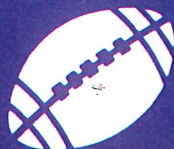


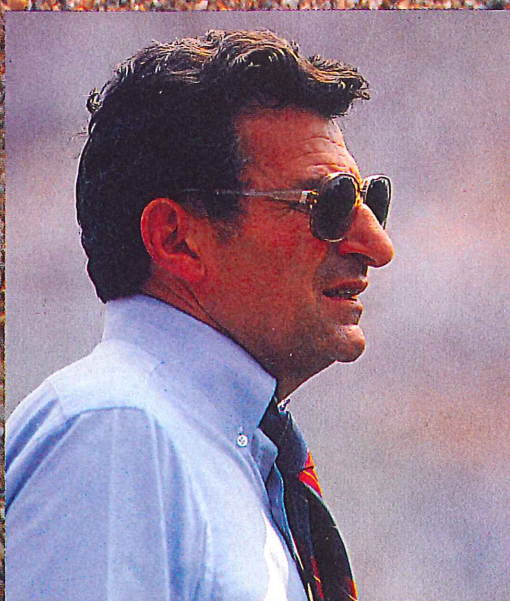
December 28, 1990, 8 p.m.

\$4.00

# BLOCKBUSTER BOWL



TM



Joe Paterno, Penn State



Bobby Bowden, Florida State

***College Football's Winningest Coaches  
Meet In The First Annual  
BLOCKBUSTER Bowl***

Joe Robbie Stadium

Penn State vs. Florida State

**RAYCOM**



# New Kid on the Block:

*How the BLOCKBUSTER Bowl Came to Be*

By Gary Ferman

**R**ichard Giannini created the Raycom Management Group in 1986 with an eye toward managing sporting events that also could be packaged for television by the Raycom Sports Network. The initial project for the new company was a college basketball extravaganza in Charlotte, a four-team invitational now sponsored by Diet Pepsi that is the most lucrative hoop event for participating schools outside of the NCAA tournament.

But Giannini never lost sight of this dream he always had of creating the "ultimate" college football bowl game. His college roots ran deep, what with his eight-year tenure as Associate Athletic Director at the University of Florida, his previous stint as Sports Information Director and Assistant AD at Duke and his term as Marketing Director for the NCAA.

So Giannini was thinking of those bowl ideas in the late winter of 1988 as he sat in a 30 degree chill taking in a game in Memphis which was being

televised by the Raycom Network.

It had snowed there the night before and parts of the area still were covered with the white stuff.

"I've never been so cold in my life," Giannini remembers now. The day sticks out in his mind because he realizes it was the exact moment that the concept now known as the BLOCKBUSTER Bowl truly got its birth.

It may have begun merely as a thought inside Giannini's mind—the ultimate post-season game in a warm weather site, in a state-of-the-art stadium, with an attractive match-up that would guarantee one of the best television ratings of the bowl season.

It may even have been called the Sunshine Football Classic in the early

stages of the process as Giannini and his people accelerated their application timetable to the NCAA so that the game could debut in 1990.

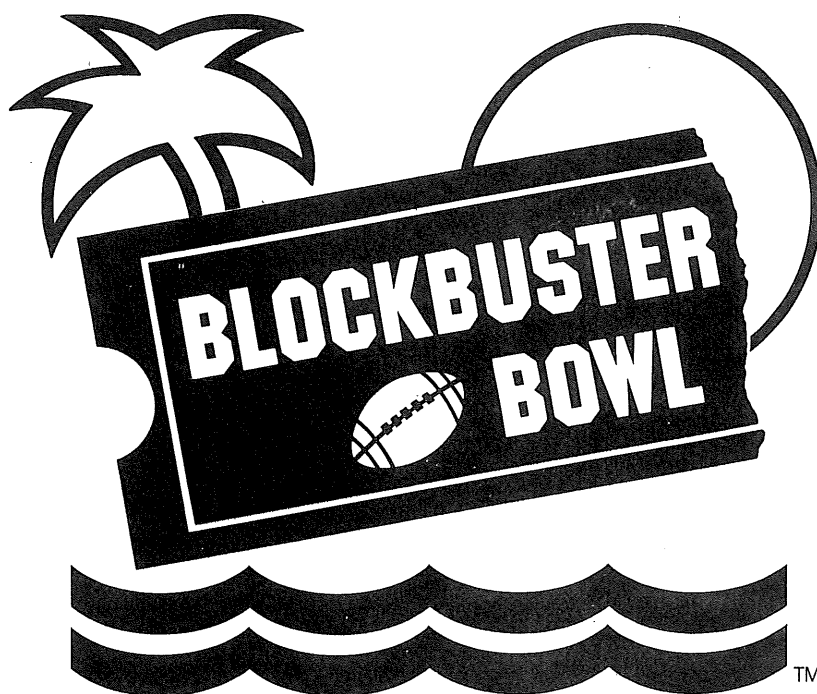
But as Florida State and Penn State take the field inside Joe Robbie Stadium tonight, as a national television audience watches on a syndicated network blanketing the nation, the newly-named BLOCKBUSTER Bowl

