

What Mike Milbury sees in his sleep

The Islanders' boss would like you to forget the past—except for one punk by Bill Jensen

For a guy who wants nothing more than to look toward the future, there's an awful lot of the past on the walls of Mike Milbury's modest office in the catcombs of Nassau Coliseum. Four large photos of the Islanders' Stanley Cup-winning teams. Three framed front-page newspaper accounts chronicling the John Spano ownership debacle.

Milbury, whose mission as general manager is to make Uniondale the home of champions once again, understands better than anyone why fans cling to the ghosts of Islanders past.

"I'm tired of everyone looking back. It's disgusting. Get over it...It was an incredible run," he says of the Stanley Cup days. "But, Jesus Christ, it was a long time ago. I know I want to continue to honor those special athletes that were part of that great legacy, but ...I'd rather have them boo the hell out of us today for not doing the job than worry about the past."

When the Islanders head into the next century, who would Milbury envision starring for the blue and orange? "I'd like to say Sergei Fedorov," Milbury re-

lates with a smile, speaking of the star Detroit Red Wing center turned holdout. "But I can't right now. Maybe Luongo [Roberto Luongo, the Isles' first-round pick last June]. He's the guy that is supposed to be the franchise goalie."

For the GM, the Isles' more recent history is tinged with ominous memories, the kind that inspire nightmares, not revelry. Perhaps Milbury keeps those Spano pages in view because he knows that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. Or maybe it just keeps him fighting mad.

Milbury, a hard-charger who spent plenty of time in the penalty box in his 11-plus-season career as a Boston Bruin, never received a worse sucker punch

than the one doled out by Spano, the supposed self-made Texas millionaire who ended up indicted on fraud charges after he tried to buy the Isles last year.

The hockey man who talked so excitedly during the day at the prospect of a deep-pocketed savior and watched games with Spano at night from the owner's box got his first hint last January that things may not have been as they seemed in Spano World. Milbury was working as both coach and GM back then, being paid only his coach's salary under a five-year, \$3.5 million contract. But as a pivotal draft day loomed, he found himself globe-trotting in search of talent. Feeling "a little overwhelmed," Milbury decided he wanted to spend all his time on front-office tasks and move out from behind the bench.

So Milbury went to Dallas to meet with his new boss, whom he describes today as a "beady little guy."

"I got there and this guy wanted me to get a pay cut..." Milbury says. "I said, 'If you want favorable terms on a buyout, I'd be happy. If you want to bring in somebody, bring in Denis Potvin. Go ahead. But you're going to pay me what I earned, what I rode the buses for, and what I worked twenty years to get leverage for.' So he kicked me out of his office and I waited in the other room and about half-an-hour later, he...came back and said I could have the job..." Of course, Spano could have offered Milbury part ownership of the team, Boardwalk and Park Place: It was all Monopoly money anyway, according to prosecutors.

