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Old Dominion debates getting into the football game

By JIM DUCIBELLA, The Virginian-Pilot

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WHY FOOTBALL?

- Many alumni have been pushing to add football for years.
- Students are offering strong interest.
- Football would give the campus something big to rally around in the fall.
- ODU's athletic conference is starting football in 2007.
- Many believe the financial backing will be there.
- It fits with other campus-related improvements that are planned.

WHY NOT?

Few things depress Sonny Stallings more than his fall visits to Charlottesville, Blacksburg or Williamsburg. Talking with alumni of the colleges located there causes his mood to drop like a crisp, crimson leaf.

"Invariably, the conversation turns to football," said Stallings, a 1972 Old Dominion University graduate now on the school's Board of Visitors. "People talk about what Tech and Virginia did. Then someone will ask: 'Where did you go to school?'"

Here it comes, Stallings thinks.

"Old Dominion," he replies before enduring what one might call "the sympathy pause."

"It's like they're thinking: 'Poor thing, you've never really enjoyed a Saturday afternoon, have you?'"

Stallings, a Virginia Beach lawyer and former state senator, long has envisioned the day when alums and students would settle into their seats for a noon kickoff as the marching band struts across Foreman Field. The packed stadium would cheer the Monarchs to victory, and friends would rehash pivotal plays over post-game beers.

"Sure, there's a jealousy factor," Stallings conceded. "In this area, you've got William and Mary, Tech and Virginia; everyone's got their teams, their games. But there's a real pride in a lot of people here that's just waiting to come out.

"I believe you're going to see football at ODU in the next three years."

For the first time in 26 years, there are signs that Stallings could be right. ODU

- It's too expensive.
- Other sports programs might suffer.
- Complying with Title IX will be difficult.
- Fans might only support it if the team won a lot.
- Money could be spent on men's and women's basketball instead.
- The region already has several I-AA football teams.

Discussion: [Should ODU start a football program?](#)

Who's on the ODU Board of Visitors

Old Dominion's Board of Visitors is made up of 17 business and community leaders, each appointed to four -year, renewable terms by the governor. They control and expend the funds of the university and any appropriation made to it. They also make all rules and regulations concerning the university and appoint the president. At least three members must be ODU alumni.

James A. Hixon, Rector (appointed in 2002): Senior vice president of legal and government affairs for Norfolk Southern Corporation. He is a graduate of Virginia Tech and William and Mary law school.

Ross A. Mugler, Vice Rector (2002): Commissioner of the Revenue for the City of Hampton. ODU graduate .

Patricia M. Woolsey (1999): President of Woolsey Consulting. Has served on the Board of Directors of the Fairfax Chamber of Commerce and as a Board and Executive Committee member of the Virginia Chamber of Commerce.

Katherine A. Treherne (2003): Dermatologist in Norfolk and Hampton. Medical degree from the Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn.

Conrad M. Hall (2003): President and CEO of Trader Publishing. VMI graduate (engineering), with an MBA from U.Va.

Scott D. Pattison (2001) : Executive director of the National Association of State Budget Officers in Washington . George Washington University graduate with a law degree from U.Va.

Kendra M. Croshaw (2002) : Director of government relations and public policy/corporate affairs for Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters Health Systems. ODU graduate (business administration).

Frank Batten Jr. (2002): Chairman of Landmark Communications, the parent company of The Virginian-Pilot . Dartmouth graduate (history), with an MBA from U.Va.

leaders are deep into a serious study of adding I-AA football, the second-highest tier in the NCAA. President Roseann Runte has been asked to provide a report on starting football to the Board of Visitors in June, after which a decision will be made.

Runte said the decision "could go either way. I don't want to pre judge."

The school's latest foray was prompted in part by reaction to a recent poll by the Alumni Association that drew 6,700 responses from alumni, students, faculty and the public. Though the poll was not scientific, the numbers were overwhelmingly one-sided. More than 90 percent encouraged ODU to add a team.

"I have no reservations about ODU football," said Clay Ransone, a 2001 ODU graduate and season-ticket holder for men's and women's basketball. "It completes a college campus and gives students, alumni and the local community something to rally around. I would love to see it and love to see it happen now."

