

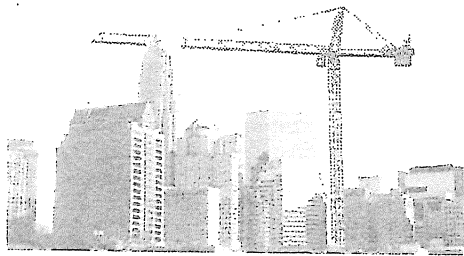
Battle for fans enters a new era of competition

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At first, the Continental Tire Bowl seemed a joke. It represented yet another third-tier college bowl game in a city less than renowned for its tourism potential.

Its pairing of third- and



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fourth-choice squads from the Big East and Atlantic Coast Conferences put the game on a path toward oblivion. In mid-October, Raycom's chief operating officer, Ken Haines, hoped the game could attract 40,000 fans at 73,258-seat Ericsson Stadium.

Then, something strange happened. The doomsday scenario broke down. Raycom selected the University of Virginia, a school that felt snubbed by other bowls — and determined to show its fan support. The other entry, West Virginia University, offered a nearby, and rabid, audience. Prospects grew brighter. Raycom's Haines heard the phone ringing off the hook.

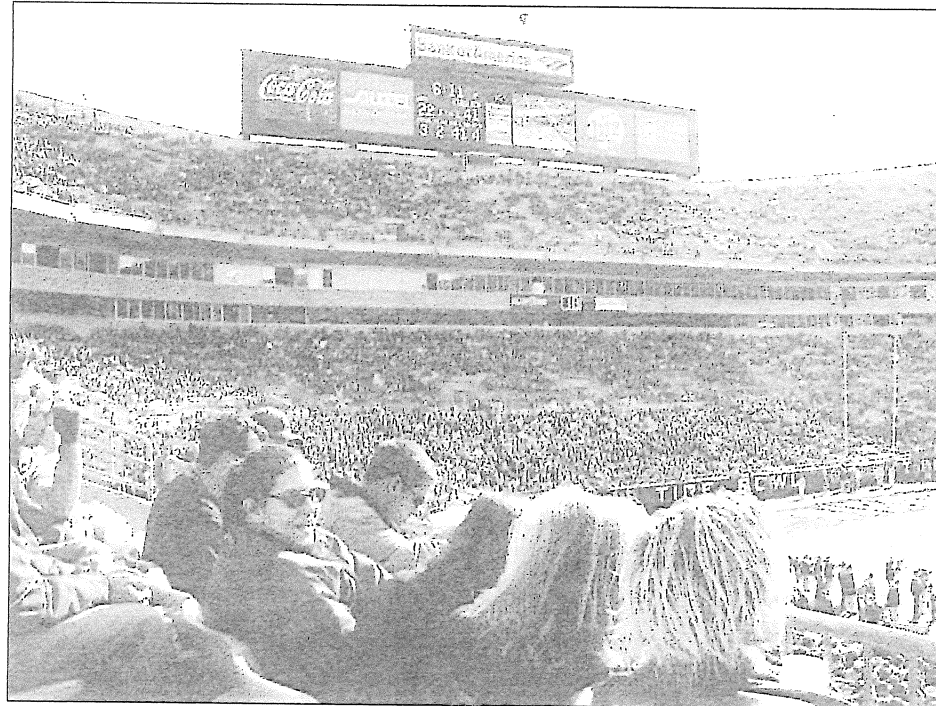


photo ERIK SPANBERG

The Continental Tire Bowl drew more than 73,000 college football fans to Ericsson Stadium.

And, soon, Raycom called stadium officials and requested that all of the upper-deck sections — at first closed because of an anticipated low turnout — be opened. The sections became hot commodities. The middling, afterthought bowl game became a tough ticket, offering one of the nation's few full houses for a bowl game.

"This is a great thing for the game's future," Haines says. For example, he expected a strong lobbying push would be required to get the game approved again in 2003. That won't be an issue after the splashy debut.

In addition, the impressive fan support could help Raycom secure higher-ranked teams in subsequent years, as word travels about the reception here.