

Saturday, November 24, 10:28 am

Follow us

- 
- 
- 



- [Devices](#)
- [About](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Support](#)
- [Contact](#)

[DOWNLOAD FOR iPad](#)

Enter your email for up

[This article has been shared from The Daily](#)

# A financial Hail Mary

## Some colleges think big-time football is their solution

By Mara Gay Wednesday, November 21, 2012

Like 1

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
-



**PHOTO: Boston Globe**

1 of 4

Prev Next While UMass is expanding its stadium, it is playing in Foxborough — more than 90 miles from campus.

For the 1-11 University of Massachusetts Minutemen, set for one final trouncing this weekend against Central Michigan, the end of their first, brutal season of FBS football could not come soon enough.

Fortunately for the Minutemen, the university sees the team as a long-term investment.

The school, like dozens of public universities across the country, is betting big on college football, making the multimillion-dollar leap to the Football Bowl Subdivision (formerly Div. I-A) in the hopes that a successful program will raise the school's national profile and build a powerful alumni donor base that can offset state budget cuts in the years ahead.

Across the country, public universities, shaken after a decade of cuts to higher education — and enticed by the huge sums of money generated by powerhouses like the University of Texas and Alabama — are betting millions that big-time football is part of the solution.

“We can no longer wait for the state budget appropriation to run our schools,” said Bob Kustra, president of Boise State University, an unlikely upstart in Idaho that has built a virtual football empire over the past 15 years. “I think football is a way to do that.”

At the University of Massachusetts, officials have sold the move to Division-1 as a way to increase the



school's cachet, especially among donors and state legislators.

In an email to faculty last year announcing the decision, then-Chancellor Robert Holub said it “allows the university to take control of its own destiny” and “provides greater opportunities for the campus to connect with alumni, donors, potential students and influential friends in the state and across the country.” Holub also said it would help the university gain national exposure on TV and actually reduce the athletic department’s reliance on university funds.

John Chellock, director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education, said football is an alluring option for cash-strapped public universities.

“State budgets are a wreck. For a lot of schools there’s a real concern about long-term financial sustainability, and the debate over athletics is occurring within that context,” he said. “You start to think that the football is part of the solution.”

But the glory of top-level football doesn’t come cheap. For most schools, the move means building a new stadium to meet the NCAA requirement that colleges attract an average of at least 15,000 fans per game. Universities are required to offer at least 14 varsity sports, provide more scholarships and increase academic standards for student athletes. Travel costs for FBS athletic departments often skyrocket and [coaching salaries can run into the millions](#). The NCAA application fee alone, the mere price of admission to prime-time, stands at a cool \$1.3 million.

And while generating revenues at schools such as the University of Texas, where the athletic department brought in a staggering \$150 million last year, can be seductive, the chances of building that kind of program from scratch are incredibly slim.

“There is a kind of lottery mentality at work here,” said Robert Baade, an economics professor at Lake Forest College who studies money in college sports. “You start a team and you hope for the kind of glory and revenue at schools like Ohio, Texas and Michigan. But the odds are decidedly against it.”

The UConn Huskies intercept a pass in a game with the UMass Minutemen, who are 1-11 this season. Just 22 out of some 230 FBS programs generate enough money to operate without university funding, according to NCAA data from 2010, the most recent year available.

And yet, across the country, public universities are pouring millions into their athletic departments, racing to play catch-up.

Those who study the impact of the sport on higher education worry that schools are diverting money from shrinking state education funds and rising student fees into programs that have little chance of becoming profit-generating powerhouses.

At the University of Massachusetts, the move has meant investing \$30 million to expand its stadium. In the meantime, the team is playing at a borrowed stadium 94 miles from its Amherst campus — less than ideal for the kind of game-day tailgating that builds traditions among students and alumni.

“They’re not the first ones that have tried this,” Dan Fulks, a Transylvania University professor and a leading researcher in the economics of university athletics, said of the school. “You just have to think, ‘Who’s going to pay for the stadium?’ There are some very real financial intangibles involved.”

