

The latest extravagances in the college sports arms race? Laser tag and mini golf.

By **Will Hobson** and **Steven Rich** December 21 at 4:01 PM

The people in charge of Clemson University's athletic department have not settled on a design for the miniature golf course they are building for their football team, but they know it will have just nine holes, not 18.

That will leave room for the sand volleyball courts, laser tag, movie theater, bowling lanes, barber shop and other amenities planned in the \$55 million complex that South Carolina's second-largest public university is building exclusively for its football players.

"It'll be their home on campus, when they're not in class" said Clemson athletics spokesman Joe Galbraith of a building that represents the latest innovation in the athletic facilities arms race that is costing many of America's largest public universities hundreds of millions of dollars and shows no signs of subsiding.

Facilities spending is one of the biggest reasons otherwise profitable or self-sufficient athletic departments run deficits, according to a Washington Post review of thousands of pages of financial records from athletic departments at 48 schools in the five wealthiest conferences in college sports.

In 2014, these 48 schools spent \$772 million combined on athletic facilities, an 89-percent increase from \$408 million spent in 2004, adjusted for inflation. Those figures include annual debt payments, capital expenses and maintenance costs.

A decade of rampant athletics construction across the country has redefined what it takes to field a competitive top-tier college sports program. Football stadiums and basketball arenas now must be complemented by practice facilities, professional-quality locker rooms, players' lounges with high-definition televisions and video game systems, and luxury suites to coax more money from boosters.

And now Clemson, whose undefeated Tigers are one of four teams in this year's College Football Playoff, is building [a football complex](#) with an aspect school officials tout will be the first of its kind: a "players' village" entertainment wing with attractions more commonly seen in arcades and theme parks than on college campuses.

"I am pumped," Coach William "Dabo" Swinney said in [a video the school released promoting the new building](#). "It is going to be the epitome of Clemson: fun, special, unique. It's going to be the best in the country, without a doubt."

Clemson's new facility likely will be the best for just a matter of months, critics of college sports said, until the next school decides to transform a corner of its campus into what Drake Group President Gerald Gurney terms "day spas" designed to entice teenagers.

"This is all about pandering to the fantasies of 18-year-olds. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the mission of a university," said Gurney, whose organization advocates an overhaul of commercialized college sports in America.

"What's probably next down the line is a floating river attraction. . . . Why don't we have a roller coaster?" said Gurney, who has worked in athletic departments at the University of Maryland and the University of Oklahoma, where he now teaches. "It's embarrassing that we're even discussing this."

As wealthy donors at Clemson rush to outdo peers at other financially flush athletic departments, those with fewer resources look elsewhere for the cash needed to keep up. At Maryland, a new indoor football facility will be financed, in part, with millions from state government. At the University of Virginia and Rutgers University — whose athletic departments, like Maryland's, are dependent on mandatory student fees — officials are mulling similar projects.

At other schools where historic fundraising drives bankrolled multimillion-dollar projects, officials fear expensive upgrades soon will be obsolete. At the University of Colorado Boulder, the athletic department is finishing a \$156 million project that includes new locker rooms and offices for football and an indoor practice field.

"By the time we're done . . . we'll be right back behind them all again," said Stephen Ludwig, a member of Colorado's board of regents. "It's a never-ending arms race to build shiny objects that appeal to 17-year-olds, so they'll pick us instead of someone else."

What the customer wants

On April 19, 2013, the University of Tennessee dedicated its new \$45 million Anderson Training Center, a 145,000-square-foot home for its football team with a two-story weight room, hydrotherapy room, amphitheater-style team meeting room and a public entrance featuring a waterwall and museum commemorating Volunteers football history.

At the dedication ceremony, Tennessee Athletic Director Dave Hart told donors that professional football scouts had offered unanimous praise.

"They have all told me this is the best facility, college or professional, that they've ever seen," Hart said. "Quite a tribute and quite a legacy to all of you who helped make this possible."

Tennessee's campus was home to the nation's best football training facility for roughly three and a half months.

On Aug. 1, 2013, the University of Oregon dedicated the Hatfield-Dowlin Complex, the latest massive gift from Nike co-founder Phil Knight to his alma mater.

Few people actually know how much Knight spent on the building, thanks to a series of financial transactions that obscure details from public records. The university reported the 145,000-square-foot building's value as \$95 million in filings with the federal government, but some media reports have pegged the actual construction cost closer to \$138 million.

In addition to the now-standard accoutrements of a modern college football training facility, Oregon's new building featured flourishes from overseas. The individually ventilated lockers came from Germany; the wood for the floor in the weight room came from Brazil; and the lounge chairs in the players' barber shop came from Italy. The building also came with technological innovations such as a 40-yard electronic track that measures speed, power and foot placement.

"If a building was a super hero, that's it," Oregon Coach Mark Helfrich said in a news conference.

The facilities arms race is not solely benefiting football teams. In the past decade, many athletic departments in the wealthy Power Five conferences — the Atlantic Coast Conference, Southeastern Conference, Big 12, Big Ten and Pacific-12 — have built baseball stadiums, volleyball courts, soccer fields, golf practice facilities and ice hockey arenas with money largely derived from powerhouse football teams and, to a lesser degree, men's basketball teams.

As the primary revenue-driver, however, the football team is usually the first to get a facilities upgrade. Every improvement is considered a recruiting edge, from the locker room to the scoreboard.

In July 2014, Texas A&M unveiled a 7,661-square-foot video board, then the largest in college football. School officials insisted it was a coincidence that the screen was slightly bigger than the one at rival Texas, which Longhorns fans boastfully nicknamed "Godzillatron."

The College Station campus was home to the largest video board in college football for one year.

