

Virginia to play West Virginia before a sellout crowd

CITY SCORES BIG WITH 1st BOWL GAME

Continental Tire Bowl

Teams: University of Virginia, West Virginia University.

Kickoff: 11 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 28.

TV: ESPN2.

Payout: \$750,000 per team, plus percentage of ticket revenues.

Estimated economic impact for Charlotte: \$7 million to \$20 million.

Organizer and backer: Raycom Sports.

Prime sponsors: Continental Tire, Miller Brewing, Infinity Radio Group, Lowe's Motor Speedway, Jack in the Box.

Teams arrive: Saturday, Dec. 21.

Team hotels:

■ University of Virginia: Marriott City Center.

■ West Virginia University: Omni Charlotte.

Omni Charlotte.

Street party: Friday, Dec. 27.

5 p.m. to 2 a.m.

MORE COVERAGE

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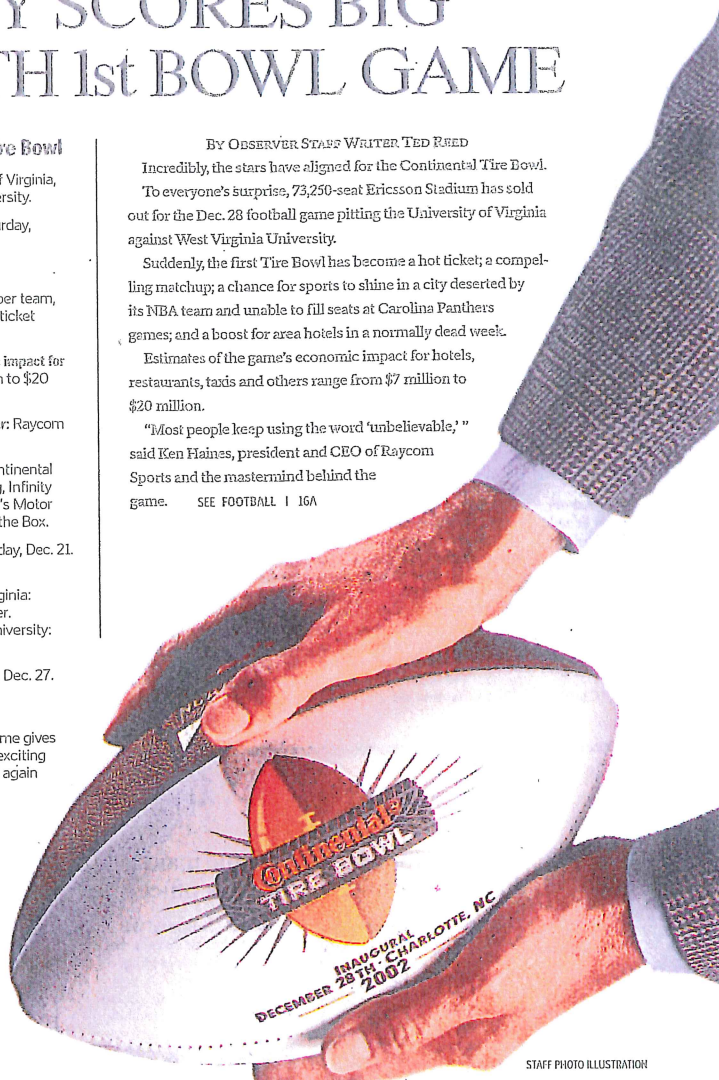
BY OBSERVER STAFF WRITER TED REED

Incredibly, the stars have aligned for the Continental Tire Bowl. To everyone's surprise, 73,250-seat Ericsson Stadium has sold out for the Dec. 28 football game pitting the University of Virginia against West Virginia University.

Suddenly, the first Tire Bowl has become a hot ticket; a compelling matchup; a chance for sports to shine in a city deserted by its NBA team and unable to fill seats at Carolina Panthers games; and a boost for area hotels in a normally dead week.

Estimates of the game's economic impact for hotels, restaurants, taxis and others range from \$7 million to \$20 million.

"Most people keep using the word 'unbelievable,'" said Ken Haines, president and CEO of Raycom Sports and the mastermind behind the game. SEE FOOTBALL | 16A



STAFF PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

Bowl game will premiere before sellout

Football from 1A

Charlotte-based Raycom, which packages and markets ACC basketball games for television, is the Tire Bowl's organizer and financial backer.

