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La Dolce Vita

How Mike Schiavone left Italy and came to represent one of New York's most famous professional sports teams: the Buffalo Bills

BY BOB THURLOW
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUKE COPPING

THE AMERICAN DREAM IS SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE MICHAEL SCHIAVONE.

Born in Potenza, Italy, in 1957, Schiavone grew up watching shows like *Bonanza* and *Perry Mason* dubbed in Italian, and seeing movies like *Ben-Hur*, also dubbed, at the only movie theater in town, which his uncle managed. He estimates he saw Charlton Heston's gladiator epic 13 times.

"I remember going to buy bread at a bakery across the street," Schiavone says from his law office in Buffalo. "It was one of those brick-oven bakeries. They had these long, wooden [boards] that they'd reach in to pull the bread out, and you'd take it home. It couldn't get much fresher than that."

Then his life changed. Leo Insalaco, a barber from Dunkirk, N.Y., was visiting his family roots and decided he wanted a hand-tailored suit to bring back to the States. The tailor he chose was Schiavone's father, Anthony. "At that time, it was an honor to be asked to do work for an American," Schiavone says. "So my dad went out of his way and, in less than a week, was able to craft a meticulous, handmade suit. The gentleman looked at my dad and said, 'You know, you can't get work like this where I'm from. I'm not even sure you can get it in New York City. You ought to come to America.'

"A year later, we were here."

Assimilation wasn't particularly difficult for him. Sure, his name, pronounced *Ski-ah-VONE-ay*, was Americanized to *Sha-VONE* out of respect for the perplexed tongues of his first-grade classmates. But he says, "At that age you're relatively resilient and adapt to change well."

When he arrived in the U.S. at the age of 5, for example, football meant a round ball you kicked around a field, but he soon began to follow the American version of the sport. "My brother and I went to our first Bills game in the 1973 season, which was the first season at Ralph Wilson Stadium," Schiavone says. "It was September: a glorious, sunny Sunday afternoon. Perfect temperature, perfect climate." The fall colors were beginning to turn, and O.J. Simpson was beginning his march toward breaking the single-season rushing record.

This is where the American dream part comes in. Because the young immigrant who sat in the bleachers that day, cheering on O.J. and the Bills, grew up to be a corporate business lawyer who not only became the Bills' chief outside counsel, but who helped negotiate the stadium's lease. Twice.

"I'm very blessed," Schiavone says.

SCHIAVONE'S OFFICE AT LIPSITZ GREEN

Scime Cambria is decorated with photos of his wife, Cheryl, their three sons and Buffalo Bills memorabilia including a Jim Kelly-autographed football. It's only a block away from the Erie County Courthouse, but if you're his client, chances are you're not making that short walk with him.

"I'm a business and transactional lawyer," he says. "My focus is on keeping clients *out* of court as best I possibly can."

Those clients include small- and medium-sized businesses, manufacturing and distribution companies, hotel operators and local real estate developers. "Many of these are small, closely held businesses, so you're dealing with intergenerational succession planning, family estate planning and business succession planning," he says. "I sometimes feel as though I'm in-house counsel to 30 or 40 businesses. ... While there are differences, they all face the same challenges; they all have the same issues. ... At the end of the day, the Bills are a Western New York employer that has approximately 150 employees. The only difference between the Bills and one of the other companies I work with is the profile."



MICHAEL SCHIAVONE

- SENIOR PARTNER, LIPSITZ GREEN SCIME CAMBRIA
- BUSINESS & CORPORATE; ENTERTAINMENT & SPORTS; ESTATE PLANNING & PROBATE
- OUTSIDE COUNSEL TO THE BUFFALO BILLS
- SUPER LAWYERS 2007–2013

So how did Schiavone wind up in the law? Did an Italian-speaking Perry Mason plant the seed?

"I think I was fascinated by government and the legislative and judicial process," he says. "Not that I knew what they were, but I always had a penchant for governmental affairs."

He honed the skills he would need as a lawyer—debate, advocacy, diplomacy—as one of the few Republicans at State University of New York at Fredonia in the years during and after Watergate. "Talk about ostracized," he says. "A political science major at a very liberal liberal-arts institution, who happened to be a Republican."

Schiavone worked his way through high school, college and law school, first at Twin Fair, a discount department store, then at a local steel plant. He assumed he would become a criminal defense attorney. "It wasn't

until I was in law school," he says, "that I was exposed to other areas of the law that aren't nearly as exotic—at least as far as television is concerned—and I became captivated with estate planning and tax planning and business-succession planning issues.

"I'm more of a numbers guy than your average lawyer," he adds. "I have more acquaintances who are accountants than lawyers. If you're bottom-line driven, and you understand financial statements and tax returns, and you're excited about the tax code driving policy, it creates passion out of what most people find mundane."

In the early '80s, fresh out of Syracuse University College of Law, Schiavone began focusing his career on estate and tax planning for high net worth individuals. Then in 1989, Vince Tobia, a colleague, became chief outside counsel for the Bills, and he tapped Schiavone—

who had experience in construction and financing—to help with the expansion of Ralph Wilson Stadium's luxury suites in the early 1990s. A few years later, he asked Schiavone to help negotiate what was then a 15-year lease renewal for the stadium. Then a year later in 1999, Tobia died of a heart attack at age 60.

"We were all shocked," Schiavone says. "Vince was, or appeared to be, the picture of health. Took care of himself, was in great shape, was an amateur boxer in his youth. He was very fit, very active, very athletic."

It meant the Bills needed a new outside counsel. They didn't look far.