In September, Auburn University debuted a 10,830-square-foot video board in its football stadium. School officials also insisted it was a coincidence their new board was bigger than the one at SEC rival Texas A&M.

South Dakota-based Daktronics built both boards. In an interview, Daktronics vice president Jay Parker said he has had several conversations with college officials who specifically cite the size of rivals' boards when placing orders. Parker declined to offer specifics.

“I’m not so sure I can go on the record with where those conversations came from,” said Parker. “Our desire is to sell products and to sell what the customer wants.”

Architect Joel Leider also has had those conversations. Leider is vice president of SportsPLAN, a small firm based in Kansas City, Mo., that specializes in designing collegiate athletic facilities

When he started in this business in the 1980s, Leider said, an indoor football practice facility was a rare job; only colleges in wintry regions needed them.

In the past 20 years, dozens of schools across the Southeast and Southwest have built indoor football facilities. Leider also finds himself facing more competition. At least 20 other companies have entered the college sports design sector since the 1990s, he said.

Some collegiate players now enjoy facilities superior to those offered by some professional teams. Florida State and the University of Florida have indoor football practice facilities. The NFL’s Jacksonville Jaguars do not. Asked about this, Leider noted a significant difference between professional and college sports.

“When you can pay a player, that changes the equation,” Leider said. “Just look at [Arizona Diamondbacks pitcher] Zack Greinke: He just signed for \$200 million. I’ll bet the quality of the locker room isn’t that big a deal for him.”

Asked what new features he predicted would be in the next wave of upgrades, Leider laughed.

“I wish I had my crystal ball polished,” he said. “Like everybody else, I just wonder about the future of college athletics in general. Obviously, I’m in the business, and when more schools are building facilities, that’s good for us. But it’s hard to even recognize college athletics anymore.”

Footing the bill

Not every athletic department has a Phil Knight. For some schools, facilities upgrades mean turning to students, government or lenders to help cover the cost.

At Georgia Tech, an athletic department that depends on mandatory student fees to help pay its bills has amassed \$229 million in debt, records show.

In 2014, Georgia Tech athletics collected about \$5.1 million from students, which covered about 7 percent of the department’s spending. Spread proportionally across the entire athletics budget, that means students covered about \$980,000 of Georgia Tech’s \$13.3 million annual debt payments on sports facilities including an indoor football practice field, upgrades to the basketball arena, a basketball practice facility and a softball field.

Virginia and Rutgers, athletic departments both highly dependent on student fees, have new football headquarters on their wish lists. And at Maryland, the university is planning a \$155 million project to convert Cole Field House, its former basketball arena, into an indoor football practice facility, new locker rooms and offices for football, a training center for all athletes and an “Academy of Innovation and Entrepreneurship” for students.

The project is dependent on \$25 million from Maryland state government and \$25 million from an athletic department that needs to charge one of the highest mandatory athletic fees in the Power Five to cover its expenses (\$406 annually for the average full-time undergrad).

Two months after Maryland officials announced the project, and its state support, Gov. Martin O’Malley’s outgoing budget cut funding for higher education. The university raised tuition five percent last year.

Supporters of the Cole Field House project point out the \$25 million in state money is earmarked for facilities spending, so it couldn’t have been used by the university to prevent tuition hikes. And unlike the football complex at Oregon and the one planned at Clemson, the renovated Cole Field House will be open to all students.

“This is much more than a football facility,” said Barry Gossett, vice chairman of the university’s board of regents.

Many students, however, question whether the millions more spent on Maryland football facilities is a worthwhile investment.

“While the football team is getting something new and nice . . . there’s a sentiment among students that they have to pay more and more every year, but they’re not necessarily getting anything more for their spending,” said Patrick Ronk, student government president at Maryland.

The renovated Cole Field House is scheduled to open in 2017. Promotional materials promise “an athletic training facility unmatched in Division I sports.”

Every dream starts with a dreamer

At a groundbreaking ceremony on Nov. 6, Swinney, the Clemson football coach, told the crowd the story behind his team’s new headquarters. A few years ago, Athletic Director Dan Radakovich asked Swinney what he needed to “take Clemson football to the next level.” Swinney jotted down a few ideas for a football headquarters.

“I really thought he would take that piece of paper and just laugh,” Swinney said. “But he didn’t. . . . Every dream starts with a dreamer.”

In a recent phone interview, Clemson deputy athletic director Graham Neff defended the miniature golf, laser tag

and bowling lanes as relatively inexpensive additions that offer a recruiting edge.

“Our football program is the engine to our athletic train. The ability of that program to be successful, be able to recruit, is important for the whole department, and I’d argue, for the whole university,” Neff said. “For that incremental cost of pouring concrete [for mini golf holes], we feel there’s going to be a big ROI [return on investment] for it being new and unique to Clemson.”

A cost breakdown for the players’ village amenities was not available, Neff said. The \$55 million building will be paid for by \$35.5 million in donations and \$19.5 million from the sale of athletic revenue bonds. Clemson athletics does not charge a student fee, but officials considered creating one last year before student government objected.

As Swinney spoke at the groundbreaking, he was standing in a \$10 million indoor practice facility that opened in 2012. A couple hundred yards off in the distance stood Memorial Stadium, with gameday locker rooms and football offices built in 2007 (as part of a \$60 million project) that were [renovated last year](#) as part of more than \$100 million in ongoing Clemson athletics facilities projects.

Swinney knows donors get frustrated sometimes, he told the crowd, because they give money to facilities that are soon replaced. He had a message for those donors.

“Let me tell you, this will be the forever home of the Tigers,” Swinney said.

A few seconds later, Swinney added: “Not to say that we won’t ever tear a wall down . . . or add another wing.”

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