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Despite long odds, universities start or resume big-time football programs

Submitted by Jake New on July 18, 2016 - 3:00am

In February, John Bardo, Wichita State University's president, [tweeted an image](#) [1] of a black and yellow football helmet emblazoned with the letters WSU. The tweet was shared more than 2,100 times and viewed by 40,000 people, exciting Wichita State fans and alumni who speculated that the image meant the university's long-dead football team was being brought back to life.

This was not quite the case; the helmet was only a prototype designed to gauge interest in restarting the program, which has been dormant for three decades. That same afternoon, university officials met with a consulting firm, College Sports Solutions, to begin determining if bringing Wichita State football back was financially feasible. About five months -- and \$75,000 -- later, the firm [released its analysis](#) [2].

It is the ninth such report commissioned by Wichita State since the football program was discontinued.

"There's always interest in discussing this topic in our community," Darron Boatright, Wichita State's athletic director, said. "The ancillary benefits of having a big fall sport on a college campus are very large. We just need to find out if it's a real possibility and if it makes sense from a financial standpoint, as well as if it makes sense for our community. Right now, it's too early to say that."

If Wichita State University does bring back football, it won't be alone in reviving a defunct program despite the expense and uncertainty that comes with the endeavor. Driven by support and pressure from university board members and wealthy donors with dreams of their college joining the ranks of the biggest of big-time college sports, at least half a dozen Division I institutions have resuscitated or created new football teams in the last decade. Not a single one is making money on football.

Starting or restarting an intercollegiate football team is an expensive and complicated process.

Teams at the National Collegiate Athletic Association's most competitive level, the Football Bowl Subdivision, provide scholarships -- and, in some cases, full cost of attendance -- to 85 players. The team needs a place to practice, a place to train and a place to compete. The median coaching salary for Football Championship Subdivision institutions is \$245,000 per year. At the FBS level, the median salary is nearly \$2 million. The total annual median football expenditures are more than \$3 million for FCS teams and \$16 million for FBS teams.

Gender equity laws drive the costs up even farther, requiring colleges to provide "substantially proportionate" participation opportunities, including financial aid, for female athletes. Because adding football requires at least 100 new male athletes, colleges creating such programs often have to fund two new women's teams.

At Wichita State, bringing back the football program would cost the university tens of millions of dollars. College Sports Solutions estimated that revenue for the first two seasons would be about \$3.7 million total. The university would lose \$14.5 million before the team began its third season.

“To get to the top echelon of football, and that’s what colleges are hoping for, takes a lot of time, effort and money,” Mark Nagel, a professor of sports management at the University of South Carolina, said. “You have to face 10, 15, maybe 20 years of continual financial losses.”

A Fool’s Errand?

In 2003, East Tennessee State University dropped its football team, over budget concerns. A decade later, the university announced it was bringing football back. Two years later, the team began its first season. It won two of its 11 games.

The first team the revived program at East Tennessee State played that season was Kennesaw State University. Kennesaw State, too, was a new team at the time. Five years earlier, students had approved a \$100-per-semester fee increase to support the creation of the football team, and the university began construction on a \$16.5 million stadium. Kennesaw State fared better in its first year, eking out a winning season with six wins and five losses.

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte also recently increased student fees to create a football team, which began competing in the Conference USA league in 2015. During that season, the team won just two of its 12 games.

Georgia State University’s football program has also had a rocky start. The team played its first season in 2010 after the university secured \$1 million in pledged donations. The university built a \$9 million practice complex and a \$1 million strength and conditioning addition. In 2013, the university announced that the program would move up from the FCS to the FBS. Last year, Georgia State announced it was building a \$300 million football stadium to house the team.

After five seasons of play, the program currently has the lowest winning percentage of any team in the Football Bowl Subdivision.

“There’s this idea, primarily coming from alumni and boosters, that you can put enough money into a team and turn it into a powerhouse success story,” Andrew Zimbalist, a professor of economics at Smith College, said. “But that becomes more and more unrealistic with each passing year. It’s a fool’s errand, but people are crazy about football, so they keep trying.”

The trend, Zimbalist said, is predominantly located in the southern United States, where the “culture is very football dominant.” Indeed, many of the youngest Division I teams are located in the football-friendly South: Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas. Of course that also means that they are in states with powerhouse teams that have decades of loyal season ticket holders and donors who may have little interest in the new kid on the block.

Charlie Cobb, Georgia State’s athletic director, said the university’s location in Atlanta not only informed the decision to create the team but also the program’s hasty move to the FBS level. “If you’re going to be playing football in Atlanta, you need to compete at the highest level,” Cobb said. “When the opportunity came, it was a no-brainer.”

In its first season as an FBS team, Georgia State won zero games. The following year, it won one. Last season, the team won six of its 13 games and competed in the AutoNation CureBowl. It was the first season that the program had 85 scholarship players. Despite the improved record, average attendance plummeted from the previous season’s 15,000 to 10,000.

Even so, Cobb said the team has helped raise the university’s profile, acting as the institution’s

"front door," a sentiment shared by many college officials who believe in the importance of Division I football.

