



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

October 26, 2021

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**Past Pres** Jerry Coughter  
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### Programs Elly Clary



## By Elly Clary

## Flex Sabates

## Successful Businessman, Sports Team Owner, Philanthropist and Cuban Immigrant

A close scrape with death as a Castro resistance fighter in Cuba. Arriving in Miami at 15 with \$25 and two boxes of cigars. Selling dozens of cars in his first month at City Chevrolet.

“Charlotte has been a very special place for me,” Felix Sabates told Rotarians by way of recounting some of his experiences and accomplishments as an entrepreneur, sports franchise owner and philanthropist.

After living with an uncle in Boston and Missouri, Sabates landed in Lexington, NC, with his mother and five brothers and sisters. When the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on their lawn, Sabates told his mother it didn't appear to be a Catholic Church ceremony.

The church did help relocate the family to Charlotte where Sabates started working at the airport washing cars. He married at 17 because he loved his wife but also wanted to leave the two-bedroom, one-bath house where he was living with seven relatives.

“As much as you talk,” his wife told him, “you would make a good salesman.”

She was prophetic. He sold 35 Chevrolets in 30 days to Cubans who didn't have transportation. “It was like shooting fish in a barrel,” he chuckled.

Always evolving, Sabates built the most successful sales representative firm in the United States. A highlight was getting in on the ground floor of the Pong computer game phenomenon. Later, pushing products of the nascent Compaq Computer Corporation, he realized billions in sales. He even made money on a talking teddy bear that turned out to be defective.

Sabates hitched a ride on an airplane with Eddie Crutchfield, the former CEO of the old First Union Corporation. After an argument over whether he or the bank owned the craft, Sabates and Crutchfield became great friends.

George Shinn got Sabates into sports team ownership, along with NASCAR honcho Rick Hendrick, when Shinn convinced owners of the National Basketball Association's teams to award a franchise to Charlotte. Sabates marveled at Shinn speaking to the owners for an hour without notes about financial arrangements for what became the original Charlotte Hornets.

"I had more money than George had," Sabates smiled. "He was the best bluffer in the world."

Now Sabates is the only owner of the original Hornets who has a piece of Michael Jordan's iteration of the team. He's also owned a hockey team and a NASCAR Sprint Cup operation. And he turned a Hatteras yacht dealership into that brand's largest retail outlet in the world.

Well-known for philanthropy, Sabates has been a big supporter of UNC Charlotte. He is a large contributor to Atrium Health's Levine Children's Hospital.

Lately, he's encountered what he termed "serious medical issues" and said he's rid himself of much of his business interests. He recently sold his Charlotte house and is spending maybe 70 percent of his time in the Bahamas.

But in closing, Sabates reiterated what a special place Charlotte holds in his heart.

\*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/639576720>

The program introduction begins at 14:40 minutes.