The UMass stadium renovation is part of a \$3.1 billion capital plan, paid for by university funding, private donations and student fees. But school officials insist the move to the FBS will actually reduce university

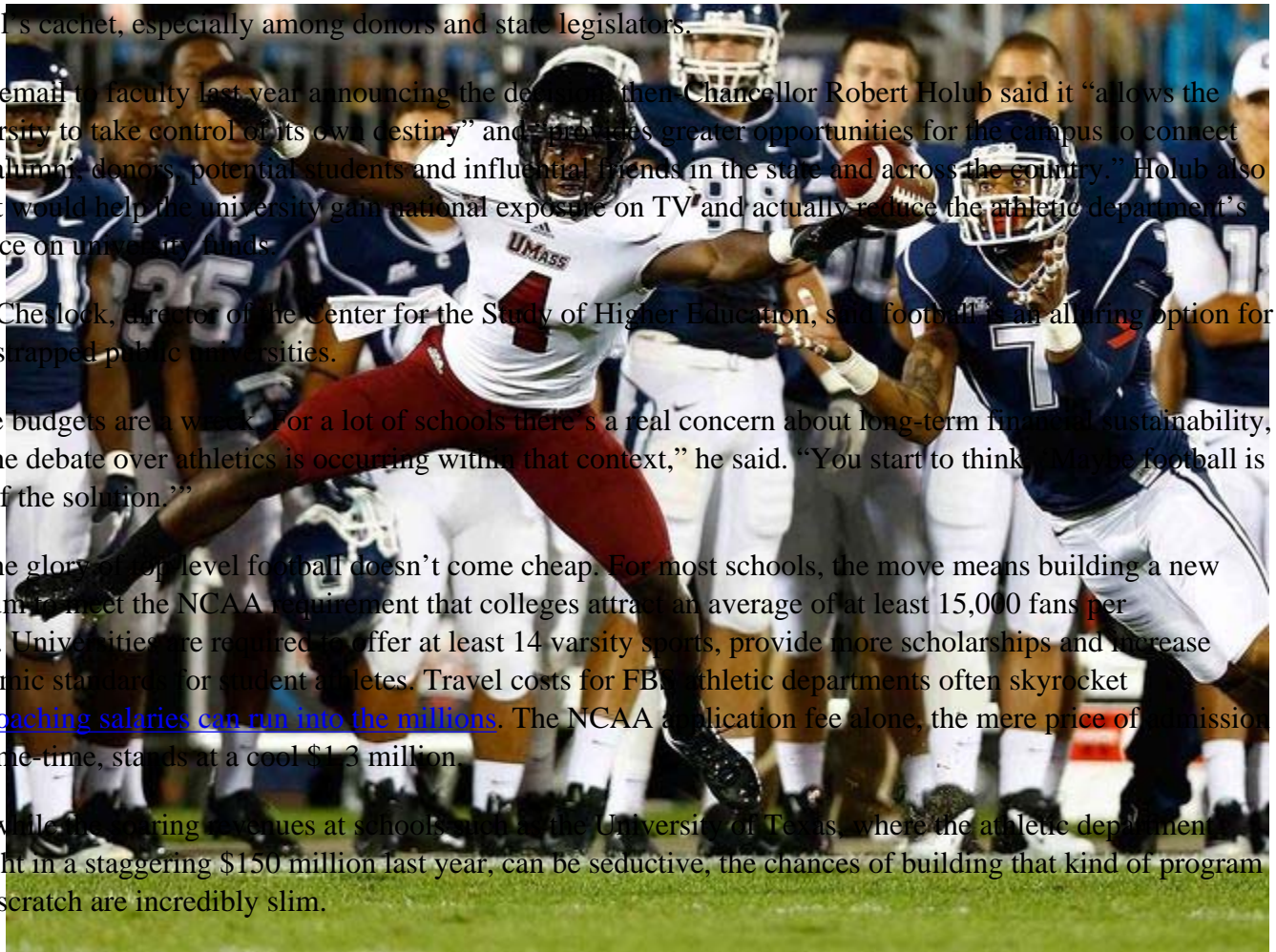


PHOTO: Jared Wickerham/Getty



spending on athletics by the year 2020 — a projection that relies heavily on ticket sales and media deals generated by a winning football team. They did not return multiple requests for comment.

