

How Boom Boom the mascot brought major college football to Las Vegas



By Jesse Granger (/author/jesse-granger/) Jun 5, 2019



When Las Vegas was still in its infancy as a sports town, so was John Saccenti in his sports career.

In the late 1990s, Saccenti attended classes at UNLV during the day and worked as Boom Boom, the polar bear mascot for the Las Vegas Thunder hockey team, at night. Saccenti remembers the long but fun nights, where he'd lose as much as 11 pounds in water weight dancing and skating around the Thomas & Mack Center.

More than 20 years later, Las Vegas has blossomed into one of the centers of the sports world. The NHL arrived in 2017 and the Golden Knights took the town by storm. The NFL won't be far behind, with the Oakland Raiders scheduled to move to Las Vegas for the 2020 season.

And as sports have exploded in the city, so has Saccenti's career.

Tuesday afternoon, as executive director of the Las Vegas Bowl, Saccenti announced the bowl game will be moving to the brand-new \$1.8 billion stadium that will house the Raiders, and will feature top teams from the SEC, Pac-12 and Big Ten Conferences.

Saccenti stood on the stage at APEX nightclub, on the 55th floor of the Palms Casino Resort, overlooking the half-constructed state-of-the-art stadium, and called some of the most powerful men in college football to the stage.

SEC commissioner Greg Sankey, Pac-12 commissioner Larry Scott and Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany took turns on the mic, singing the praises of Saccenti, his staff and the city of Las Vegas.

The move will take effect in the 2020 college football season and will make the Las Vegas Bowl one of the most highly-regarded bowl games outside of the New Year's Six. The bowl will have the second or third-best team in the Pac-12 for each of the next six seasons, and its opponent will be from either the SEC (2020, 2022 and 2024) or the Big Ten (2021, 2023 and 2025).

"It hit me last night at dinner," Saccenti told *The Athletic*. "It was about 20 of us over at the Mandalay Bay, up at the top of the Delano overlooking the stadium and The Las Vegas Strip. Greg Sankey got up and gave a toast. Jim Delany got up and gave a toast, and Larry Scott gave a toast. The words that came out of their mouths, I actually got choked up and got a little emotional. I just said to myself, 'I can't believe this is actually happening.'"



The Las Vegas Bowl made its major announcement in typical Las Vegas fashion, inside a night club with an Elvis Presley impersonator. (Courtesy of the Las Vegas Bowl)

It wasn't that long ago when Saccenti's view wasn't nearly as aesthetic. It was the inside of a sweaty polar bear mask, actually.

In 1994 Saccenti was a student living in the dorms at UNLV. His neighbor worked as Boom Boom the mascot, and asked Saccenti if he'd like to help with promotions and sling t-shirts into the crowd for \$50 per game.

Saccenti accepted and essentially worked as Boom Boom's assistant during games, following him around the arena and helping him whenever necessary.

“One night I went up to the office and I hear two people screaming at each other,” Saccenti recalled. “They’re yelling and cursing and everything else, and the door opens and the guy who was Boom Boom comes walking out all pissed off, and Ken Stickney (owner of the Thunder) was in there.

“He comes out and says, ‘You! I don’t know your name, but here’s 250 bucks in cash. Go put that bear costume on and don’t say another word.’”

Saccenti followed his orders. He slipped a pair of skates on, threw the giant, long-necked polar bear mask over his head and headed onto the ice.

“It was an absolute disaster,” Saccenti said. “They threw it on me 20 minutes before game time. Then we had an intern who didn’t pull the rug back off the rink the first night so my skate hit the rug and I went flying into the boards.”

Saccenti survived the fall and went on to work as Boom Boom for the next four-plus seasons for the Thunder.

“I was skinnier than all hell from all the sweating, so that was nice,” Saccenti joked. “I liked working in minor league sports because you work with a great group of people, and it’s a lot of hours and become so close with them. And I spent a lot of time with the players back then, and they were so down to earth and genuine. We’re still friends to this day, we had a huge reunion not long ago with all of the players.”

During his time with the team, Saccenti met Don Logan, who worked with both the Thunder and the Las Vegas Stars Triple-A baseball team at the time.

