

Home on the Range

With the creation of Chelsea Piers, **Roland Betts** built a multi-purpose facility that is a haven for urban golfers and a model for other cities

BY GREG MIDLAND

PHOTO BY ANDREW LEVINE

A man walks purposefully from one end of the gargantuan Chelsea Piers sports and entertainment complex to the other. He passes through what is now a familiar, year-round, hum of activity on the Manhattan waterfront: young adults playing indoor soccer or basketball, hockey players lugging bags of equipment, young professionals heading to or from a workout, and of course, urban golfers stepping off the crosstown bus, out of a cab, or simply walking across the West Side Highway, golf bags hanging from their shoulders.

A friendly, tongue-wagging bulldog—his favorite breed—stops the man in his tracks, and when he looks up at the dog's owner, he notices that it's one of the stars of "Law & Order: SVU." Yes, Chelsea Piers also has thriving TV and film studios that have helped grow a prized subset of the New York economy. After his canine interlude, he continues to survey all that he sees with a mixture of satisfaction and vigilance.

The man is Roland Betts, co-founder of Chelsea Piers, and it's not an overstatement to say that the successful development of this world-famous sports palace was one of the greatest New York success stories of the last century. Ironically, it wasn't his starting goal.

"The whole thing is a huge historical accident," Betts, 65, says with a sly grin. "One of my [two] daughters, Jessie, was an avid figure skater as a kid, and for many years I brought her to the old Skyrink, which was on West 33rd Street, for early-morning practice."

Here's where the tale of dutiful father merges with the ambition of a man who had already been a high school teacher, lawyer, Major League Baseball owner and successful movie financier.

"It became obvious that the Skyrink location wasn't going to last because the lease wasn't going to be renewed," said Betts. "So another parent, David Tewksbury, and I started looking for a new facility. We looked all over but didn't find enough column-free space for a rink. Then someone told me about Pier 61, and I remember this very well because it was just the 20th anniversary of my first visit there—November 1, 1991. I stood at the end of it and looked at this thing, which was a derelict structure but was 120 feet wide and 900 feet long. And I could see that not only could we put one rink in there, but we could put two."

Pier 61 was owned by the State Department of Transportation, and Betts persuaded then-governor Mario Cuomo to conduct an auction. Here's where the historical accident part comes into play:

The auction documents defined the property not solely as the upper level of Pier 61, but as the entire complex of three piers that comprise the facility today. If Betts and Tewksbury wanted Pier 61 for their hockey rinks, they'd have to take a lot more with it.

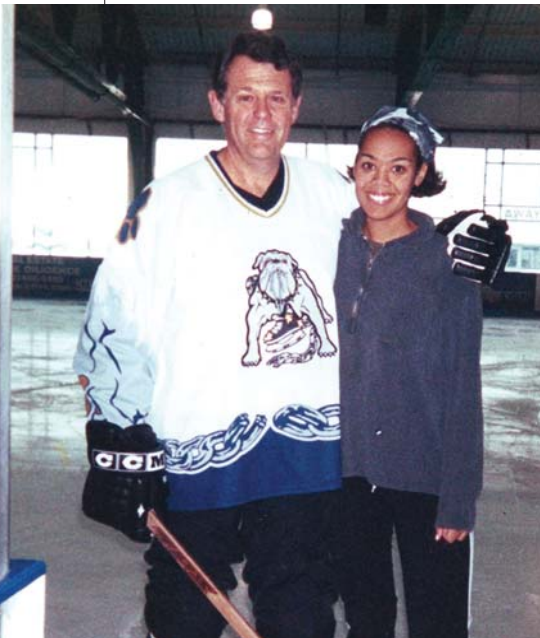
"The project went from about 100,000 square feet to about a million and a half," recalls Betts. "And my first instinct was to say, enough, this is too complicated. But then we thought about how cool it would be to have all these first-rate sports facilities that everyone could access, all in one place."

"I had young children then," says Bernstein, "and I was a stand-in for all those families who were raising kids in the city. There was really no place to go for this kind of recreation. The property was so vast, and realized we could achieve our goal of having cutting-edge athletic facilities."

The group won the auction for the property in May 1992, and two years later they began developing the piers into what it is today—a tourist attraction and city amenity that sees an average of more than 4 million annual visitors. Most facilities opened in

as early as age 4 at Huntington Country Club. Today, he plays most of his Met Area golf at the Golf Club of Purchase, and near his second home in Jackson, Wyoming. His love affair with the game brings him all over the world, including trips with friends to places like Whistling Straits and Bandon Dunes, and to Royal Portrush Golf Club in Northern Ireland.

"I think the courses in Northern Ireland are among the most beautiful in the world, and I even love the weather," Betts says. "I tell people that if they come here to Chelsea



Betts, a former hockey player at Yale, was led to Chelsea Piers through his search for a practice rink for his daughter Jessie (above, left), who was an avid figure skater. Betts and his wife, Lois, attended Opening Day 1994 in Texas with their good friends George and Laura Bush.

Twenty years ago, Chelsea was not nearly as fashionable as it is today, especially the blocks west of Ninth Avenue. In order to get Chelsea Piers built, Betts had to secure permits from city, state, and federal agencies, and win over a skeptical neighborhood review board and media. The process took more than two years and the reaction from just about everyone was that it would never work—it's too far away, the location is bad, no one's ever done this, etc.