While impressed with the intensity of the poll response, Runte maintains that she will stay neutral about football until all the research is in and has been evaluated. That research includes devising what combination of endowments and annual giving would be needed to keep the program solid financially, whether rights could be sold to rename Foreman Field, how much student fees would be raised, when a coach should be hired – and hundreds of other related questions and issues.

"If it sounds like a complicated process," said Bob Fenning, ODU vice president for administration and finance, "that's because it is a complicated process."

Four percent of survey respondents said they don't support ODU football. They say the university's initial start up estimate of \$30 million, although only a ballpark figure that ODU is in the process of revising, makes this a folly.

"If you ask a group of students how many are interested in football, hands go up," said Dana Burnett, ODU's vice president for student affairs and dean of students. "Then ask if they're willing to pay an additional \$100, \$200 or \$300 per year in student fees to help fund it. A lot fewer hands go up."

Doug Jewel, president of the Intercollegiate Foundation, a group that raises money for ODU athletics, calls the possibility of adding football "a disaster – and I'm a huge football fan."

If ODU were to start an athletic fund raising campaign, Jewel says, it should put the money where it would reap the maximum return: men's and women's basketball.

Seventy-five years ago, when ODU began as a modest two-year school known as the Norfolk Division of The College of William and Mary, no one questioned the value of football. The school's founders considered it essential.

From 1930-40, ODU played 100 games under coach Tommy Scott. With his team competing primarily against other two-year schools, Scott posted a record that was estimated in a 1940 edition of The Virginian-Pilot to have been 68-27-5.

But the last two years were miserable. The team lost 11 games, including all six in a final season in which it did not score. Attendance dropped. Debt grew.

On Nov. 19, 1940, three days after a 25-0 loss to Bluefield College , Scott resigned for health reasons, and ODU ended its program.

The school flirted with resurrecting football from 1985-89. But two fund raising campaigns and a season-ticket push fell short of hopes, and the Board of Visitors abandoned the project.

"ODU doesn't have football; there must be a reason," Runte said. "We tried in the past, and it didn't succeed. We need to find out what's different now."

High start up costs are one reason the NCAA says that it's been seven years since a school without football began a program at the I-AA level. That doesn't mean there haven't been attempts.

The University of Texas at Arlington went through a football-evaluation process last year after students overwhelmingly voted a \$2-per-credit-hour increase contingent on

the revival of a I-AA program disbanded 20 years ago.

Robert O. Copeland (2004): Managing director of RST Development. He owns, operates and manages more than 1.5 million square feet of retail, warehouse and industrial space and apartment units in the mid-Atlantic region.

David W. Faeder (2003): Managing partner of Fountain Square Properties LLC, a diversified real estate company. He is vice chairman of Sunrise Senior Living Inc. ODU graduate (business administration), with an MBA from U.Va.

Harold W. Gehman Jr. (2004): Admiral who completed more than 35 years of active duty in the Navy in 2000. His last assignment was as NATO's supreme allied commander, Atlantic, and as the commander in chief of the U.S. Joint Forces Command. Penn State grad (science).

Mary C. Henninger Haddad (1997): President of the Haddad Foundation for Children. She serves on the advisory board of the Hampton Roads Youth Center and is an ODU graduate.

Marc Jacobson (2004): Retired on Feb. 1, 2004, as judge of the Norfolk Circuit Court. University of Michigan graduate, with a law degree from U.Va. The Welcome Center in the Ted Constant Convocation Center is named in honor of Jacobson and his wife.

William E. Russell (1997): Deputy superintendent of Chesapeake Schools. Norfolk State graduate with a master's and doctorate in education from Temple. Pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Suffolk since 1992.

Sonny Stallings (2002): Lawyer and partner in the Virginia Beach law firm of Stallings & Bischoff. Served four years (1987-91) in the Virginia State Senate. Graduate of ODU (political science), with a law degree from the University of Richmond.

Mark E. Strome (2004): Founder and president of Registered Investment Advisor, Strome Investment Management L.P. ODU graduate (engineering), with a master's in economics from the University of California at Berkeley. In 1998, he was awarded an honorary doctor of science degree from ODU.

Pat Tsao (2004): Founder, president and CEO of INTECS International Inc., a leading information technology firm headquartered in Alexandria. Tsao received her master's degree in computer science from ODU.

