

Glasnost Bowl: Idea Ahead Of Its Time

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Friday morning, Ken Haines, executive vice president of Raycom Sports and Entertainment, attempted to place a call to the Soviet Union from his office in Charlotte, N.C.

He finally got through on a line connecting him with a Moscow operator and heard a "beep, beep, beep."

A busy signal.

How fitting, Haines said to himself. How exasperating. How absolutely, completely, utterly *exasperating*. The final glitch in a grand idea that got swallowed up in Soviet bureaucratic entanglement.

Raycom officials decided Tuesday that they had reached a point of no return in a joint project with the Soviets called the Glasnost Bowl — an introduction of American college football to the Soviet Union. Soviet delays finally forced Raycom to pull the plug on the Sept. 2 game between Illinois and Southern Cal in Moscow. By telex, Raycom informed Sovintersport of its action. As of Sunday, Haines hadn't heard a word from Moscow.

What went wrong? Who is minding the store in Moscow, Yakov Smirnoff?

"It was becoming increasingly apparent the Soviets were having trouble delivering what they promised to deliver," Haines said. "We faced a very tough decision. Could we string this out to the last minute and hope when everybody got to Moscow everything would be OK?"

"We decided it would be too much of a gamble. So we went to the backup plan of playing the game in Los Angeles."

Haines said if Raycom had waited any longer, preparations for a September game in LA "would have been chaos." Tickets have to be printed. Illinois has to go to work on travel plans. ABC wants to televise the game, and the details for this cannot be tied together in a week's time.

Raycom made its decision public Thursday. An item published in Friday's USA Today said the game was canceled because USC was dissatisfied with arrangements. On Friday, a St. Louis radio station said the cancellation was because of "TV contractual difficulties."

Haines said: "There were reports Illinois didn't want to play. There were reports ABC didn't want to televise the game. There were reports the facilities over there were so bad both schools threw up their hands and refused to have anything to do with it. None of this is true.

"The honest-to-God truth is we were getting skeptical the Soviets were going to be able to pull it off. That's the bottom line. Everybody else — the schools and ABC — wanted to play this game in Moscow."

What Raycom encountered in

months of face-to-face dealings with Sovintersport officials is what many others have dealt with in international sports when the Soviets are involved. It's called the "Russianness" of the Soviets, who can be as far removed from the normal patterns of procedure or behavior in the world of sports as in the world at large.

Raycom found the Soviet silence to be deafening. As an example, a contract signed April 27 stipulated that Raycom was to be told no later than May 15 what hotels would be penciled in for Americans traveling to Moscow as part of a Raycom tour package for the game.

"Nothing," Haines said. "We heard nothing. We telexed over there. Nothing. Another telex. They responded, saying, 'Give us more time.'"

A Soviet attorney hired by Raycom was, at first, optimistic. But recently he began feeding Raycom reports that said, "These people are really having trouble putting this together."

In retrospect, Haines said the mission was "a yoyo."

"We'd go over there full of enthusiasm and there would be these little signs, this handwriting on the wall," he said. "They didn't have this. They didn't have that. Nothing ever seemed to be happening."

Haines phoned Illinois athletic director-coach John Mackovic, USC athletic director Mike McGee and ABC-TV officials to tell them the game was off in Moscow.

Their reaction?

"Empathetic but disappointed," Haines said. "They understood. They'd made a trip over there, and they knew it would be difficult. But everyone kept hoping there would be enough positive signs to keep the thing going. We couldn't have asked for two better schools or TV network to be involved. They were all supportive."

How will Haines remember the abortive Glasnost Bowl? Interminable red tape that, in the Soviet Union, is really red. And a busy signal.

This wasn't what Haines had in mind at the beginning. Bringing East and West together in a historic venture carried the trappings of more than just a football game. Far-reaching political implications were involved.

"My heart was into it," said Haines, influenced no doubt by his father's career as an employee of the U.S. State Department. "It was something people could have done that governments have had trouble doing. I don't know, what they're going through with *perestroika* [economic restructuring] may have done us in. There's confusion over there.

"This idea — this game — might have been two years ahead of its time."