

photo SEAN BUSHNER

Raycom Sports CEO Ken Haines put together a winning formula for the Continental Tire Bowl by pitting teams of regional interest in the inaugural game.

CHARLOTTE BUSINESS JOURNAL

VOLUME 17 NUMBER 39

DECEMBER 20, 2002

Biggest game in town

Bowl game's sellout crowd delivers hospitality windfall

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Two months ago, Ken Haines hoped his company's new college football bowl game here could attract 40,000 fans. Now the game is sold out — that's 73,258 seats — and organizers believe they could sell another 10,000 tickets if they had them.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think this would happen," says Haines, president

and chief executive at Raycom Sports, which owns and operates the Continental Tire Bowl. "It's been phenomenal."

The game, which debuts Dec. 28 at Ericsson Stadium, was initially greeted with little enthusiasm. Sports-talk radio shows hammered the concept, in their own backyard, no less. The event, critics contended, added to the glut of second-tier college bowls, all but guaranteed dreary weather on game day and carried a whiff of desperation following the departure of the Charlotte Hornets.

Raycom ignored the carping and went to work. The firm signed Continental Tire

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BOWL GAME: Sellout crowd will fill up hotels, restaurants over key weekend

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North America Inc. as title sponsor, with the company making a three-year commitment worth \$1 million annually.

Then ESPN2 came aboard, promising a national TV audience. And, in a combination of pluck and luck, two regional teams with successful seasons — the University of Virginia and West Virginia University — fell in line for a strong match-up.

Now organizers predict a \$20 million to \$30 million economic impact. Hotels across the city are booked for the weekend between Christmas and New Year's, a time when the hospitality industry usually struggles. In addition, area restaurants and retailers now anticipate a flood of visitors, spurring sales.

Six days after the Virginia-West Virginia pairing was announced, fans had snapped up all the tickets, priced at \$25 to \$65 each. A kickoff street party uptown the night before the game may draw 40,000, Haines says.

With the expected sellout crowd, the Continental Tire Bowl would rank second among first-year bowls for attendance. Of the 25 bowl games played last season (there are now 28), just seven attracted more than 70,000 fans.

"These guys have hit on something," says Rick Burton, a sports marketing professor at the University of Oregon. "They've focused on geographic proximity, and it's paid off for them."

Burton and other industry experts say first-year bowl games often get lost in the mire, enduring small crowds and losing money. The Charlotte bowl game, with a budget in the \$2.5 million range, should turn a profit.

Tackling budgets

The game breaks even with attendance of 38,000. All ticket sales above that number are split between Raycom (25%) and the participating schools

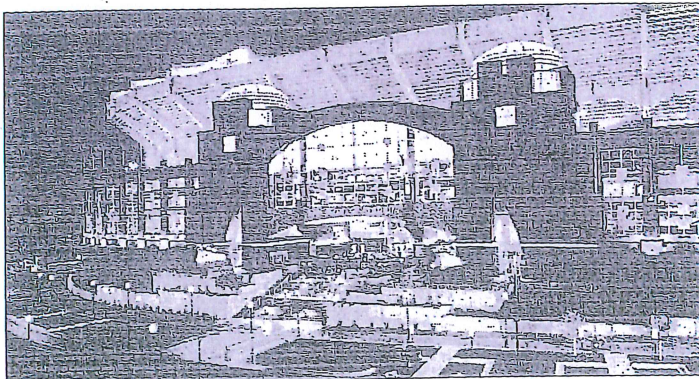


photo FILE

Ericsson Stadium owner Carolinas Stadium Corp. has a lot to gain from the Continental Tire Bowl. The group is charging up to \$400,000 in rent and expenses and will keep concession revenue.

(75%). Raycom retains the revenue from the first 38,000 sold, but it must pay each of the schools a \$750,000 guarantee and cover expenses.

Expenses and rent for Ericsson Stadium costs \$300,000 to \$400,000, industry experts say. In Atlanta, the Southeastern Conference pays rent of \$173,345 at the publicly owned Georgia Dome for the annual championship game there.

Neither Haines nor Jon Richardson, president of stadium owner Carolinas Stadium Corp., will discuss specific financial terms between Raycom and the stadium. Richardson says all stadium agreements differ. For example, in Charlotte the NFL stadium is privately owned. In addition, the stadium retains no parking revenue, a source many other venues can draw from.

Because Ericsson Stadium is privately held, it controls vending and concessions. For the bowl game, Richardson says, the stadium owners will keep all of that revenue.

"Everybody is going to benefit from this game," he says. "It's bringing a lot of business to town. We are very pleased with how well it's doing."

Haines says he's carefully gauging additional stadium, security and traffic costs. He wants to make sure incremental expenses don't leave the game in the red.

For title sponsor Continental Tire, the game now looks like a wise investment. That's because the capacity crowd ensures a livelier national image during the ESPN2 broadcast — as well as more fans in the stadium seeing the company's advertising.

"Let's face it, sponsorships work when they reach people," says Max Muhleman, a national sports consultant based here. "If a game sells out, more people are interested."

Katharina Konawalski, a brand manager at Continental Tire, says the game's sudden popularity caused one very happy problem. "Some people here waited too long to get tickets, and

now they can't get any."

No room at the inn

For the slumping hotel industry, a flat season just became buoyant. "This helps everybody end a very tough year on a positive note," says Mohammad Jenatani, president of the Greater Charlotte Hospitality & Tourism Alliance.

Jenatani says hotels beyond the core uptown area — at SouthPark, University City and near the airport — have benefited from the strong ticket demand. About 20,000 Virginia fans and 30,000 West Virginia fans will travel here for the game, Haines says.

Raycom wants the blitz of good news to carry over into next year. Shortly after the game next week, Raycom will launch an aggressive bid for more corporate sponsors and aim for additional local fan support.

John Swafford, commissioner of the Atlantic Coast Conference, a Continental Tire Bowl affiliate with the Big East Conference, says Raycom must attract local backing each year.

"You can't always depend just on the schools," he says. "This has been a huge surprise this year, and I think Raycom is smart to make sure the local support is there, too. You need both to make it work year after year."

Besides signing Continental Tire, Raycom has enlisted Miller Brewing Co., Bank of America Corp., Wachovia Corp. and Marriott as corporate sponsors.

While Haines acknowledges the high standard set this year, he says the problem of raised expectations is a pleasant one. And certainly one nobody predicted.

"I told Ken not to get too down this year," Muhleman says, recalling the game's announcement last spring. "I said, 'People need a year or two before they get behind a bowl game.' I guess Ken's not worried about that anymore, is he?"