wallace: Right. It was crushing.

Jim Thomas: Trent Green only threw 4 incomplete passes the entire preseason and two of them were dropped.

Bob Wallace: He was a great leader. He made a point of knowing everybody in the building. Speaking to people. He became the face of the franchise, 8 weeks that he was around and then and I remember Kurt, you know, so he gets hurt in the third game, Trent, right?

Jim Thomas: Third preseason.

Bob Wallace: We've never seen Kurt Warner play hardly at all. No one has. So he doesn't play a lot in the fourth game because obviously—

Jim Thomas: It's the last game, you don’t want anybody hurt. He had played the. season finale in ‘98 at San Francisco and was like 4 out of 13.

Bob Wallace: And then, I remember being in the office and the day before the Baltimore game and, 6:00 o'clock, guys are all, no cars and they didn't figure that this young kid -- freaking out, and he's going to start. But you know and then he played and he played really unbelievable

Jim Thomas: Let me tell you, that Baltimore game, now I think he threw a couple interceptions, but he played like 26 to 14. People don't realize how good that Baltimore defense was. They were right at the rise of being one of the greatest defenses of the time it was them and Tampa, really. I remember the third game, Cincinnati wasn't much, but they had Darnay Scott. I forget the other -- they had they had a couple of good receivers and you go into Cincinnati. I think Hakeem scores 3 touchdowns you just destroyed them, you're 3 and O. Bernie and I, we’re done writing, you know the stadium's empty, we're walking in the parking lot to leave, and we look at each other and said this team might be pretty good. And Monday was memorable about the Monday kind of the rehash day with the coach, Vermeil tells us. I think they maybe had some trouble with playing.

Bob Wallace: Well, we got stuck in the Cincinnati airport for like 2 hours.

Jim Thomas: And what did he say? He and Carol were late for the Céline Dion concert. God bless him, Dick Vermeil. Well, then, that's game three-game 4. The Wicked Witch of the West. Same old sorry ass Rams. They come into St. Louis. You had lost seventeen in a row. 17 in a row, was one of the longest losing streaks in a series between two teams in NFL history, and Isaac Bruce just goes nuts. 4 touchdowns, you wipe them out, they get a couple of cosmetic touchdowns. I think it was 42 – 28. There was a smaller media room there. I remember we're in there and Vermeil’s good friend for many years, Bill Walsh, comes in there and in a stage whisper we could all hear it, he says you're going all the way. And right then, we knew. And then kind of the rest of the rest is history. The Minnesota game, the first home playoff game in the St. Louis Football Pro Football history. I've never, and I've been to all the stadiums many times over, lots of playoff games. I've never heard that first kind of 5 minutes before the game and first, I've never heard a louder stadium. They had those little foam noodles. Still have one in the basement. Remember, the national media was like they don't run the ball well enough. You got to run the ball to win. Actually, if you look now, like two seasons ago I did it. The ‘99 Rams would’ve finished like 13th in passing yards. So the game has gone so much to passing. Anyway it's I think it's 17 to 14 Vikings at halftime and the media’s going, see this offense –

Bob Wallace: Then Tony takes the next opening kickoff back for a touchdown, right?

Jim Thomas: 102 yards and you guys score the game’s next 35 points. It's 49 to 17 again, they got some cosmetic touchdowns. Also I remember the Tampa, the what a brutally physical game that was. And remember there was a lot of scuffles and chippy stuff. I remember Frank Middleton, the guard. He came over to the Rams locker room. He wanted to beat somebody up after that and I remembered him outside the locker room, and he was all he was all upset. And then the Super Bowl. I mean, what a storybook ending.

Bob Wallace: Those of us, we didn't it was happening, I don't, you know, to this day I'm not sure I enjoyed it as much as I should have because you know, it's like, when's our bubble going to burst. So then we moved on from Dick and I’m sure you were surprised when he resigned, although I actually thought it made a lot of sense for him to -- I mean, it wasn't going to get any better.