SOURCE: www.odu.edu

Sports consultant Chuck Neinas analyzed the costs. In a report filed last September, using 2004 dollars and including construction of a 44,000-square foot building used primarily for football, Neinas put the total cost at \$15.1 million. UT-A postponed making a decision.

ODU's start up costs could be higher. Given the existing facilities, school officials would likely determine that they need a new football-related building, too. And, unlike UT-A, which already had an adequate stadium in which to play, ODU would need to renovate the 69-year-old Foreman Field.

As for annual costs, documents that most colleges file with the Department of Education lend insight into I-AA football. Based on information that eight mid-Atlantic universities submitted for the 2003 season – the most recent available – the average cost is \$2.47 million. The same schools reported average revenue of \$2.38 million.

“Even if it is \$30 million” to get started, “I believe the university has matured and could handle it,” said Scotty Ward, a former ODU rugby coach who in the 1980s was vice president of Citizens for ODU Football. “I don't think raising that money would hurt any programs, and it would be very popular.”

However, Preston DiSilvestro, a season-ticket holder for men's and women's basketball, questions the general intensity of fan interest.

“Most ODU fans have shown their colors,” he wrote. “They will support the team when it is winning, but won't support it when it is losing. If the first three years of football were losing or we did not win at all, it would put ODU in a tough position.”

Boosters contend that, win or lose, ODU football would give the school a well-rounded athletic program, one that would bring in more support for all of its sports. It also would satisfy a desire expressed by ODU's 94,000 alumni, many of them well established enough in business to help pay for football if they choose to.

“Overwhelmingly, the feedback I get from alumni is that they'd love to have football,” said Gordon A. McDougall, president of the school's alumni association. “It's part of the whole college experience. It would be great for the university as far as exposure. It would be a great vehicle for the alumni association to stage some of its programs.”

McDougall points to what happened at normally staid William and Mary last year in the week leading up to the Tribe's nationally televised home playoff game against eventual I-AA champion James Madison. Students enthusiastically painted statues – and themselves – green and gold in what evolved into a week-long pep rally.

“There's nothing like the kind of celebration college football provides,” he said.

ODU is engaged in a campus renaissance unlike ever before, and advocates for football say adding the sport would only stoke the momentum. Athletic projects include a nine-hole golf course opening this summer off Powhatan Avenue, a major conversion of the field house into a student recreation center, construction of new wrestling offices, an indoor tennis “bubble,” a batting cage and expanded facilities for academic aid for athletes.

Throughout the rest of campus, projects include new dorms and parking garages, the addition of a grocery chain and a brand-name hotel to the University Village. All could be completed in the next 24 months.

The dorms could become a vital plank in the pro-football platform. ODU, traditionally a commuter school, has set a short-term goal of housing 6,000 students on campus. Football would provide those students with an important fall activity.

“I've been here 33 years,” Burnett said, “and I've never seen the student body so ready to participate.”

When ODU played Michigan State in the NCAA men's basketball tournament in March, students organized a party at Webb Center to watch the game on television. Burnett said the place was jammed, a first in his experience.

“There's no doubt that there's a void here in the fall,” he added, “a void the students have tried hard to fill.”

Last fall, the ODU Student Government Association issued a unanimous resolution calling for a “future football team to

perform at NCAA standards." The resolution came after student-body president Brandon Boyles had made football a central element of his campaign.

Following the election, Boyles continued to discuss football with fellow students and conducted a forum on the impact a program might have on future applicants.

"I asked, 'Is Virginia Tech a more popular place than ODU because it has football?'" said Boyles, a senior from Bristow. "Would you be more prone to go to Virginia Tech for that reason alone?" One hundred percent of the students answered yes. I was amazed.

"To me, football is about spirit and forming an identity."

The formation of a Colonial Athletic Association football conference in 2007 is another positive change to the landscape. Athletic Director Jim Jarrett recalls that the last time ODU contemplated football, "we were all over the place, from Siena to Dayton" piecing together a sample schedule.

This time, ODU would have a built-in slate that would include William and Mary, James Madison, Delaware, Towson University, Northeastern and Hofstra. All are CAA members competing against ODU in other sports. Richmond and Maine will join the CAA for football only.

ODU also could use games against non members Norfolk State and Hampton University to create strong local rivalries.

