

# The Charlotte Observer

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COMMENTARY



Tom Sorensen

## W. Virginians' hurt feelings ruin image

I've always had an image of West Virginia that had nothing to do with overalls or out-houses.

I believed West Virginians were sturdier than the rest of us. I believed they lived the way they thought they should rather than the way others thought they should. I believed they were too self-assured to succumb to prevailing trends.

Man, was I wrong. The prevailing trend in this country is sensitivity. Life in the United States often seems a contest to demonstrate whose feelings have been damaged most. Some claim the movement, like so many others, originated in the south of California. I'd say it originated in South Charleston, W.Va.

Saturday, West Virginia and Virginia played a football game at Ericsson Stadium. During halftime, the Virginia band engaged in a skit that mocked West Virginia.

Two women, one representing Virginia and the other West Virginia, competed for the interest of a bachelor. The woman who represented Virginia planned to become a pediatrician.

The woman who represented West Virginia wore overalls and square-danced with the bachelor. Did she plan to go to medical school? No. She planned to go to "Beverly ... Hills that is. ... Swimming pools, movie stars!"

To some, this was funny.

To West Virginia, this was Hillbillygate. The governor of West Virginia called for an apology (and received one from the Virginia university president Thursday), the West Virginia university president denounced the skit, and the indignant fans of the state and school cranked out angry letters to the editor.

Hey, West Virginia. Why don't you do what other sensitive souls do when they get angry? Why don't you form a committee? Counselors from Wheeling to Willow Bend, from Hometown to Huntington and from Bluefield to Brandonville are standing by.

What a waste. I travel frequently and occasionally hear outsiders make fun of Charlotte. Some of their criticism is valid, but most is uninformed. I don't get offended. What does their ignorance have to do with me or with my town?

By trotting out tired West Virginia stereotypes, the band did no damage to the state's reputation. But the reaction of West Virginians has.

Do you remember, West Virginia, how much fun the Continental Tire Bowl was going to be? You came cascading down Interstate 77, filled our hotels and restaurants and took a backwater bowl and made it feel important.

Not once in the 21 years I've worked for this newspaper have I been asked by so many for tickets to a sporting event. I had no idea I knew so many West Virginians. They were so proud and happy, and their enthusiasm was sufficiently contagious that folks who long ago turned from their West Virginia roots announced they were loyal and lifelong fans.

We loved having you here. You showed us how real fans act. Then came halftime, and you showed us you're no different than anybody else.

I have a question. If Virginia, a six-point underdog, had not pounded your Mountaineers by 26 points, would you still be talking about halftime?

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# The Charlotte Observer

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## Nobody's laughing at city's sad little bowl game now

RALEIGH — Over here in the Triangle, they were laughing at you. Yeah, Charlotte — you. They were laughing at you.

At least it sounded like laughter. Maybe they were yawning. Maybe they were doing a little of both.

See, when the ACC announced in May that Charlotte had been awarded a bowl game, people here found it amusing. You could hear it the on radio or read it in the newspaper, where Charlotteans were called (oops) Charlatans. It was palpable, the Triangle's condescension.

A bowl game, in Charlotte? At what high school?

See, folks here believe Charlotte isn't much of a sports town. The NFL team is bad, the NBA team fled, etc.

A bowl game, in Charlotte? What are fans going to visit in their spare time, a bank lobby?

Well, Charlotte would have to discover for itself what some in the Triangle already knew. Charlotte was a sad little sports town, and if it took a sad little bowl game to confirm it, fine.

The thing is, Charlotte has embraced its sad little bowl game like Linus embracing his blanket. A local business, Raycom Sports, landed the bowl and will operate it. Another local business, Continental Tire, purchased sponsorship rights.

Area fans started buying tickets as soon as they went on sale in October, two months before teams were announced. In all,

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more than 12,000 tickets were purchased in the Charlotte area, contributing to this unimagined scenario:

Less than a week after Virginia and West Virginia accepted invitations to the inaugural Continental Tire Bowl, the tickets were gone — all 73,258 of them.

Only one debuting bowl game, the 1990 Blockbuster Bowl in Fort Lauderdale, sold more tickets. Florida State and Penn State drew 74,021, but Charlotte's sad little bowl would have smashed that record if Ericsson Stadium were bigger.

"We could have sold another 10,000 tickets," says Ken Haines of Raycom. "Easily."

Worse than additional stadium seating, Charlotte needs more hotels. Every room within 20 miles of uptown Charlotte is

gone, underlining the biggest obstacle between the city's pursuit of even bigger game — the Republican National Convention and a Super Bowl.

Like it is all over, even in the Triangle, Charlotte has been leaking money for more than a year. The Continental Tire Bowl will plug some of those leaks by contributing roughly \$20 million in fans' pursuit of lodging, food and memories.

The night before the game, a crowd of 60,000 is expected for an uptown block party. It will be celebrating the first Continental Tire Bowl, but it should be celebrating something else, too.

Even if you're not going to the game, go to the block party. Crash it. Celebrate, Charlotte. And celebrate Charlotte. You've earned it.

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**CONTINENTAL TIRE BOWL**  
No. 15 West Virginia vs. Virginia  
11 a.m., Saturday. TV: ESPN2