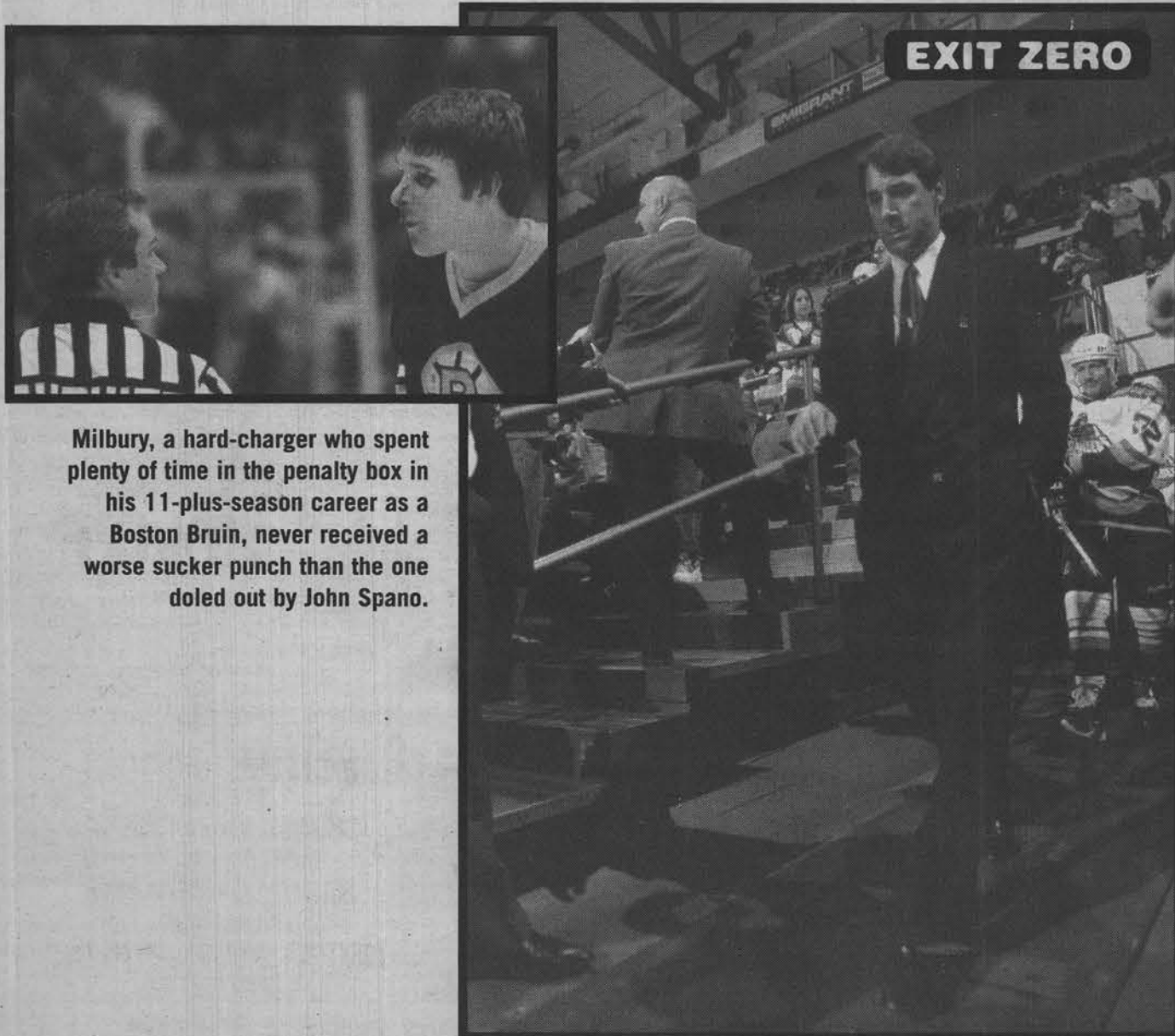
"What have I learned? I learned that he was a total fraud. He hurt a lot of people, stole a lot of money and he deserves to go to jail. I didn't learn anything. I just had to suffer the aggravation...He was a jerk."

On the docket for the Islanders of the next millennium is a new Coliseum, one with all the modern amenities—skyboxes and a lot of bathrooms. The team's prospective new owners are even floating the idea of buying the Nets and returning the NBA to Nassau, making a new arena a more sure-fire venture.

Milbury desperately wants the new joint to have some character, not more seats. "I'd rather stay at 16,500 [meaning thousands of seats] and keep atmosphere. The buildings have lost personality. I'm looking for a homier approach." But he adds that the old arena on the shores of Hempstead Turnpike ain't done yet: "This is a great place to watch a game. And it rocks. When the place is filled and we have a good game going, it can rock. You can feel the excitement. I don't want to lose that in a new building. I want to have a home where we have an advantage and having a mausoleum is not having an advantage."

As the Isles lurch into this season's clobbering time, Milbury is left with his visions of future glory and the hope of a humble playoff berth...and maybe the sight of Fedorov racing down the wing.

In the meantime, Lord Stanley may take a few years to return to Long Island. Somehow, you get the feeling that the prospect of John Spano sharing a cell with a big fella named Duke would take the edge off a little bit.



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