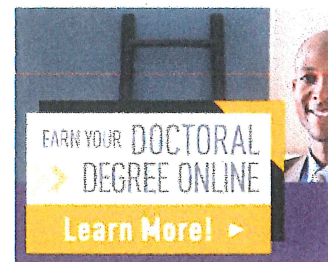




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TIRE BOWL EXCEEDS CHARLOTTE'S EXPECTATIONS

JENNA FRYER, Associated Press
 Dec. 23, 2002 4:47 PM ET

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) _ Traffic is bad, a hotel room can't be found within a 20-mile radius and a ticket to the Tire Bowl is almost impossible to find.

Charlotte, a city generally regarded as a lousy sports town, is suddenly crawling with college football fans.

All 73,258 tickets to Saturday's game between West Virginia and Virginia are sold _ doubling the mark organizers had targeted to consider the inaugural bowl a success _ and proving the city has officially rebounded from the loss of its NBA team.

"Charlotte has been labeled under the banner of losing a professional sports team," Carroll Gray, president of the Charlotte Chamber business group, said Monday.

"We're not known as a sports town, so the results of this bowl is something totally unexpected. It's exceeded our predictions by almost 2-to-1."

With attendance dwindling at the NFL's Carolina Panthers games and the NBA's Hornets gone to New Orleans, the bowl was expected to take years to develop into a premier event.

But the pairing of West Virginia and Virginia _ two schools within easy driving distance _ has raised interest in the game and will give the Tire Bowl the second-largest crowd for a first-year bowl in NCAA history.

The Blockbuster Bowl, now called the Tangerine Bowl, drew 74,021 for Florida State-Penn State at Pro Player Stadium in South Florida in 1990 in its first year. Tire Bowl officials said they could break that mark if they sold standing-room only tickets at Ericsson Stadium.

"I'm dazed, shocked and overwhelmed," said Ken Haines, vice president of Raycom Sports. "Never in a million years did we think we'd have something like this in our first year. We thought this bowl game would take some time to grow up. Instead, we've struck lightning right out of the gate."

Haines attributes the interest to West Virginia and Virginia both being passed over for more established bowls despite each school finishing second in their conference.

That meant two top-level teams fell into the Tire Bowl, giving the game established fan bases that wouldn't have to travel very far. Haines said WVU fans account for more than 30,000 of the tickets sold while Virginia supporters snapped up 20,000.

The lure of Ericsson Stadium was also a draw for college football fans eager to watch a game in an NFL setting, Haines said.

And when the tickets started going, the local community rushed in to get some before it was too late.

"We didn't know what would happen with the Charlotte community," Haines said. "The Hornets had left, the Panthers have not won a lot lately. I guess as it turns out, the town was hungry for something successful."

Both teams spent Sunday at Ericsson Stadium watching the Panthers play the Chicago Bears. For Virginia coach Al Groh, who coached the New York Jets in the NFL, it was his first time at Ericsson _ which has routinely been picked as one of the top NFL stadiums.

"Friends had told me it was beautiful but I had never actually seen it because the Panthers games were always home games," he said. "But it was a terrific facility with a great playing surface and our players are really excited."

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