

Final Report

Will the Charlotte business community support an effort by UNCC to launch a major college football program that would give the city its first and only Division 1-A team?

That is the question examined in this study at the request of a special committee by Private Sports Consulting, Inc., (PSC), a successor company to Muhleman Marketing, Inc., with a combined 35 years in the sports marketing field.

This question is similar to those asked us in 25 sports markets across the country on the verge of building a major new sports facility or gaining a new sports team or franchise.

Whether for a professional or collegiate undertaking, the question of support from the local and regional business community is among the most important to be answered in assessing the decision to move ahead.

We prepared lists of various specific business people we wanted to interview, seeking a variety of related business sizes and levels, as well as locations. We also placed an emphasis on contacting those who historically have supported drives and campaigns for various civic, cultural and sports improvements in Charlotte.

We wanted some UNCC grads, but because that group's support, as we expected, was consistently high, we focused more on non-grads. And, because our interview subjects had been highly targeted, a pattern of reaction quickly became apparent.

Final Report continued

We found a varied reaction to the question of support for UNCC football from the business community. These reactions were rendered despite two unusual factors:

- a) The very long lead time before implementation could take place.
- b) The lack of any significant information about costs or amenities for supporters for the football program or new stadium.

Eyebrows figuratively - and sometimes literally - arched when we explained that the first football season likely would not begin until 2012, and the first year that a 1-A program would be possible likely would be 2016, putting the USF analogy possibilities a decade or so away (USF rising to a #2 national ranking this year after starting a program just 10 years ago)

Questions regarding ticket prices, sponsorship costs and suite and club seat availability in both Memorial and the new campus stadium were not answerable at this stage, although some asked anyway.

Nonetheless, in our opinion, a well-marketed, intensive campaign to gain business (and fan) backing in the Charlotte area could be reasonably successful, based on reaction we encountered even this far out. With specific amenities and pricing information and a closer start date, we believe business and fan response will be improved.

Just over half of executives we spoke to responded positively when asked if they would support a football program with at least season tickets. Just under half responded negatively, many expressing low to minor interest in providing support for a UNCC football program. It was clear that **passion for UNCC football is not yet driving response, but rather a keen sense of opportunity and beneficial progress potential for a growing university.**

Final Report continued

Reasons “Why Not” to Support

Reasons given as to “why not” illustrated many of the issues the university should take note of in planning an effort to add Division 1-A football to its offerings.

Among those cited were:

- Obligations to the major sports programs in this area, most professional, already being carried. These included the Panthers, The Wachovia PGA event, the Bobcats and Lowe’s (NASCAR) Motor Speedway. (Tickets, suites, advertising, sponsorship.)
- Personal loyalties to their own alma maters which already have 1-A football and to which many of the executives contribute annually, including North Carolina, N.C. State, Wake Forest, Duke, Clemson, and South Carolina. Also, many schools from across the country, such as Ohio State, Georgia, Tennessee, Notre Dame, Texas and Stanford.
- The likelihood for some that while personally they might support college sports, corporate/company support is more likely to be academically focused. (Although a “launch” campaign might be an exception.)
- Memorial Stadium not seen as suitable for entertaining and being too “rough and inadequate.” (A frequent concern.)
- Division 1-A being possibly attractive, but 1-AA not likely to interest.
- Concern that any football conference available in 1-AA or 1-A would be no better than the current Atlantic 10 basketball conference.

Final Report continued

- Distance to travel to “northside” campus stadium.
- Feeling that individuals and especially alums should carry this program, rather than the business community.
- Rather watch a good team on TV than a “startup” in person.
- Prefer to “wait and see” if the idea gets off the ground, then maybe.
- Question that Charlotte is a “good enough sports town.”
- Not enough details or information to decide yet.
- “Not that many people care about UNCC teams in Charlotte.”
- Lack of enough wealthy alums.
- Concern that recruiting good players in this area would be very difficult.

Reasons “Why” to Support

- Many new people here who want a major college program to support.
- Like to be able to say we support things like that in this city.
- University needs a “dynamic focal point”
- Fall weekends “much more exciting” for students
- Lots of alums should be at a “decent earning point” now.

Final Report continued

- The University needs new reasons for community support - got to have football.
- Will call attention to UNCC's size and growth.
- Would help our basketball also, especially the conference.
- Tired of Bobcats and Panthers. Good time to add a college team.
- Would "jump start" a perception change which UNCC has earned.

Strategic question: Alumni or Business as Principal Support Group?

One of the issues which emerged from our inquiries of particular strategic importance was the contention that UNCC alumni, friends and family should be the principal support force for a football program, not business.

Noted one of Charlotte's most prominent business executives and leaders, "There probably will have to be more individuals to provide the necessary funding than businesses... simply because UNCC hasn't yet had the breadth of successful graduates." He added, "**I suspect there will be lots of \$1,000 and \$10,000 individuals contributing the majority of the funding, not companies donating a million at a time,** contributing the really big bucks."