Haines called a meeting of his staff Monday morning to deal with an unanticipated problem: "There are a lot of prominent individuals in Charlotte who had not ordered tickets and would now like some, and we just don't have any," he said.

Raycom considered buying tickets on eBay, but high costs ruled that out.

The company hoped for a Carolina's team and 45,000 to 50,000 fans. It breaks even at 38,000 fans, Haines said.

Nine days ago, the Bowl Championship Series selected the eight teams that will play in its four premier bowls. Afterward, confer-

ences, colleges and bowls sorted out the remaining matchups.

The Tire Bowl came out a winner in those negotiations, with two natural rivals whose fans are within easy driving distance.

"One thing we've learned in the bowl business is that when fans can get there by car and spend less money getting to the game, the numbers go up," said ACC Commissioner John Swofford.

Although it finished tied for second in the ACC, Virginia was not invited to the Gator Bowl in Orlando, primarily because of its reputation as a school whose fans won't travel for bowls.

It's a bad rap, said Dick Mathias, Virginia athletics ticket manager. "Any reputation we have that's negative is because we've played in faraway places that are difficult to get to," he said.

Recent sites have included Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Shreveport, La.; and Honolulu. Only a few thousand Virginia fans made the treks.

For the Tire Bowl, Virginia was allocated 12,500 tickets. It requested more three times last week, until it could get no more. About 20,000 of its fans are coming.

West Virginia seemed headed for the Big East Conference's berth in the Gator Bowl but was pre-empted by Notre Dame, which though not affiliated with a conference, is part of the Big East's bowl pool.

That left West Virginia with a choice of bowl games in Charlotte, Phoenix and San Francisco. "Our fans wanted to go to Charlotte," said Shelly Poe, sports information director.

West Virginia sold about 22,000 tickets through its own ticket office, while the bowl's office sold thousands more, many to West Virginia alumni in the Charlotte area. "We'll have 40,000 people there, rooting for West Virginia," Poe said.

Poe said some fans who bought tickets late last week are staying

at motels in Statesville.

Most of the 23,000 Charlotte-area hotel rooms are sold out Dec. 27 and 28, said Kim Rickwood, marketing vice president for Visit Charlotte. She said spending on those two nights should reach several million dollars. The overall impact could be \$20 million, Haines said.

The ACC and Raycom began planning a Charlotte bowl in 1999. Swofford said Charlotte was a natural site because of the concentration of ACC alumni, the lack of major college football and the central location.

A key step came when the NCAA bowl certification committee met in Philadelphia on Sept. 11, 2001. As they were about to decide whether to approve the Tire Bowl, members learned of the terrorist attacks. Approval came eight months later.

The sellout may erase some of the questions about whether Charlotte merits a bowl game.

"They've run out of warm places (for bowl games)," National Public Radio sports commentator John Feinstein said recently. "They're having bowls in places like Charlotte, N.C., now, which I don't think will be very warm (on Dec. 28)."

When Virginia Tech was considered a Tire Bowl candidate, player Jacob Gibson told The Roanoke (Va.) Times that the team had little interest in Charlotte.

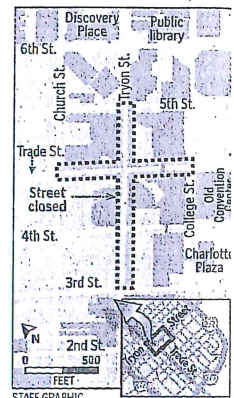
"We were talking the other day," he said. "What are we going to do in Charlotte? Go to the Bass Pro Shop or something?"

The comments amuse Haines, who said Charlotte's advantages will become clear. Players will tour Lowe's Motor Speedway, and 50,000 fans are expected at downtown pregame rallies Dec. 27. Afterward, they can walk to restaurants and night spots.

Now Haines needs to hit two more jackpots: good weather on Dec. 28 and a good matchup next

Street Party

Streets will be closed for a pep rally and party Friday, Dec. 27, from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m.



STAFF GRAPHIC

year. "I've got a big problem," he acknowledged. "What do we do for an encore?"

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