But another man decided that he liked what he saw. Tom Bernstein is Betts's close friend; the two founded Silver Screen Partners in 1983. Silver Screen financed every movie made by Disney for most of the 1980s and '90s, and was the financial force behind box office hits such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Bernstein watched from afar while Betts and Tewksbury made the plans for Chelsea Piers, and later decided to get involved himself.

late 1995, including the world-famous golf club, boasting a four-deck driving range with an automated golf ball delivery system. In a typical month, more than 2 million golf balls are sent flying toward the Hudson River by everyone from beginners to accomplished players looking to squeeze in some practice on their lunch break.

Chelsea Piers provides a diversity of experiences unlike anywhere else—including a bowling alley, youth camps, and catered event spaces. It all seems so natural now, but early on there were questions about whether it would survive. While that is no longer in doubt, Betts sometimes can't help but marvel at how it all got started: "It was an effort to build a better place for my daughter to skate, which got out of hand."

Roland Betts was born on May 25, 1946, and grew up on Long Island's north shore. His father was an avid golfer, and Roland learned the game early, playing with his dad

Piers and can consistently hit the ball straight without hitting the side nets, they're ready to go to Ireland. Because we get some tough cross-winds from the water."

Growing up during a golden age of sports, Betts naturally gravitated to other activities besides golf. He followed the Brooklyn Dodgers and, like many, was heartbroken when they left for Los Angeles. He also became a good junior hockey player, and pursued that game all the way to Yale University, where he was a four-year member of the hockey team and in 2009 gave a substantial gift to renovate the team's historic Eero Saarinen-designed home rink.

It was at Yale where Betts also began another strong connection: his friendship with George W. Bush. The two met early in their freshman year and have remained close ever since. Before he became the 43rd President of the United States, Bush served on the board of Silver Screen, and in turn Betts

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helped Bush assemble the group of people who would purchase the Texas Rangers baseball team in 1989.

So who wins when the two play golf?

"No comment," jokes Betts. "He's ducking me! We were supposed to play in September but he had to cancel."

After his 1968 graduation from Yale, Betts began teaching high school in Harlem and later became an assistant principal. He wrote a book about the experience, called *Acting Out: Coping with Big City Schools*, and it's clear his time in education continues to have a profound effect on him.

"I thought I'd teach for about a year or two, but it ended up being more than seven years because I loved it so much," he said. "I loved the energy of the kids, the challenge—it's the most difficult job I've ever had."

Following his time in education, Betts went to law school at Columbia and took a job in 1978 in the entertainment department at the New York law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison. It was there that the seeds were sown for much of his later professional endeavors. He became fast friends with Bernstein, another young associate and the father of 2011 Met Amateur runner-up Sam Bernstein. Betts left the firm in 1982 to start his film company, and

Bernstein followed two years later. The two have been business partners ever since.

"We like each other and have similar senses of humor," remarks Bernstein. "We also have broad interests, not only in business but in other areas. So there's always something to talk about."

Their sights are now focused on Connecticut and the development of Chelsea Piers Stamford. The waterfront facility will occupy roughly 500,000 square feet in a former Clairol manufacturing plant. The facility is expected to open in July 2012 with an Olympic-sized swimming pool as well as hockey, basketball, tennis, squash, and other sports—but not golf.

"The essential element that makes golf work here at Chelsea Piers is the 165-foot-high netting system, and it's fortuitous that it's on a pier," said Betts. "The Stamford project is in a suburban-style neighborhood, so the netting wouldn't have worked. People don't want that in their backyard."

Still, Betts and his partners were welcomed with open arms by Stamford, and feel that they might be on to something that can be replicated across the country.

"The permitting process here took about two weeks," he said happily. "We created a model that was pure sports. We could prob-

ably find 10 locations around the country where something like this could work, and if so, we'd be very interested in that."

There is no doubt, however, that Betts's heart remains with the original Chelsea Piers. The golf club recently became a First Tee of Metropolitan New York facility, something that Betts is very proud of. (His daughter Jessie is on the board of The First Tee of Metropolitan New York and is a co-founder of its Young Benefactors group). Special events held at Chelsea Piers have included a clinic by Paula Creamer and equipment demo days.

Betts's charitable endeavors include time on the boards of the Olympic Committee, American Museum of Natural History, and National Parks Foundation. He served on the Yale board for 12 years and as a senior fellow for eight years. He also served on the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, and was chair of the planning committee for Ground Zero, just two miles downtown from Chelsea Piers.

So what does a man who has accomplished so much in his life do at an age when many of his peers—including the former President—have retired?

"I'm really focused on this Stamford project, and if we do well I think it will open up some other possibilities. I'll always be doing something. I'd like to play more golf!"

Assuming he does, he won't ever have a hard time finding a place to practice. ■

Construction was underway in 1995 as the old Pier 59 was transformed into The Golf Club at Chelsea Piers.



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"Chelsea Piers was the linchpin for the redevelopment of the West Side. It makes you realize what a great city this is." —Tom Bernstein



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