Scheduling, Runte agreed, "is one impediment that doesn't exist."

With CAA football, travel costs could be more easily kept in check, too, because ODU would bus to many of its road games.

The school's location also could rein in recruiting expenses. Hampton Roads has long been recognized as a hotbed for high school football. Dozens of high school players leave the Southside and Peninsula each year to play for the region's I-A and I-AA programs.

"It's an investment," said Boyles, the student-body president. "There are so many football players in Hampton Roads, some of whom are NFL-caliber. They now go to other colleges. I'm sure some of them would like to stay home. This would give them that opportunity."

The CAA affiliation also would allow ODU to compete against colleges with academic philosophies in keeping with its own. There would be little need to admit students whose scholastic qualifications didn't mirror those of the student body.

"I admire the emphasis coaches at ODU place on academics," said Jill C. Jurgens, an associate professor and member of the Faculty Senate. "Players go to class, become involved in the community and graduate. Academics and athletics blend so well together here."

Even those opposed to ODU starting football concede that the idea has merit. But some don't like the timing; they feel ODU alumni need more time to grow in number and wealth. Some feel that if ODU wants to get into football, it should compete at the highest level, I-A, and play against the likes of Virginia and Virginia Tech. They say the area in and around Hampton Roads already has three I-AA teams, so adding a fourth would have little value.

All sides wonder how ODU would remain in compliance with Title IX of the Education Act of 1972. That law requires that colleges adhere to certain standards regarding proportional athletic opportunities for men and women.

If ODU were to add 63 football scholarships to its men's athletic ledger, it must, over time, provide a like amount of money for its women's programs.

To reach compliance under Title IX, some schools across the nation have cut or eliminated men's teams. Most of the 30 people interviewed for this story said they are opposed to ODU adding football then lopping other programs to comply with Title IX.

"It would be a disgrace to the university if scholarship students were told that their sports were being cut and their scholarships taken away," wrote ODU season-ticket holder Gary Welch.

That's almost certain not to happen, said Jarrett, the athletic director. ODU fields eight men's and eight women's teams, only one more than the minimum required for NCAA Division I members.

"There's not a lot of flexibility in our situation," he said. "We'll mostly be adding. Anyone who just assumes that we'll drop programs is wrong."

Many fear that I-AA football will become a financial drain on students. But at this point, it isn't clear what effect football would have on fees. According to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, ODU undergraduates paid \$640.93 in athletic fees this year.

That was less than undergrads paid at Norfolk State, Virginia Military, Longwood, William and Mary, Christopher Newport, JMU and U.Va.-Wise. It was more than it cost at Virginia, Virginia Tech, George Mason, Virginia Commonwealth, Radford and Virginia State.

Certainly, I-AA programs don't make the kind of money some big-time schools make. Notre Dame made \$27 million in 2003, the same year Virginia Tech had an \$11 million profit.

But neither is I-AA automatically a huge fiscal burden. Southeastern Louisiana, which resurrected football in 2003 after an 18-year absence, made \$250,000 in its initial season. Of the CAA's seven current football-playing members, three showed a profit in 2003.

"Look, we can find a million reasons why football won't work," Stallings said.

"I believe that we can get the money," he added. "There's been an attitude change at the top, from 'We can't do this' to 'Why can't we do this?' And we haven't had anyone give us a boatload of money."

Besides, some football boosters argue, if the sole purpose of college sports was to make money, there would be no CAA sports at all. In men's basketball, the league's dominant revenue-producing sport, only two of 10 schools reported a profit for 2003.

Lastly, there's the question of priorities. After watching the men win the 2005 CAA basketball crown with a school-record 28 victories and the women capture a 14th consecutive CAA title, Jewel and others believe ODU's basketball teams could regularly compete with the nation's best if they had more money.

"I once thought ODU football would be the best thing since peanut butter, but I just don't see it" anymore, said Jewel, who together with his wife recently committed to endow a men's basketball scholarship. "For a fraction of the cost, we can boost our men's and women's basketball programs. ... I'd rather see the money for that. I know that's not what they want to hear."

But it is part of the conversation that's been started.

"There's no model for this," Fenning said. "We'll either be successful or we won't. Either way, there will be lots of Monday-morning quarterbacking."

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