"THE FIRST TIME YOU'RE ON THE FIELD," says Schiavone, who occasionally mingles with team guests and VIPs on the field, "you look around. You look at the number of people, and you get

the perspective that you would never get from the sidelines: That this is pretty much a stage, and there are tens of thousands of people watching you. You do wind up pinching yourself and asking, 'Am I really here?'"

During most home games, Schiavone entertains clients in a luxury suite. "At the same time," he says, "I have two lawyers who are working in the administration building to assist in processing arrests. We coordinate with the security forces to make sure that if someone is going to be arrested, the arrest is legitimate and it's going to stick. On game day, we're running a mini-judicial system." He estimates 20 to 25 arrests per game are made, mostly for disorderly conduct, fighting and criminal trespass.

Security measures are constantly being coordinated, and when necessary, updated. "The Boston Marathon situation has changed the rules of the game as far as what the fans can bring into an NFL stadium," he says. "Backpacks, purses, seat cushions are all prohibited unless it's a clear, see-through, 12-by-12-by-12 pack."

Road games, he's usually in the press box.

"There's a misperception [about the job] that you really don't do much until the season starts," Schiavone says. "In reality, I'd say 75 percent of my work occurs during the off-season. You're preparing for the upcoming season; you're assisting in negotiating contracts with sponsors, providers, suppliers ... security companies and the rest. All of that occurs before the first preseason game."

This past year, the stadium's lease with the city—which Schiavone helped negotiate in the late '90s—neared expiration. That was difficult enough; misperceptions in the media didn't help.

"There was never any threat to relocate the team outside of Western New York," Schiavone says. "From day one, Mr. Wilson, the owner, was committed to negotiating an extension of the lease that was mutually beneficial to the people of Western New York and to the Buffalo Bills. And at the outset, the Bills expressed their desire to the state that a new stadium was not economically feasible, either to the state or to the Bills. So the suggestion that the team might have moved to a larger market, might have moved to Los Angeles ... Certainly, the media could have picked up that Los Angeles is looking for

a team, and reported that various teams may be available, but the Buffalo Bills were not leaving Western New York."

With Schiavone representing the Bills, the county retained Christopher Melvin of Nixon Peabody, and the state secured the services of Foley & Lardner's Irwin Raji, fresh from his role in Guggenheim Baseball Management's \$2.5 billion acquisition of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

"It took some time," says Raji. "There were moments that were challenging, but the players at the table—the Bills, Mike Schiavone—we all had a common interest."

"Mike's vast legal knowledge of both NFL and general business matters, combined with his years of local experience, were invaluable," says team CEO and president Russ Brandon. "He has a great ability to quickly understand the positions from both sides of the negotiating table and help the parties reach a collective solution that suits the needs of everyone involved."

In late 2012, the parties came to an agreement on a 10-year lease, with a one-time termination option available during the seventh year. Ralph Wilson Stadium will also undergo \$130 million worth of renovations, such as adding high-definition video displays and improving concessions and restrooms, to be completed by 2015. The agreement also calls for the formation of an advisory group to research the feasibility of a new stadium.

"Preliminary work [on the renovations] has started, but it's pretty much site preparation work," Schiavone says. "I don't think there's going to be any material changes that fans are going to notice in the 2013 season."

As tough as these negotiations were, it wasn't the most difficult thing Schiavone has had to do as a lawyer. That came earlier in his tenure as chief outside counsel.

From the late 1970s on, the Bills held training camp at the State University of New York at Fredonia. Schiavone is still deeply involved with his alma mater, serving on the foundation board of directors for more than a decade and recently spending two years as its chairman. Earlier this year, the college awarded him its distinguished service award.

And in 2000, the Buffalo Bills, his client, moved their training camp from Fredonia to St. John Fisher College in Rochester.

"Your profession teaches you to represent your client to the best of your ability—

regardless," Schiavone says. "I did that. ... And in so doing I guaranteed training camp would no longer be at Fredonia."

"That was probably the most difficult thing I've done."

IS IT TOUGH TO REMAIN A FAN OF A TEAM

you work for? Does the work get in the way of any given Sunday? "My blood runs red, white and blue no matter what," Schiavone says.

Indeed, to hear him rhapsodize about the Bills and its fans is to hear echoes of the way people describe the relationship between the 1950s Brooklyn Dodgers and their fans. Both teams played in working-class regions in the long shadow of New York City. Both teams were lousy for years, then good enough to make the final game/series, but never good enough (or only once for Brooklyn) to win it all.

"You start out with the fact that, historically, Buffalo is a hardworking blue-collar town," Schiavone says. "There is a following that runs deep for generations. Come September, if you're not a Bills fan, you're probably not in Western New York. I'm not saying that other teams don't have a following—because obviously I've been to other teams' stadiums—but there's something unique about Western New York and the love affair between the town and the team."

Though the Schiavones are recent arrivals to the U.S., their following, too, runs for generations. It may have started with Schiavone and his brother, but their father—the man who stitched a suit fine enough to take his family across the Atlantic, and who, in America, worked all day at a men's store and then tailored suits at night out of his home—joined them.

"We made a Sunday afternoon Bills game a family affair," Schiavone says. "For a while it was my brother and I and my dad. Then we started bringing our children."

Schiavone's father, who lives a few miles from him, now suffers from Alzheimer's. Up until two years ago, he was still tailoring out of his home. But Sundays in autumn were reserved for family and football.

"It gave us an opportunity to get together once a week during the season," Schiavone says. "My mother would make sandwiches and various things that my dad would bring to the stadium. We'd always have a cup of espresso before kickoff. Then we'd go grab our seats." 