“Don came up and said, ‘Hey, do you want to work in sports?’” Saccenti said. “I told him I think I do. He asked what I want to do specifically and I replied, ‘I don’t know.’ He goes, ‘Perfect. We’re going to put you in a bunch of different departments, and we’ll see where you are best suited. You’re young, but I think you have something.’”

Saccenti worked in public relations, corporate sales and the marketing departments for both teams — hockey in the winter and baseball in the summer.

He eventually parlayed that into a job with Las Vegas' newest professional sport in 2000, becoming marketing manager for the XFL's Las Vegas Outlaws football franchise.

"One of the hardest things was leaving Don, but that opportunity with the XFL popped up, so I got to learn under Vince McMahon, and pick his brain on marketing and entertainment," Saccenti said.

The XFL didn't last long, but Saccenti landed on his feet with a job at ESPN Events and worked as an account executive on projects at UNLV for four years, in addition to the Las Vegas Bowl. Then, in 2014 he was named executive director of the Las Vegas Bowl.

Few are entrenched in the Las Vegas sports community more than Saccenti, but even he couldn't have predicted the tidal wave of sports that would take over the city.

"I knew hockey would take off here," Saccenti said. "I saw the passionate fans. I saw the crazy fans. I knew there were a lot of transplants here that liked hockey. But did I expect this, and what the Golden Knights are doing? Not a chance in hell."

"I thought there was no way on God's green earth that the NFL would allow the Raiders to come to Las Vegas. When that happened I fell out of my chair," Saccenti said. "Quite frankly for a while we gave up on this thing because, if nobody's going to build a state of the art stadium, we can't grow the game. We're stuck with a 36,000 seat stadium that's not very attractive, in the middle of nowhere."

The Las Vegas Bowl has been successful for its 28 years of existence but was always limited to Mountain West Conference teams and lower-tier Pac-12 teams because of Sam Boyd Stadium's limitations.

But when rumors of a 65,000-seat, state-of-the-art NFL stadium coming to Las Vegas, Saccenti had new hope.

"I was at every single stadium authority board meeting," he said. "I started calling people and I'm like, 'This is happening, we need to get the wheels moving now!' I was worried that other bowl games would see what was going in and try to beat us to the punch with their existing

relationships. So we worked hard behind the scenes for about two years to make sure we got here.”

Saccenti’s hard work paid off, as his bowl game will now host the cream of the crop in the college football landscape.

“He’s been a great partner of ours for many years,” Scott said. “Our team at the Pac-12 Conference has enjoyed working with him and he’s built a great level of trust and confidence. Convincing the SEC and the Big Ten to come play in their first-ever committed events in Las Vegas is a level of trust and confidence you have to have in the people running it and their reputation must be very strong for that to happen. So I think that’s all a credit to John and his team.”



Saccenti poses with a giant, jeweled football with the Las Vegas Strip behind him. (Courtesy of the Las Vegas Bowl)

“John carried the labor and the work,” Raiders president Marc Badain said, turning to Saccenti while at the podium. “There are a lot of people in this room who are proud of you, and proud to be your partner. It’s a really big day for you so I hope you enjoy it.”

Saccenti was all smiles throughout the presentation, including the photo shoot afterward where he and others posed for photos with a giant football covered in jewels on a rooftop balcony overlooking the Las Vegas Strip.

As Las Vegas grew as a sports town, Saccenti grew with it. His career arc is a perfect embodiment of the transformation of Las Vegas as a whole.

On his final day working as Boom Boom the mascot, Saccenti was escorted out of the Thomas & Mack Center in handcuffs, still wearing the costume. He and the other team staff knew it would be the last game in Thunder franchise history, so they were throwing free merchandise into the stands.

Saccenti was warned by arena ushers to stop, as they feared it would incite an already rowdy crowd. But he continued throwing merchandise until they began chasing him.

“I decided to run from them,” Saccenti said. “The entire row would stand up, I ran across the row, then they’d all sit back down to block the ushers. They dispatched every usher in the Thomas and Mack, and said ‘Boom Boom is on the loose!’

“They actually had a UNLV officer grab me and he’s trying to put cuffs on with the Boom Boom costume still on,” Saccenti said with a chuckle. “I think he was goofing around. We get in the elevator, and he says, ‘Alright you’re done for the night. Just go enjoy the rest of the game and there’s no harm no foul.’”

(Top photo courtesy of John Saccenti)

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