Comments on this from others included, "...**it will have to be (driven) by UNCC's own grads**", and, "I understand UNCC is really growing, especially undergrad, and **that's where this support is going to have to come from.**"

Noted a prominent financial executive, "**There is going to be a question of where it fits in for some of the larger corporations; is it advertising, for instance? Some \$250,000 blocks are not out of the question. It's not going to be easy, but I think it will be doable.**"

Final Report continued

Said one executive, “If UNCC is going to catch the imagination of the city, they need to succeed with a major program like this that will tie them more tightly to the community. It’s a huge university already and getting still bigger. It should be a great source of pride to the city and a major football program will help call attention to that.”

Another said, “I don’t know if the business community here would raise millions for a new stadium and program. There are a lot of allegiances here already for football and of course, pro sports. I would be curious to hear the details and how they would do it, however.”

From another uptown executive, “It’s a good idea and I think feasible but it will be a challenge, particularly the stadium, as to how to pay for it. The four years of 1-AA is tough, but apparently there is no choice. I guess Memorial Stadium is the only option for that. I sure hope the County will fix it up, though.”

And from a SouthPark area executive, “My initial reaction was to say probably not, but if it would help I would buy a few tickets.”

A major consumer goods executive said, “I would say the key for UNCC in establishing 1-A football will be their alumni base, how capable and deep it is and how enthusiastically they respond. It’s a wonderful concept. The university needs a dynamic focal point....football will help make it a complete university.”

Said a marketing executive and graduate, “It’s a good time to do this. I know in Tampa with the University of South Florida program that has been so successful, they credit the Tampa business community for backing the school’s football effort and making it happen. We’ve got to have new reasons for our grads and the community to back sports at UNCC. Certainly I would contribute and know many others who will as well, but it will be critical for UNCC to get community support. We will have to get that message out.”

Transportation executive: “I can’t imagine football being successful there. Maybe if we didn’t have two pro teams here. Corporately, we would probably buy four season tickets just to be good citizens, but I’d question their use. UAB and USF may be success stories, but they’re in big football country and I’d think twice about that comparison...I think it will be a very difficult sale to businesses...here.”

Final Report continued

Favorable Indicators

Thanks to the Panthers, who brought the pro game to Charlotte more than a decade ago, plus resurgent college programs at Chapel Hill and Wake Forest and the development of powerhouse prep teams here, this area appears well on its way to elevating its appreciation for football.

While the sport is not yet as pervasively popular in most of North Carolina as basketball, there probably is no area of the state where the game of football is more appreciated than Charlotte. In addition, strong and consistent hiring by our major banks and other large companies has relocated thousands of newcomers who bring with them a deep love of college football as their favorite sport.

With Bank of America stadium for the greater part sold out for NFL games, there is no major brand of football immediately accessible to fans within 50 miles of the city. One of the nation's best 1-AA programs, Appalachian State, is some 110 miles away and the closest SEC school is 95 miles away and usually sold out for its games.

Nationally, football is king of the college sports packages offered on television. Last year's BCS national championship game pulled a 17.4 rating, while the most recent NCAA Final Four championship basketball game scored a national rating of 13.2. NFL games lead all sports ratings.

In addition, Charlotte is developing an annual college bowl game and was just selected to become a future ACC Championship game site.

Overall, our business community is one of the nation's healthiest.

Conclusion:

We find that a new UNCC football program following NCAA timing requirements of four years at the 1-AA level before moving into a 1-A program as soon as the fifth year following the inaugural season, at this time appears **possible, if challenging**.

Final Report continued

Asking responsible business executives to project support levels for their companies five (1-AA) and ten (1-A) years out, with few particulars as to seating options or promotional opportunities produced often-hesitant responses.

However, among executives generally qualified to provide the most informed evaluations, including several representing the area's largest companies, **the prevailing reaction was narrowly encouraging.**

Many were skeptical, especially with a lack of information on the campus stadium or a firm timetable, but many of those balanced their reluctance to commit any assurance of support at this time with hopeful comments that the program could be pulled off.

As one respondent noted, **a campaign similar to a United Way drive will likely be required to raise desired capital and support agreements**, once the relevant information is presented. There is some question as to whether business support will be as large as outright fan support, particularly from UNCC's large and growing base of graduates.

The initial four-year site of **Memorial Stadium is one of the elements most often questioned by business executives used to the comfort and amenities of Bank of America Stadium and Bobcats Arena.** Details of the proposed campus stadium, which would open coincidentally with the school's 1-A debut, appear likely to form a major part of the decision basis for many businesses and their leaders.

In summary, **our finding at this time is that a support program for major college football at UNCC likely could be "sold" to the Charlotte business community but it will require a vigorous, well-organized campaign to do so.** Season tickets and annual contributions for the first four 1-AA "apprenticeship" years will be especially reliant on the UNCC alum base.

Many moving parts will need to be smoothly integrated.

Final Report continued

But at this time, we find that the sample section of the Charlotte business community which we accessed in this study indicates a willingness to cautiously proceed.

Private Sports Consulting, Inc.
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