will be everything Giannini imagined it would be as he shivered that night in the bitter cold.

"It's a match made in heaven," Giannini said. "Somebody upstairs really was looking after us."

Yet the emergence of the BLOCKBUSTER Bowl is more than a story about prayers. It's a tale of the emotional ride of a group of men and women that grew by the month, who battled for credibility, who at one point feared they might be upstaged at Joe Robbie Stadium by the Orange Bowl Committee, which for a long time debated over whether to move its January 1 game from the historic stadium in downtown Miami.

At the turn of the new year 1989,



Giannini began surveying warm weather pockets around the country in search of a stadium that didn't already have a bowl game. His search took him to Joe Robbie, which was about to host the Super Bowl.

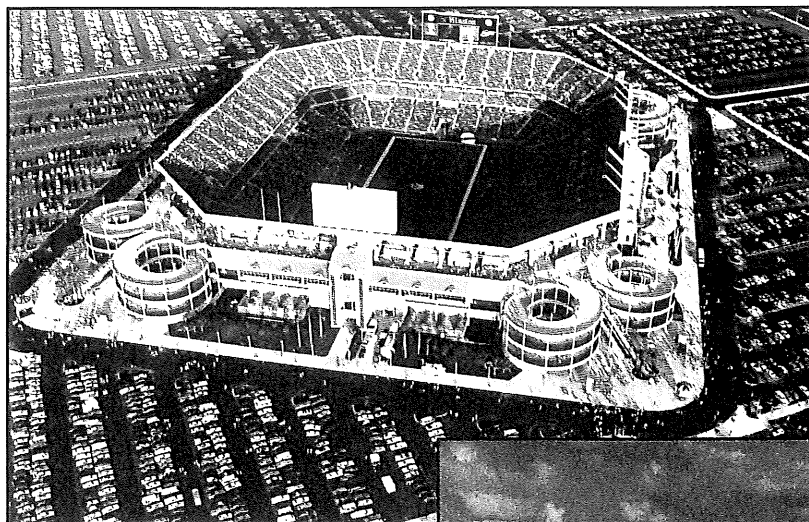
South Florida already had the Orange Bowl, but Giannini never doubted the area could support two bowl games if Raycom reached out to a different segment of the population.

He called Bob Kuechenberg, the former Dolphin All-Pro offensive line-man who had done color commentary for some games televised by Raycom. Kuechenberg contacted Joe Robbie, the late owner of the Miami Dolphins who built the stadium with private funds. A get-acquainted meeting was arranged for March 3, 1989.

"My father was very enthusiastic about it," said Dan Robbie, who now serves as the Dolphins' Executive Vice-President and President of Joe Robbie Stadium. "He had four dreams when he built the stadium. He wanted to get the Super Bowl, place a bowl game there, put baseball in and pay it off. We've accomplished two of the four now.

"With the BLOCKBUSTER Bowl, he felt it was a perfect match. Being in pro sports, it would've been hard for our family to promote a college event. Richard had all the expertise, knowledge and contacts. It was the perfect marriage for us."

After that meeting, Giannini studied economic data from the tri-county area and decided the game would be built around Broward, Palm Beach and Dade County. He worked out a



Joe Robbie Stadium offers BLOCKBUSTER Bowl participants the finest football facility in the entire nation.

deal to become part of Fort Lauderdale's Winterfest celebration.

