

## How a Bowl Tries to Gain A Little Bit Of Traction

Organizers Work to Beef Up The Substance as an Event Tries to Find Its Style

By VIV BERNSTEIN

CHARLOTTE, N.C., Dec. 26 — College bowl games used to be named after flowers or fruit or other bounties of nature. But things have changed. Welcome to the Continental Tire Bowl, 2003, full of the kind of pageantry you will not find in Pasadena, Calif.

On Tuesday, Larry Fitzgerald, the Heisman Trophy runner-up from Pittsburgh, ventured into the great unknown by climbing into the passenger seat of a stock car for a ride around Lowe's Motor Speedway.

Fitzgerald is a Minneapolis native; NASCAR is to Minnesota what snowflakes are to Miami.

"I hit that first turn and I was like — they tell me nobody's ever gotten in an accident here and I know damn sure I don't want to be the first one," he said, still grinning after he squeezed out the window of the racecar and peeled off his fire suit. "That was great. It's a lot more exciting than scoring touchdowns."

Years from now, some may remember that 160-mile-an-hour ride long after they forget who won this year's Continental Tire Bowl, an event that ranks well below the behemoth Bowl Championship Series in the annual glut of college football bowl games.

There are 28 bowl games this year, with the tradition-laden Rose Bowl sharing the stage with the corporate-titled events like the G.M.A.C. Bowl, the Capital One Bowl and the one here that is named after a tire company. Continental Tire North America, Inc., has its headquarters in Charlotte and paid nearly \$1 million a year not to share billing with the city nickname — the Queen City — which is known for dozens of miles around. The



The pro wrestling star Ric Flair also helped entertain fans in Charlotte.

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But so what? Players from both teams had a chance to take a spin in a racecar because Charlotte is a NASCAR town, first and always, and, anyway, it is not exactly warm enough to go swimming.

"We're very excited just to be in a bowl game," Pittsburgh quarterback Rod Rutherford said. "It might not be the game that we want to be in, but at the same time, it's a postseason game that we've got a chance to get that sour taste out of our mouth from the Miami game."

Virginia thought it was on the cusp of challenging for an A.C.C. title this season after beating West Virginia in the inaugural Continental Tire Bowl a year ago. But quarterback Matt Schaub was injured in the first game

this season and the Cavaliers had too many close losses along the way to be a contender. Still, they beat Virginia Tech to earn the return visit.

"It's been a long season," Schaub said. "There's been a lot of ups and downs with the injury and coming back. To make it to the postseason, that's what we're here to do."

But instead of the B.C.S., the beaches of Florida and the national stage, they are here in Charlotte, a banking town known by many travelers as a Southeastern hub for U.S. Airways.

The executive director of the Continental Bowl is Ken Haines, the chief executive of Raycom Sports, and he worked for years to bring a bowl game here, in part because of Charlotte's loyalty to nearby A.C.C. teams. This was a college sports town long before it became a pro city with the N.B.A.'s Charlotte Hornets and the N.F.L.'s Carolina Panthers. Given the chance, the town elders would probably have been delighted to trade the Hornets — now in New Orleans — to Chapel Hill if they could have received the North Carolina Tar Heels in return.

"When the A.C.C. had basketball games or teams would come over

here for a football game, you couldn't get a seat," Haines said. "It was sold out. Our ratings on television for the college game were astronomical out of Charlotte."

Still, Haines had to overcome Charlotte's winter weather and lack of razzle-dazzle when he pitched a bowl game to the N.C.A.A. last year.

December is the time of year when North Carolina gives in to winter and loses its leafy charm, when clouds as gray as Detroit routinely settle above and a cold, steady drizzle often dulls the holiday colors. But this is the South, which means there is always the chance the skies will mock the calendar. This year, bowl organizers, fans and players had luck on their side. Most of the week has been sunny, the thermometer pushing 60.

"It's warmer than Pittsburgh, so I can't complain," Panthers defensive back Shawntae Spencer said.

Meanwhile, there is the challenge of finding entertainment options for players and fans. The NASCAR spin courtesy of the Richard Petty Driving Experience — and a tire change competition that drew an unfathomable amount of attention — was a hit with most of the players, although some declined the ride.

"I don't know," said Kwakou Robinson, a Virginia defensive end from Brooklyn. "It seems kind of crazy to me."

There have been trips to Jillions, an entertainment center with video games and pool tables, and the Concord Mills outlet mall. Concord Mills has been promoted as the second-largest tourist attraction in North Carolina behind the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, and often slows traffic on nearby Interstate 85 for miles. The mall's anchor store is the Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World, a draw for hunters and fishermen.