The vast majority of FBS programs run at a significant cost to colleges and students, already grappling with budget cuts and tuition increases. Critics say that for many public universities, putting up even larger sums of money to enter the competitive world of big-time football may not always be a smart investment.

“Likely, you end up being no more successful than most schools,” said Cheslock. “Then you have to say, ‘Wow, the cost of athletics is even higher.’”

But for schools that are successful, the rewards can be great. Boise State University has used football to help transform the small Idaho school, once a junior college, into a nationally ranked university with \$1 million in merchandise royalties, millions more in TV rights and growing aspirations of becoming a major research institution.

Officials at Boise State, which joined then-Div. I-A in 1996, say the buzz over the football team — and its now-famous blue field — has made the university more popular with donors and prospective students, too.

Out-of-state enrollment at Boise State has nearly tripled over the past decade, bringing in more tuition dollars. The average GPA at the school has risen steadily over the past decade. And in 2007 alone, the year Boise State beat Oklahoma in a stunning upset at the Fiesta Bowl, applications to the university shot up 40 percent.

“We’re using the football success to attract better students, and out-of-state students, too, which helps our budget situation,” said Kustra. “When you ask students, ‘How did you get here from Hawaii or from New York?’ they say, ‘I watched ESPN, and I saw you guys and I saw that blue field.’”

Fulks said his research backs that up. “You get more exposure. Applications go up. Your student body diversity goes up. Your SAT scores go up,” he said. “We see clear evidence of that.”

But the move can be fraught with awkward growing pains, as lesser-known public universities struggle to compete and build a brand in the shadow of teams such as Ohio State and Michigan, programs that have been built over decades and have alumni bases with connections to the schools that span generations.

The University of Massachusetts, for example, has found itself routinely outmatched on the football field this season. In a particularly brutal faceoff against Michigan last month, the team lost 63-13 in a game shown on the Big Ten Network. Still, Michigan paid UMass \$650,000 in TV money for its troubles — nearly double what it paid to trounce the school in 2010, when the Minutemen were still in the lowlier Football Championship Subdivision.

Even in the heart of football country, some are beginning to raise questions about the wisdom of investing in big-time college football. At the University of North Alabama, officials pushed the move to the FBS back a year, to 2014, after trustees, faculty and student representatives raised vocal concerns about the cost. Financing the school’s entry into the FBS, for example, will cause student fees to double.

But UNA president William Cale said he’s making the pitch to students that their investment will pay off. “I’ve been telling students, ‘The value of your UNA degree is going to be enhanced if we become a Division I school,’” he said. “Besides, most of the country didn’t pay a bit of attention to Boise State until they started playing on TV.”





junior college to a university hoping to become a

The Daily is a first-of-its-kind daily national news publication built exclusively as an application for tablets and other emerging digital platforms.

DOWNLOAD FOR IPAD ↓

**THE DAILY NEWSLETTER SIGNUP**



Enter your email for up

### THE DAILY'S TOP STORIES



#### [Tokyo travel](#)

Separate the myths from the reality of visiting Japan's biggest city



#### [The Weekly: Thanksgiving Survival Edition](#)

Fawn Fairchild hits the street to see how you dealt with the folks this time around.