"It's a struggle at times, but it's been absolutely worth it so far," Cobb said. "Everybody wants their team to win, but we understand that it's a process. You're going from not even having a uniform and helmet decal to recruiting players and building a practice facility. We were truly starting from scratch. After the way we finished last year, I think we're right where we should be from a competitive standpoint."

Georgia State is not the only nascent program to so quickly make the leap to the Football Bowl Subdivision and to struggle playing at the more competitive level.

The University of South Alabama played its first football game in 2009. The team went undefeated in its first two seasons. At the time, the team was playing a mix of FBS, FCS and Division II teams. In 2012, the team joined the Football Bowl Subdivision, playing a full Division I conference schedule for the first time. That season, South Alabama lost 11 of its 13 games.

"It's almost impossible to make this leap," Zimbalist said. "It's not rational to think otherwise. But if rationality was all that was at play here, this would have stopped a long time ago."

'Emotion Takes Control'

Wichita State decided to drop its football team in 1986, after nearly 90 years of playing the sport. The financially strained program had suffered 18 losing seasons in the previous 20 years.

"We weren't winning and we were losing a lot of money," Martin Perline, an economics professor at Wichita State, said. "That's a bad combination."

Perline was a faculty athletics representative from 1975 to 2013 -- witnessing the death of the football program, as well as the many attempts to revive it. The first try came a year after the team was discontinued. Then came other attempts in 1991 and 1992. The university commissioned feasibility reports again in 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998 and 2007.

Perline said he's not sure how many of those reports were intended to actually help bring football back. He said he suspects that many of the reports were written in an attempt to prove to "a small coterie of people who would like to have football" that the sport really is too expensive to revive. When asked who might be a part of the coterie -- members of the Board of Trustees, wealthy donors, vocal alumni -- Perline said, "all of the above."

Nagel, who was once a sports management professor at Georgia State and was against the idea of starting a football team, said the pressure to have football often comes from a university's Board of Trustees. (Cobb, Georgia State's athletic director, denies that university officials were pressured by anyone in particular to create the team.)

"The board's job is to strive for excellence, and unfortunately, there's a perception that if you don't have football, then you're not a big-league university," Nagel said. "That permeates down to administrators, faculty and staff: if you don't have a football team, then you're somehow not a real campus and you are not on par with other schools. That emotion takes control."

Last year, Ray Watts, the president of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, experienced that emotion firsthand.

In 2014, UAB became the first institution in nearly 20 years to announce plans to shut down its big-time Division I football program [3]. Citing rising costs and the growing stratification [4] of college sports, Watts said killing the program would help save Birmingham \$50 million over the next

decade. The announcement, however, created an intense backlash on campus, eventually resulting in a reversal of the decision [5].

When Watts decided to discontinue the football team, the program was struggling both on the field and financially. For most of the previous five years, the average attendance at UAB home games was just above 15,000, the minimum required by the NCAA to remain in the FBS. The university was already spending \$20 million to subsidize its \$30 million athletic department. About \$5 million of those subsidies [6] were student fees, and about \$15 million were general institutional funds.

The university hired CarrSports Consulting to analyze how much it would cost to make the football team competitive. The price tag to improve program, the firm concluded, was \$49 million. That included \$27 million for operations -- football personnel, equipment, technology and new expenses, like providing athletes with more meals and covering the full cost of attendance -- over the next five years and \$22 million for new buildings, including new practice facilities and an administrative building.

The university decided to cut the program. The team's boosters immediately decried the plan and pressured the university to commission another report that would hopefully discredit the earlier analysis. When the firm's work was canceled over conflict of interest concerns, the boosters dug into their own pockets and paid for the researchers to finish the report.

That report and a third study commissioned by the university stated bringing football back was "a viable option," though the funding is technically still not there. The university is counting on students, alumni, the city of Birmingham and other supporters to not only start showing up for the games, but also to come up with the \$17.2 million the university said the program still needs to remain competitive -- an amount the donors have pledged to provide.

In 2014, the year the university decided to cut the team, the athletic department only received \$2 million in private donations.

It will not be easy resuscitating a program that was dead for six months. Most players left the university to play elsewhere, as did members of the coaching staff. If Wichita State decides to revive its team, the process will be even more challenging. There's little difference between bringing back a team that's been gone for 30 years and creating one from scratch.

"If you have had a team for 100 years, and you have invested in it before the sport was this expensive, it often makes sense to keep it," Nagel said. "But starting one from nothing and hoping to get to the echelon of college football now, it's probably too late."

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Links:

[1] https://twitter.com/President_Bardo/status/694932766874415104

[2] http://webs.wichita.edu/depttools/depttoolsmemberfiles/wsunews/ws_u_football_report_css_2016.pdf

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/12/03/u-alabama-birmingham-sacks-its-football-team-citing-costs>

[4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/08/05/growing-stratification-ncaa-conferences-concerns-less-wealthy-division-i-colleges>

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/06/04/u-alabama-birmingham-learns-how-difficult-it-sack-college-football>

[6] <http://sports.usatoday.com/ncaa/finances/>

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