The signature event of the week was an old-fashioned street festival and pep rally in uptown Charlotte on Friday. The main artery through the city — Tryon Street — was shut down for four blocks to hold the event, and such Charlotte celebrities as "Nature Boy" Ric Flair of pro wrestling fame and the former N.F.L. lineman Joe DeLamielleure were among the speakers.

There was also a band competition between the colleges, although Virginia had to borrow a local high school band from West Charlotte to stand in for the Cavaliers. Virginia does not yet have a marching band and its unsanctioned pep band is no longer invited to perform at school events. At last year's Continental Tire Bowl, the pep band put on a halftime show that depicted West Virginians as hillbillies. In the hula-baloos that followed, West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise demanded, and received, an apology from Virginia's president, John T. Casteen.

But even if the Virginia pep band were here, it would be hard pressed to offend a lot of Pittsburgh fans, since not many were expected to make the trip to Charlotte. While Virginia sold more than 23,000 tickets for the game, Pittsburgh struggled to entice fans to come here. Around 5,000 tickets were sold, with

played at 11 a.m. (ESPN2) because of the N.F.L.'s Saturday afternoon schedule. The attendance will be a significant drop-off from last year, when the Continental Tire Bowl outsold all other non-B.C.S. bowls by producing a capacity crowd of 73,535.

"I think it's a combination of things," Jeff Long, the Pittsburgh athletic director, said in a phone interview. "We had a preseason rank very high. While we had an 8-4 season we're proud of, there's some disappointment we haven't achieved a higher level."

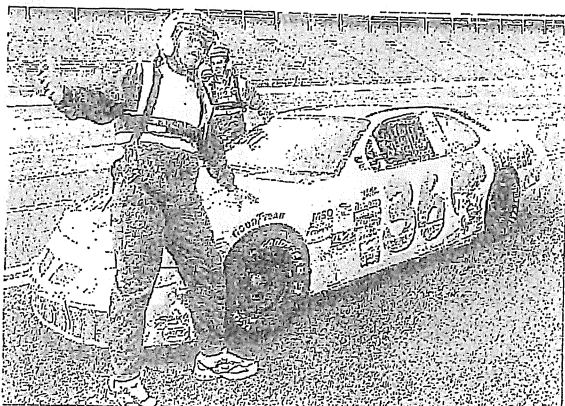
Charlotte's inability to sell itself as a vacation destination for Northerners was another factor, Long said.

Still, there was never much doubt that Pittsburgh would accept a bid to the game. The payout is \$750,000 and travel costs are limited — the flight is short and the hotel rates are not steep because there is no competition for rooms from tourists at this time of year. The Panthers figure travel costs alone were as much as \$300,000 less than last season, when they went to Phoenix for the Insight Bowl.

And even though the Panthers are expected to lose money on the trip, Long said, the bowl game is "a reward for the team, first and foremost."

The Continental Tire Bowl will be a money maker for the organizers, who lost several hundred thousand dollars last year. More important, Haines hopes the bowl game will find itself in the mix for a playoff game if the N.C.A.A. eventually adopts such a system. Haines is already talking to A.C.C. officials about bringing the conference football championship game here.

Virginia Athletic Director Craig Littlepage said travel costs were \$300,000. The university will make money because the A.C.C. pools all bowl income with basketball and



Chris Keane for The New York Times



Photographs by Nell Redmond (above and below right) ; Associated Press

Today's Continental Tire Bowl may not be prominent, but game organizers and the host city of Charlotte, N.C., tried to make it a fun week for fans and players. For fans, there were events like yesterday's pep rally, above and below right. For players like Pittsburgh's Larry Fitzgerald, there was the chance to ride in a stock car at Lowe's Motor Speedway.





The New York Times

## A Newer Bowl Game in Charlotte Sets Its Style and Is Seeking More Substance

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Associated Press  
Pitt's Larry Fitzgerald rode in a stock car as part of the Continental Tire Bowl festivities.

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to offend a lot of Pittsburgh fans, since not many were expected to make the trip to Charlotte. While Virginia sold more than 23,000 tickets for the game, Pittsburgh struggled to entice fans to come here. Around 5,000 tickets were sold, with another 5,000 Pittsburgh tickets distributed free to local charities and youth groups in Charlotte.

In all, 51,000 were expected for Saturday's game, which will be played at 11 a.m. (ESPN2) because of the N.F.L.'s Saturday afternoon schedule. The attendance will be a significant drop-off from last year, when the Continental Tire Bowl out-sold all other non-B.C.S. bowls by producing a capacity crowd of 73,535.

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Photographs by Neil Redmond for The New York Times  
The Continental Tire Bowl tried to stir interest with a rally, left, and with pro wrestling's Ric Flair, above left with Larry Fitzgerald.

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And, as Virginia quarterback Schaub pointed out, any bowl game is preferable to no bowl game