**PHOTO: Boston Globe**



...lium, it is playing in Foxborough — more than 90 miles from

#### [Guillermo del Toro will see you now](#)

Checking in with Hollywood's busiest geek



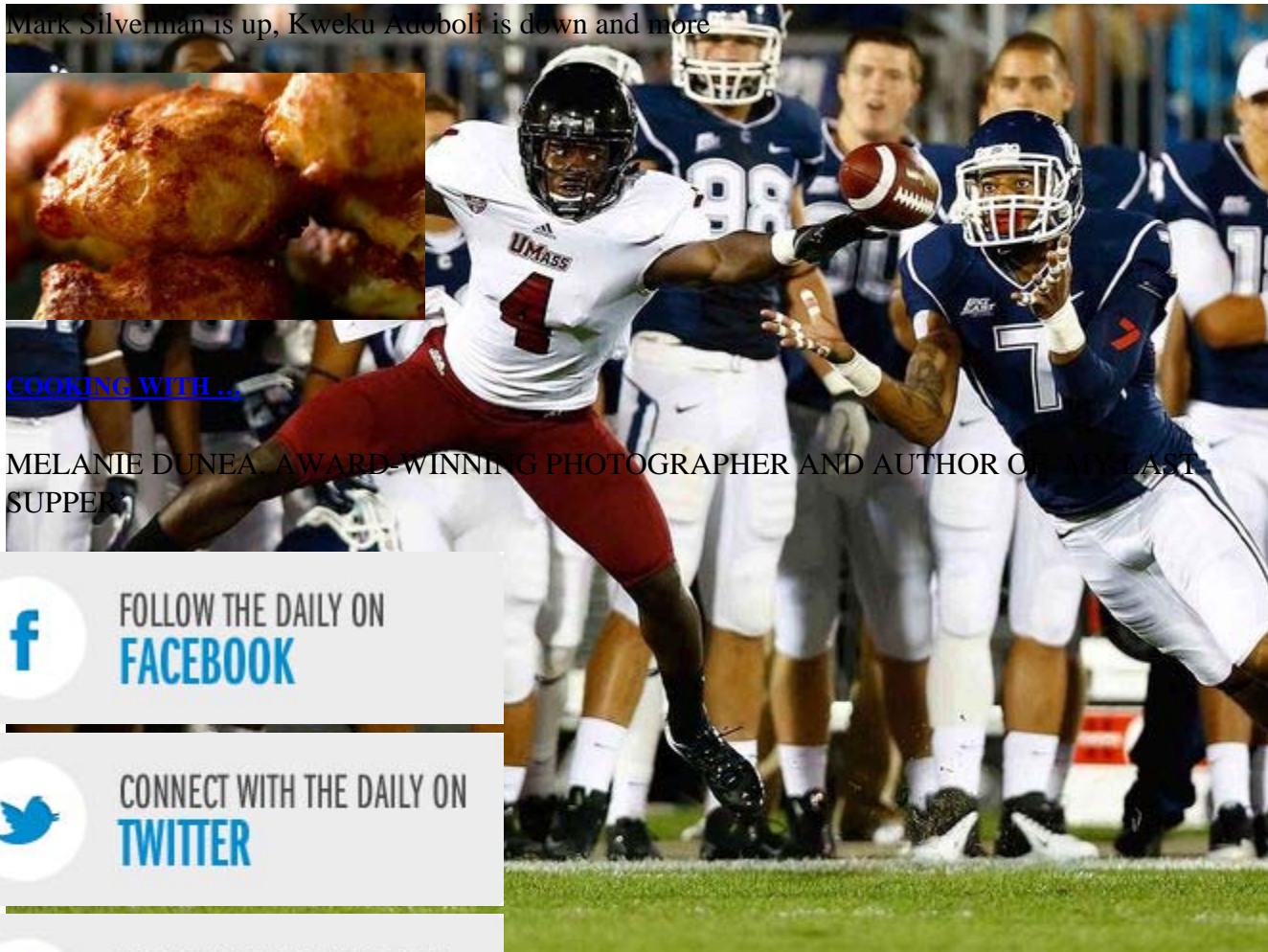
#### [Winners and losers](#)

Mark Silverman is up, Kweku Adoboli is down and more



[COOKING WITH...](#)

MELANIE DUNEA, AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHER AND AUTHOR OF *THE LAST SUPPER*



FOLLOW THE DAILY ON  
**FACEBOOK**



CONNECT WITH THE DAILY ON  
**TWITTER**



BLOG ABOUT THE DAILY ON  
**TUMBLR**

The UConn Huskies intercept a pass in a game with the UMass Minutemen, who are 1-11 this season.

- [Advertisers](#)
- [iOS EULA](#)
- [Terms of Service](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- All Rights Reserved
- ©2012 The Daily Holdings, Inc.