An application was due to the NCAA by April 1, so Giannini and his people were running short on time. The NCAA required the support of at least 10 member schools who had been to a bowl game in the previous three years before it would consider an application for a newly-sanctioned game.

"We didn't want to go to the Florida schools because they all had connections to the existing bowl games in the state," Giannini said. "We didn't want to put them in a position where they couldn't support what we were doing."

Especially since the state universities would later become a top priority for the team selection committee.

It wasn't a problem. One by one the endorsements came in: Alabama, Clemson, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina State, Notre Dame, Southern California, Syracuse and Tennessee.

"We scrambled," Giannini said. "It wasn't an easy task because of the timing. But we had our application in hand by April 1. That started the clock."



The beautiful beaches of Fort Lauderdale add a special ingredient to the BLOCKBUSTER Bowl mix.

On August 18, 1989, Raycom officials met with NCAA administrators in Kansas City to explain the application. The final certification remained on hold until April 17, 1990, when an army of people who had become involved in the game accompanied Giannini to Tuscon.

There was Joe Millsaps, a Fort Lauderdale realtor who was a past president of the Chamber of Commerce and was a chairman of the high-powered Committee of 100. There was Diane Grow, the President of Fort Lauderdale's Winterfest celebration. There was Kuechenberg, who had been named chairman of the first game and who also would head the team selection committee.

There was Keith Tribble, a former Florida Gator player who had been tabbed by Giannini to serve as Executive Director. There was Bill Carr, the

former Gator AD who now is an associate of Giannini at Raycom. And there was Rick Ray, the chairman of Raycom.

The NCAA was impressed by the final presentation and granted the Sunshine Football Classic permission to become the nation's 19th bowl game.

"That there might be too many bowls seemed to be a concern of a lot of people," Giannini said. "But it wasn't our desire to create just another bowl game. We wanted one that would be in the top 10 in payouts, the top 10 in television ratings. We wanted to create the ultimate bowl game."

But as the staff proceeded in its efforts to sell corporate sponsorships, tickets, and lay the groundwork for the team selection process, it found there was an unexpected obstacle that had to be overcome in addition to the identity crisis expected of a new entity.

Down in Miami, the Orange Bowl Committee was divided on the issue of remaining in the old stadium or moving to Joe Robbie, which suddenly was heavily courting the game.

There was talk that the OB was demanding exclusive use of the stadium for the few days leading up to New Year's Day, which would wipe out the concept of eventually playing the Sunshine Classic on New Year's Eve. There also was the legitimate question of whether the new bowl game could develop an identity in the Orange Bowl's shadow.

"We felt it was our responsibility as managers of the stadium to go after the Orange Bowl because that would've been a great benefit," Dan Robbie said. "We felt they could co-exist if we didn't give the Orange Bowl a window allowing them to shut out the new game."

"It was a touchy situation because I know the Raycom people felt they were receiving the short end of the stick when we talked to the Orange Bowl. We wanted to be sincere in our efforts. We still wanted to make the new game one of the top games in the country and I wasn't really that upset

when the Orange Bowl decided not to make the move."

What made the situation even more tension-filled was the involvement of BLOCKBUSTER Video President H. Wayne Huizenga, who shortly after Joe Robbie died, had bought a 50 percent share of the stadium and a small piece of the NFL Dolphins.

BLOCKBUSTER was at the top of Raycom's target list for a title sponsor that would allow the Sunshine Clas-

sic to exist at an economic level making it among the highest-paying bowl games in the nation. It was uncertain whether BLOCKBUSTER would become involved if the Orange Bowl moved to Joe Robbie.

"It kept us really up in the air," Giannini said. "People had a question mark about our game. What happens if the Orange Bowl moves to Joe Robbie? I don't know what we would've done." *(continued)*

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But once the OB Committee surprisingly voted to stay home, the talks between BLOCKBUSTER and Raycom advanced to a more serious level.

A key link was Don Smiley, an assistant to Huizenga whose primary functions have been the marketing of the company through sports-related mediums and working on Huizenga's bid to bring major league baseball to South Florida. Giannini met Smiley

on one of his initial visits to South Florida in June 1989 and Smiley became a member of the bowl committee.

