



How Bristol, Conn., Became the Home of ESPN

It is hard to imagine that the leader in sports entertainment has risen from the shadows of South Mountain in sleepy Bristol, Conn., yet the blue-collar New England town was the location that founder Bill Rasmussen chose for his wild-eyed idea of an all-sports TV network three decades ago.

It was a Friday afternoon in August 1978, and Rasmussen, a former sportscaster and public relations director for the AHL's New England Whalers, and his son Scott were stuck in traffic on Connecticut's I-84. They were discussing possible programming for their newly acquired satellite transponder from RCA. On a lark, Bill blurted out the idea to create a network devoted only to sports. Both father and son instantly thought they had a great idea.

Rasmussen began working out of nearby Plainville, Conn., planning the start-up venture. He rented space from a small cable company, but looked elsewhere to actually locate the studio and technical facilities. When asked why he didn't choose the office site as the launch pad for ESPN, Bill Rasmussen replied, "Our landlord – United Cable – told us Plainville had an ordinance prohibiting satellite dishes of any kind."

United Cable had recently purchased a small portion of land from the City of Bristol on Middle Street. Bristol officials were told by United that an outfit called the E.S.P. Network was looking for space, and would be interested in the remaining portions of the real estate. Rasmussen's desire to find a home for his idea was so strong that he had not even seen the land, which lay on the edge of town in the swampy corner of an industrial park.

"We met with the Bristol City attorney in August 1978 and the agreement to purchase was presented to Bristol officials in September," Rasmussen recalls. "Not only did we purchase the balance of Parcel A, but we asked for an option on Parcel B."

ESPN's cutting-edge (at the time) use of satellites to receive and transmit signals comes with certain precise technical parameters. Satellite signals are very fragile and can be easily disrupted. Not just any piece of land would do. As luck would have it, the surrounding hills – and in particular South Mountain due west of ESPN's location – protect ESPN's satellite signals from damage or interference without being too high as to block reception and transmission.

From there, planning, construction, and the search for financing, programming, employees and advertising occupied Rasmussen's days and nights. "Parcels C & D (next to ESPN's original purchase) were added soon after and the real estate boom at ESPN Campus hasn't stopped since," states Rasmussen.

Today, the ESPN campus in Bristol encompasses more than a dozen buildings totaling 736,000 sq. ft on over 100 acres (actually stretching across the town line into Southington).

As ESPN has grown over the years into a brand known around the world, the city of Bristol – a town that once was the clock-making capital of the world and still holds claim to the nation’s oldest amusement park -- has benefitted, both financially and in terms of recognition as the home of ESPN.

“Bristol has gone from a mid-sized city in New England, known for its manufacturing base to the king of cable sports television, and home of ESPN, the world leader in sports,” says John Leone, formerly Bristol mayor and Executive Director of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce. “We can’t go anywhere in the world without someone asking about ESPN, when they know we live in Bristol, Conn.”

Bristol native Cheryl Therriault has been a first-hand witness to the positive influence ESPN has had on the community. She was one of the company’s first hires 30 years ago and now has been an ESPN employee longer than anyone currently with the company.

“When I was hired at ESPN I had no idea what I was really getting into,” she admits. “I didn’t know much about sports and was told it didn’t really matter. They were looking for honest, energetic people to help launch a dream. There was lots of hard work, long hours, enthusiasm, dedication and fun.”

Early on, as a part of the two-member Transportation Department, she had to do a lot of explaining to hotels about what exactly ESPN was. Today, the HR department is inundated with resumes as hundreds of people fight for a chance to relocate to Bristol to join ESPN.

“I can honestly say I am so proud to be a part of this wonderful team and very glad I took the step into the unknown at that time,” Therriault says with pride.

All because of a creative mind with the time to ponder while stuck in traffic, determination, hard work and a little luck.

Fun Facts About Bristol, Conn.

- Babe Ruth played two exhibition games at **Bristol’s Muzzy Field** during his glory days with the Yankees, and hit the first home run in the park’s history. In the 1970s and ‘80s, the old-style baseball park was the home of the Boston Red Sox’ Double A team for many years, with the likes of Roger Clemens, Fred Lynn and Jim Rice passing through. The park, which is still used today, also saw one of the longest home runs Mo Vaughn ever hit, while playing for Seton Hall in the Big East Tournament.
- At 383-feet high, the **Otis Elevator Testing Facility** is one of the tallest buildings in New England -- the one building on the list without windows -- and the tallest elevator test building in North America. Elevators, escalators and their components, assemblies and systems are tested in simulated real-world environments.
- Bristol is home to **two renowned museums**, the Clock Museum and the Carousel Museum where the old-world craftsmanship of creating carousel horses is still practiced, with many rare and valuable examples on display. Bristol’s newest attraction is the **ImagiNation children’s museum**, which includes an interactive ESPN exhibit.
- Each spring, dozens of little leaguers from up and down the east coast descend upon Bristol, site of the **Eastern Regionals for the Little League World Series**. The Bartlett

Giamatti Center (named after the former MLB Commissioner) contains fields, dormitories and facilities for housing a week-long event, culminating with a nationally televised game (by ESPN) for the right to go to Williamsport, Pa. The facility is also home to the National Challengers Division Championship, for the mentally and physically disabled, aged 5 - 18

- Bristol is home to **the nation's oldest amusement park, Lake Compounce Theme Park**. The 2009 season will be the 164th consecutive year of operation for the park, which features traditional amusements and rides, water rides for hot days, and Boulder Dash, a roller coaster built entirely on a mountainside. Since its debut in 2000, it has been voted twice the world's best wooden roller coaster by the National Amusement Park Historical Association.