

WAKE FOREST vs. CONNECTICUT
1 P.M., BANK OF AMERICA STADIUM, TV: ESPN

2 games to vie for Charlotte spotlight

Organizers say ACC title game,
Meineke Bowl can both thrive

By KEN TYSIAC

ktysiac@charlotteobserver.com

It started with what Ken Haines now calls "some pretty wild thoughts."

When Haines decided to bring a bowl game to Charlotte beginning in 2002, he knew there was a chance the ACC would expand its nine-school roster.

He envisioned a championship game for a 12-team ACC and perhaps even a Bowl Championship Series game coming to Charlotte one day.

One of those thoughts became reality Dec. 12, when the ACC announced the ACC championship games in 2010 and 2011 will be played at Bank of America Stadium.

"Charlotte is a great college football town," said Haines, president and CEO of Raycom Sports, which owns the Meineke Car Care Bowl.

The championship game could enhance the city's college football reputation, and event organizers say it won't hurt the bowl game, whose success helped secure the title game.

A crowd of more than 50,000 is expected today when Connecticut (9-3) meets Wake Forest (8-4) at 1 p.m. in the Meineke Car Care Bowl at Bank of America Stadium.

According to research by the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, Charlotte's previous five bowl games have brought averages of \$12.8 million in direct spending and \$19.3 million in total economic impact to Mecklenburg County.

The challenge for event organizers is to sustain those numbers when Charlotte is asked to support two postseason college football games in December. As corporate sponsors are being asked to ante up twice for games at Bank of America Stadium, the banking industry is slumping and some economists are predicting a recession.

"I think the two (games) can work together," said Will Webb, Meineke Bowl

executive director. "We've got to be careful to make sure the games are constructed so they complement each other rather than compete with each other."

You're starting a bowl where?

The first news that Charlotte would be the site of a holiday bowl game was met with skepticism.

Florida and California locations where warmer weather attracts tourists are common sites for bowls. With the Carolina Panthers and the Hornets followed by the Bobcats in town, Charlotte has become known as a pro sports market.

"There was a lot of concern that the college interest had fallen off somewhat in Charlotte, and a concern that it was too close to too many schools and it wouldn't be considered a really fun type trip," Haines said.

But location in the heart of ACC country turned out to be a bonus. From 1990 to 2000, Raycom had operated a bowl in Florida whose title sponsors included Blockbuster, Carquest and Micron PC, but attendance had been poor in what's now known as Dolphin Stadium near Miami.

Haines said fans from ACC schools were reluctant to travel to south Florida for a bowl game without something close to national championship implications.

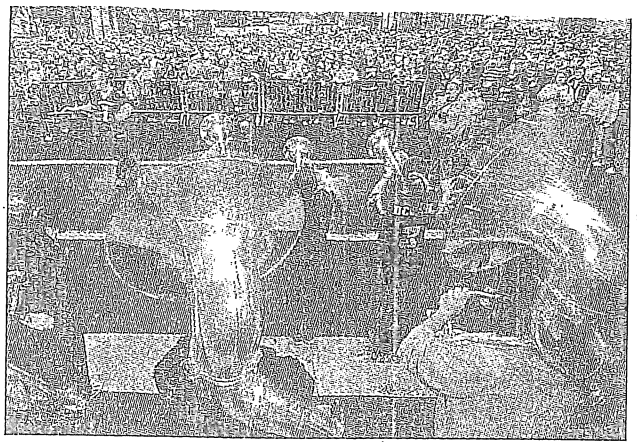
So Raycom started the bowl in Charlotte. The inaugural Continental Tire Bowl in 2002 matching Virginia and West Virginia gave Charlotte an eye-popping debut with 73,535 fans.

In 2004, North Carolina's meeting with Boston College nearly equaled that mark with an announced attendance of 73,258. North Carolina associate athletics director Rick Steinbacher spoke fondly of watching players cram themselves into cars to race around Lowe's Motor Speedway when the team was in Charlotte.

"There's nothing wrong with going to Hawaii for a bowl game, and I'm sure the (East Carolina) guys had a great time doing that (this season)," Steinbacher said. "But it's also great to be able to play in a bowl game in your home state, where your family can be there and players can get there easily, and have a good time in front of your home fans."

The skeptics were silenced. In 2003, the Sports Business Journal named the bowl one of the five best start-ups in sports over the previous five years, behind the Houston Texans and ESPN The Magazine.

When Continental Tire withdrew as title sponsor after 2004, Haines said Meineke Car Care Centers "readily" stepped in as a replacement.



JEFF WILLHELM-jwillhelm@charlotteobserver.com

The Connecticut pep band fires up the crowd of several thousand, mostly Huskies fans, at a pep rally in uptown Charlotte on Friday.

Partnership the key

The bowl's model of enticing fans to Charlotte based on short driving distances to many ACC schools caught the attention of ACC officials looking for a home for their championship game.

After attendance declined over a three-year period in Jacksonville, Fla., the ACC awarded games to Tampa for 2008-09 and Charlotte for 2010-11.

"Having the bowl game there was a definite positive in terms of the league's evaluation of Charlotte," said ACC Commissioner John Swofford.

Organizers plan to market the games together. They plan to sell personal seat licenses in a two-game package for the most coveted seats at the stadium to draw local fans.

Haines said corporate supporters can be approached in the same way, with one sponsorship covering both games. He said that although an economic downturn always is a concern, high-tech and financial services industries show great interest in college aged and college educated fans.

The Meineke Bowl also is low enough in the ACC selection order to avoid having the ACC championship loser in town twice in the same month. Jacksonville had that problem in 2005 with Virginia Tech and in 2006 with Georgia Tech playing in the ACC title game and the Gator Bowl.

"The teams actually didn't mind, but the fans didn't want to come back," said Wake Forest coach Jim Grobe. "Now, the two teams that play here in the championship game (in Charlotte) won't be coming back, so it'll be a better sell for (the bowl)."

While Jacksonville is the cautionary scenario, Atlanta is the model for making two postseason games work. There the SEC championship game always has drawn at least 71,000 to the Georgia Dome, and the Chick-fil-A Bowl led non-BCS bowls with an average attendance of 71,664 over

the past 10 years.

The key for success in Charlotte may be cooperation between bowl owner Raycom and the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, which made the bid to get the championship game.

Raycom lent its expertise from running the bowl game during the bidding process, and CRVA executive director Tim Newman said he expects the partnership to help both games thrive.

"We look forward to coordinating activities with the bowl because we think the success of the bowl and the success of the championship game are very closely tied together going forward," Newman said. "And think that we can have mutually beneficial relationships between the two games."

Staff Writers Ron Green Jr. and David Scott contributed.

Ken Tysiac: 919-834-8471