



## **The 98-year-old man who has had our numbers all these years sold Elias Sports Bureau this month**

But Seymour Siwoff kept it in the family, passing the business to his 32-year-old grandson

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That the moment passed without much fanfare shouldn't diminish its significance: A few weeks back one of the longest-tenured owners in the history of North American sports sold off his ancient stake.

Seymour Siwoff didn't own a franchise in one of the big four pro leagues, but he presided over an institution that served them all. For some 67 years Siwoff (pronounced SEA-woff) was the owner and president of the Elias Sports Bureau, the most famous stats keepers in sports. It was announced March 21 that Siwoff, at age 98, had sold the company to his 32-year-old grandson, Joe Gilston, who'd previously worked for Elias.

A handshake between the generations was all that marked this handing down of legacy. Siwoff, a World War II veteran who built Elias into the longtime official statistician of Major League Baseball, the NFL, NBA and NHL, is a man of disciplined routine. And mostly every day since the sale, Siwoff has been keeping to his — still showing up to Elias's offices on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue and getting down to business.

"He's an amazing guy ... Even to this day, he's working seven days a week," Gilston said of his grandfather in an interview. "One of the things I've admired is that he really tries to learn something new every day. He's an incredible story of somebody who's just constantly looking for what's next."

Speaking over the phone from his desk the other day, Siwoff pronounced himself “happy” to have passed along ownership of the fruits of his long life’s labour.

“As the years go by you get a feeling, ‘I want this to go on.’ And here you have a grandson who has an interest — so why shouldn’t he continue it?” Siwoff said. “The people working for us, the majority, were all like family. They weren’t family, but we treated them as such. So to keep the company in the family, it’s a wonderful feeling.”

The company’s history dates back more than 100 years, to its 1913 founding by brothers Al and Walter Elias. By the time Siwoff came aboard in the 1950s as an accountant, it was still a small and seasonal business — specifically baseball season. The small staff went through daily boxscores and updated statistics on paper ledgers with pencils and erasers, hand-delivering their summaries to newspapers and wire services around New York. Siwoff, who had worked as a shoe salesman and was considering a career with the Internal Revenue Service, was eventually urged to buy the company, “just to see what I could do with it.”

“I thought I’d try it for a while, and I wound up trying it for a lifetime,” Siwoff once told a newspaper reporter. That was 27 years ago.

Looking back on his career this week, Siwoff said the key to his company’s success was daily diligence — “the sacredness of accuracy” is how he once described it. Though Elias has always employed a staff of sports-loving numbers wizards who would presumably dominate a trivia night, it has always gone against company policy to rely on the vagaries of the human memory. The in-house motto has long been “look it up.”

Siwoff said one of his big breaks came in the late 1950s, when he first heard word of a wondrous machine known as a computer and became an early adapter.



“I fell in love with computers,” Siwoff said. “Don’t ask me how, I just thought it was the way to go. We wouldn’t have been successful without it.”

Once a baseball-obsessed boy from Brooklyn who came of age during the Great Depression, Siwoff spoke of seeing Yankees greats like Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig ply their trade. But long before keeping track of sports history became his business, he engaged in grimmer duties. Fighting as a member of the U.S. army near the conclusion of World War II, he was wounded on a bomb-strewn beach in Italy while friends and fellow soldiers died around him.

“Why did they die while I survived? The word is luck,” he said. “I was a lucky cockroach ... I was lucky. Lucky in the war. Lucky in business. And that’s the truth.”

Luck had something to do with it, surely. Struck in the stomach by shrapnel that rudely unravelled various internal organs, Siwoff only later found out that his battlefield surgeon made an error in the fray.

“Basically his intestines were not put back the way they’re supposed to be,” said Gilston of his grandfather. “But after that, basically he didn’t go to any doctors beyond a regular checkup for years — probably 40 or 50 years between serious medical visits.”

A less fatalistic reading of Siwoff’s success might point out that he was a man of considerable vision. Though Elias had always been known as a baseball company, Siwoff, upon taking over the operation, saw diversification as the path to expansion. He got in on the ground floor of an imminent sporting boom. When Siwoff first made a deal that made Elias the

official statistician of the NFL — an agreement he chalked up to a mutual friend setting up a meeting with newly installed commissioner Pete Rozelle around 1960 — the league had 13 teams and the Super Bowl was most of a decade away from its debut. When Siwoff first started doing business with the NBA, acquainting himself with then-commissioner J. Walter Kennedy, the league had nine teams.

“I was fortunate to meet people who were on the same wavelength I was on,” Siwoff said.

Gilston, for his part, grew up hanging around Elias headquarters, occasionally cleaning his grandfather’s office for the promise of a few dollars of pocket money. About a decade ago, Gilston began a five-year run as an employee.

“I basically started at the bottom,” Gilston said. “I was a data-entry guy and taught myself how to code. It was exciting. And on a personal level, it was great. I got to go out to lunch with my grandfather almost every day.”

For most of the past five years, Gilston worked for the XO Group Inc., a media and technology company where he said he gained experience in sales and business development that he hopes will serve him well as Elias’s president.

“The beauty of sports is that there’s still always a story. I think we view ourselves very much as storytellers,” Gilston said. “The platform and the way people are digesting that information might change ... but people love the story. We’re all fans. Putting modern-day sports into an historical context will always be of value and always something we do.”

Understanding where the business is heading next — and Gilston said he sees opportunities in the legalization of sports gambling — is anyone’s guess. Siwoff, for his part, said he has no plans to change a routine that’s working. Why, in a world where successful business people routinely retire to lives of leisure, does he persist in making the daily trek into the heart of New York’s grand chaos?

“You ask a good question. Why do I come in the office every day? Just to stay alive. Just to stay alive,” he said. “It’s a terrible feeling to do nothing and wait to die. I’ve lost so many friends of mine ...”

Last week Siwoff said he was “shocked” to learn his friend Marty Noble, the long-time baseball writer for Newsday, had passed away at age 70. Siwoff’s older sister, the TV director known as Lela Swift, died in 2015 at age 96. His wife of 70 years, Gertrude, died last year at age 97.

“I was fortunate I married the right girl,” he said. “She let me work these crazy hours in the early years. And I struggled. Oh, I struggled. But I didn’t give up. And it turned out to be good. That’s the best advice I can give you. Never give up.”

Never give up. And never stop starting your day with a trip to the office.

“He wouldn’t want (a vacation), so I wouldn’t want that for him,” said Gilston of his grandfather. “This is where he’s going to be until his last day.”