

Baptist schools returning to gridiron

by [Norman Jameson](#)

April 29, 2011

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- Money and men are the two main reasons several Baptist colleges are bringing football back to campus.

Presidents of Baptist schools like Mercer, Oklahoma Baptist, Bluefield, Stetson and Campbell believe merging pigskins with sheepskins will create enough magnetism to draw more men to their schools where enrollments often tip toward 60 percent female. They also believe the crowds, media attention and energy attributed to football will improve enrollment, increase retention and add vibrancy to campus.

And, because none of the Baptist schools are going to play in the highest profile and costliest division of college football -- the NCAA Division I BCS or Bowl Championship Series -- they believe income from football will exceed expenses.

The Baptist schools will play in limited scholarship or non-scholarship divisions. So, unlike 317 of the 347 universities in NCAA Division 1 whose athletic programs lost money last year, these schools intend to end up in the black.

They all believe high school men not yet ready to give up the competition and camaraderie of what is steadily becoming America's favorite pastime will pay to play the sport in college.

It worked for Shenandoah University in Winchester, Va., which started football 11 years ago. "Absolutely. There's no way it couldn't work," said Shenandoah Athletic Director Wayne Edwards, a graduate of Wake Forest University. "Faculty that protested the decision at the time just didn't understand it."

"The football program has contributed greatly to the growth of this institution, in terms of enrollment, tuition and awareness," Edwards said.

Despite the cache of campus T-shirts that say things like: "OBU Football: Undefeated since 1940," a growing impulse on campuses yearns to risk those records to bring

back a reason to hang around campus for the weekend.

Campbell's program three years old

Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C., has three years' experience in the football trial. It won seven games in those three years -- losing four times this year on the last play of the game -- and winning eventually is important to university leadership.

President Jerry Wallace, who won a football scholarship himself to East Carolina University, has said it's hard to have a proper homecoming without a football game.

Dennis Bazemore, Campbell's vice president for student life and interim athletics director, said renewing the Campbell football tradition already has accomplished many of the goals, including offering five to six weekends of "great campus life experience that we did not have prior to football."

Six thousand people attended the inaugural contest and games typically draw 2,500-3,000 to the rural campus. Campbell plays football in the Pioneer Football League and is rejoining the Big South Conference for its other major sports. Stetson University and Mercer are petitioning the Pioneer League to join Campbell.

The Pioneer League is one of three leagues in NCAA Division 1 that are non-scholarship, the others being the Ivy and Patriot leagues. Athletes are eligible for whatever academic or need-based scholarships are available to other students, but no "talent" scholarships for football are offered.

Bazemore estimated it would cost \$6-8 million to start a program from scratch, as Campbell did, depending on available facilities. OBU, which won national NAIA championships this year in basketball and in women's indoor track, and is a perennial national contender in track, is placing its football field inside the track.

Current onsite facilities are limiting startup expenses to about \$1.5 million. An alumnus from the 1940 team contributed a million dollars that will be used toward those costs.

Concerns about academic standards

Oklahoma Baptist's previous president considered bringing football back to what was once a regional powerhouse, but backed off in the face of tepid support. New President David Whitlock revisited the issue and held open forums for all

constituents, some of whom voiced reservations about academic standards and potential discipline issues.

Marty O'Quinn, OBU associate vice president for university communications, said even those who opposed bringing football back felt their concerns were given appropriate hearing.

While there was a "significant backlash" during the exploration stage from faculty who feared adding a football program would lower OBU's academic standards and put the school's financial future at risk, Edwards from Shenandoah said such fears are unfounded.

"Student athletes are going to conduct themselves in the way athletic administration insists they conduct themselves," Edwards said. "It all comes down to what you tell the kids and stick to it."

Some Bluefield College trustees voiced concerns that the character of the campus would change, that it would shift away from "a Christian based college with shared values."

Change for the better

President David Olive said his friend, Campbellsville President Mike Carter, addressed the issue eloquently when he told Bluefield trustees their campus would change, but "if you do it the right way, it's going to change for the better. You're going have another opportunity to impact students for Christ that you wouldn't have had otherwise."

Bluefield is bringing back football after a 70-year hiatus to drive enrollment and to help fund the athletics budget. With an enrollment of under 750 the influx of 60-90 young men new coach Mike Gravier says will come is "huge for a school the size of Bluefield College," Olive said.

Bluefield will compete in the NAIA, (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) an association of 300 smaller schools, as does OBU. Athletic scholarships are limited, so football "won't be a drain on the financial budget," Olive said.

Although these young men are getting partial scholarships, they're also bringing resources with them, he said. Olive anticipates football adding \$300,000 net to the annual athletic budget.

The 2011 season will be scrimmages and exhibitions only and Mid-South Conference play will begin in 2012. Baptist schools Georgetown, Campbellsville and Shorter are current conference members.

The day Olive was elected president at Bluefield, his trustees adopted a task force report calling for football's return as soon as necessary funds were raised. The process gained speed when a local high school closed and Bluefield was offered use of the facility -- including athletic fields -- rent free for five years.

Attracting male students

OBU's O'Guinn said recruiters frequently heard that if OBU had football, a son, or nephew or "two great guys in our church would beat your door down to come to OBU."

Campbell's Bazemore concurs, saying, "Yes. We are getting young men at Campbell who otherwise would not have come."

Younger alums are more "revved up with football" than are older alumni, O'Guinn said. Larry Brumley, chief of staff at Mercer University, said there is an element of skepticism in various constituencies, but he is convinced from research that adding football will attract students, retain students, generate alumni spirit and contribute to stronger communications with students and more university visibility.

OBU's board chair said adding football gives OBU a chance to have an impact on the lives of students who would not go to OBU otherwise.

OBU is adding men's and women's swimming and women's lacrosse at the same time it is adding football, which is tentatively set to begin in 2013.

"Athletics play a great role on our campus. They add to our sense of community, provide a rallying point for students and alumni, and offer a point of connection for the local community. Our history of athletic success has contributed to the overall success of our mission in Christian higher education," Whitlock said in a university publication.

Administrators foresee revenue stream

OBU Athletic Director Norris Russell estimated in the same story that the new sports will add more than 170 student-athletes and generate more than \$750,000 in net revenue. While OBU is a member of the Sooner Athletic Conference, OBU will apply

for membership in the Central States Football League, of which Wayland Baptist in Texas also is a member.

By bringing back football in 2013 Brumley said Mercer -- which had football until 1941 -- offers young men a chance to stay in Georgia and play football.

Groundbreaking for a new stadium and field house will begin in the fall. Initial size depends on fund raising.

He said because the program will be non-scholarship, it will generate revenue once start-up costs are covered.

A city commitment to improve the local stadium provided Stetson University the final piece it needed to reinstate football in DeLand, Fla., starting with a "practice year" in 2012. A full Pioneer League schedule will begin in 2013.

In announcing the return of football Stetson President Wendy Libby said the goal was to "improve enrollment, increase retention and make this a more vibrant campus."

DeLand Mayor Robert Apgar said the return of football to Stetson would have a positive economic impact on the entire community and he looked forward to fall Saturdays "when visitors and residents are spending money in downtown DeLand."

Several Baptist schools already compete in the NCAA Division 1 Championship Series, which is a full scholarship league, such as Gardner-Webb University and Carson-Newman College. Baylor University in Texas competes in the top echelon of collegiate football, the Big 12 Conference, with the likes of Texas and Oklahoma.