Smiley helped bring the bowl game together with BLOCKBUSTER and just as selection committee members were returning from their initial scouting missions in mid-October, the announcement was made that the Sunshine Football Classic would become the BLOCKBUSTER Bowl.

The video empire gave the game a cash infusion that assured its place as the sixth-highest paying bowl, with an estimated \$1.6 million going to each team. It was the first bowl game in history to line up a title sponsor before its first game.

"It was ironic because we went out the first week as the Sunshine Football Classic and the next week we were the BLOCKBUSTER Bowl," Giannini said. "When you first go out, people don't know who you are. Those are the growing pains you go through. But I think we did a good job communicating who we were and what we were doing."

BLOCKBUSTER brought unprecedented opportunities for a bowl to the table. The chain had more than 1,500 stores where the national telecast could be marketed. Plans were made to also promote the game within the video rental boxes themselves.

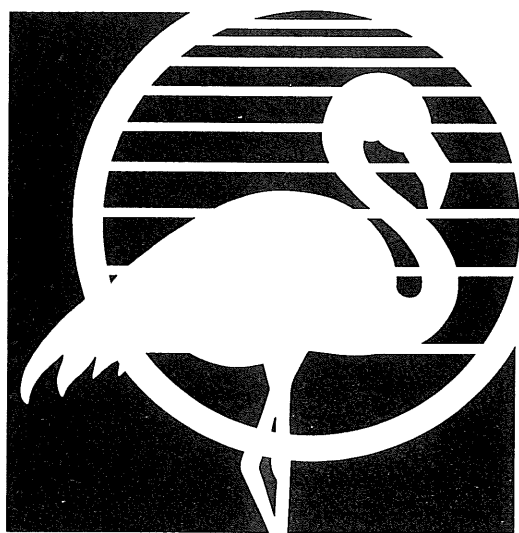
So with business matters in line, Kuechenberg and his team set out after Florida State. Locking up one of the three state schools had been a priority from day one. But when the Florida Gators went on probation and were banned from a bowl, that seemed unlikely. Both the University of Miami and FSU appeared headed to January 1 games.

The nation's bowl games began aligning with teams the first week of November, which was a head start to their already characteristic head starts.

"We were sitting there on November 4 saying 'What in the world are we going to do?'" Giannini said. "I'd hate to see what my phone bill was for that next week."

Florida State's New Year's Day options had dwindled due to losses to Miami and Auburn. The BLOCKBUSTER Bowl suddenly had an opening.

FSU hadn't played in a bowl game in Florida in five years, so the Seminoles decided to listen to the overtures. The coinciding interest of Penn State sealed the deal since Bobby Bowden and Joe Paterno — the two winningest active coaches in the game — are longtime friends who hadn't played



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**BLOCKBUSTER BOWL**

**Florida State University**

**vs.**

**Penn State University**

each other since Bowden's days at West Virginia.

"If somebody had told me we could get these two teams, I would've told them they were hallucinating," Kuechenberg said. "You've got the winningest active coach in Joe Paterno on a nine-game tear, the longest winning streak in the country. These coaches were salivating to play each other. Coach Bowden never has beaten Coach Paterno. Once they heard the other was interested, it helped put it together."

"The other factor was that this is a hot bed of recruiting. They both liked the idea of showcasing their programs down here for two weeks. FSU wasn't interested in going to New Orleans for two weeks while Steve Spurrier and the Florida Gators came down here and recruited all the talent. And that will always be a big factor for us. There is no state in the country right now turning out more talent than Florida."

So the BLOCKBUSTER suddenly had locked up what arguably is the third-best match-up in the nation after the Notre-Dame/Colorado pairing in the Orange Bowl and the Miami/Texas match-up at the Cotton Bowl.

"A dream game," said Giannini, who soon will begin trying to negotiate a major network contract for next year's game. "This match-up really opened people's eyes. They're thinking that BLOCKBUSTER Bowl really has something going down there. Everything is positive."

"We're launching it the way we felt we needed to launch it. We've done everything we told people we would do. We've tried to get into the major bowl category and in our first year, we're close, if not already there. I don't think anybody can say this is a minor bowl. It has taken a lot of blood, sweat and tears, but this is a game with all the attractions."

And one other thing on top of it. It doesn't figure to snow. ■

Gary Ferman writes for The National sports daily.

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