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Newest Bowl Game Is Already A Winner

December 28, 1990 | By Jon Margolis, Chicago Tribune.

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FT. LAUDERDALE — Just what the world didn't need was another bowl game.

Eighteen wasn't enough?

Especially when there are more defunct bowl games (22; surely you all remember the Camellia, Cherry and Great Lakes Bowls) than live ones?

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Especially when the NCAA wants more bowl games about as much as the federal government needs more debt?

But here comes Bowl No. 19. It's the Blockbuster Bowl, making its debut Friday evening, and, despite the odds, it's a hit even before its opening kickoff. There's nothing like the combination of money, power, brains and luck.

And nerve. The men who made this bowl—mainly Richard Giannini of Raycom Management Group and H. Wayne Huizenga of Blockbuster, the videotape rental chain—are not afraid to take chances, to defy the odds and maybe even the fates.

For which they may pay, a matter to which we will return presently.

It also helps to be in touch with the times. On Friday evening there will be a football game, Penn State against Florida State, potentially a whale of a game, and the talk will be of play-action passes and safety

blitzes. But the Blockbuster Bowl is a likely success because it is the creature of men who talk of marketing, management, production, distribution and creating (perhaps refining) an image.

And, of course, television. But what is different about the Blockbuster Bowl is that it was not simply created for television but that it was created for television by television.

Or, to be precise, by a sports marketing firm, one of those companies that serve as middlemen between sports events and television stations. At first, the events existed, the stations existed and the sports marketing company put one in touch with the other, taking a cut of the advertising dollar.

Now, a sports marketing firm has created an event so it could market it.

This isn't quite full circle. That will come when a sports marketing firm also starts a new TV station or network to telecast the sports events it creates.

But this is close enough. It's like the California political consulting firms that originate referendums to create the need for more political advertising, which is what the consulting firms do.

Not that there's anything new about bowl games being business. They always have been. But until now they've been local business, chamber of commerce boosterism to lure tourists to hotels and restaurants. This bowl is national business to lure viewers to their TV sets.

Sports marketing is a relatively new endeavor, and there are only four major firms. One is in New York and the other three, for reasons that are not clear, are in and around Charlotte, N.C.

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The biggest of these is Raycom, whose ``bread and butter is college basketball, `` according to Riley Fields, a promotion and information assistant at the firm. Raycom has the rights to market (that's a fancy word for sell) to television stations the basketball games of the Big 10 and four other conferences.

A few years ago, Raycom spun off a subsidiary called Raycom Management Group, or RMG, to produce events for Raycom to market, perhaps including a bowl game. ``We were looking around to increase our involvement with bowls, `` said Rick Ray, the chairman of Raycom.

As a business strategy, this might politely be described as risky. In Ray's own words, ``bowls were struggling in general, getting weaker. `` That's because there were too many of them, and some were in places where it was cold outside.

One of these places was Memphis, home of the Liberty Bowl, for which Raycom had the TV rights and at which RMG Chairman Giannini found himself freezing two years ago.

``He called me from the stadium, his teeth were chattering, and he asked me one question, `` remembers Bob Kuechenberg. ``He asked me if I knew Joe Robbie.``

And here was where the luck, skill, opportunity and daring all meshed. Football fans remember Kuechenberg as an offensive lineman for Notre Dame and the Miami Dolphins. But he was also a sometime-football

telecaster for Raycom, so he knew Giannini; he was a good friend of Robbie, who owned the Dolphins; and he was a South Florida patriot, a local businessman concerned about the image of his region.

So was Robbie (who died last January at 73), who owned not just the football team but the stadium in which it played, a very nice football stadium, with a natural grass field open to the sky, in northern Miami where it rarely gets cold. Robbie liked his stadium, which he named for himself. He didn't like the Orange Bowl. Convincing him to lease Joe Robbie Stadium to what was then the Sunshine Football Classic wasn't too difficult.

Neither was getting Ft. Lauderdale's business community to change the name of its annual Winterfest to the Sunshine Classic Festival, which is one reason the new bowl game is headquartered here, even though it will be played in Miami.