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woody paige

## Paige: CU boosters formulating funding plan

**Group eyes \$50 million for football but wants a say in athletic department moves**

**By Woody Paige**  
*The Denver Post*

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Led by a former student "android" who sold soda at CU games, a bunch of multimillionaire Buffs boosters have designed a stealth-style fundraising campaign, the most ambitious ever for the school's athletic department, to make the Colorado football team nationally relevant again.

The goal is \$50 million donated by 50 Buffaloes backers (\$1 million each) — in an attempt to level the playing field against other conference schools, improve the athletic facilities and enable CU to attract top-quality coaches in the future.

In return for its huge investment, the group of Colorado alums/supporters would seek an active advisory role in athletic department decisions.

After talking with four Buffs boosters who are willing to contribute the big bucks, but requested anonymity, I told Colorado athletic director Mike Bohn what I knew, and he acknowledged that the \$50 million proposal is a "positive vision" and "viable" and a "good model." But he cautioned that the idea "is in its infancy," and there haven't been official meetings between CU administrators and boosters.

CU's football team has fallen on hard times financially, and fallen hard on the field. The program bleeds red ink, and the team has won only 16 of 49 games (and 10 of 32 in the Big 12) in the past four years, and hasn't won a conference championship and played in a major bowl since the 2001 season.

Colorado doesn't have the resources to be a national-tier Football Bowl Subdivision team annually, but it has won conference championships and co-shared the national title in 1990. Under Bill McCartney and, earlier, Eddie Crowder, the Buffs became consistent winners.

The architect of the \$50 million Buff Booster Brigade is George Solich, a former Eisenhower-Evans Scholarship honoree (1983) and a CU graduate with a business degree and a master's.

While in college in Boulder, Solich served as an "android," a term for students who sold soda and beer at the basketball arena.

Solich became a prosperous oil-and-natural gas explorer, corporate executive and president of

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the Greenwood Village-based Cordillera Energy Partners. He is a low-profile guy, but is a high-end Buffs booster. (I met Solich at the CU-Texas game in Austin last season, but, on Saturday, he declined an interview, saying it's premature to discuss the fundraising plan.)

According to others, Solich has initiated discussions with a number of well-known, well-heeled Colorado boosters, asking for \$1 million, and the response has been encouraging.

Solich, whose passion is golf, belongs to Castle Pines Golf Club and is friends with Jack Vickers, the oilman-Castle Pines owner who was CU's foremost financial sponsor for many years — and personally was responsible for bringing in ex-football coach Chuck Fairbanks, an experiment that exploded. Vickers hasn't been involved with the athletic department for years, and there's no Buffs sugar booster with his clout since. But Vickers has mentored Solich on matters of raising the ante at CU.

T. Boone Pickens donated more than \$170 million to upgrade the Oklahoma State program. Football benefactors at major universities include Nike's Phil Knight, who has given Oregon as much as \$70 million, and Bill Laurie, Stan Kroenke's billionaire brother-in-law, who has provided Missouri with at least \$30 million.

But the richest football program in the country resides in Austin, where the Longhorns are buttressed by The Billionaire Boys Club, Texans who wear big hats and own cattle.

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Texas athletic director DeLoss Dodds has said a university football program is "better off having a bunch" (of wealthy contributors) because a solo, powerful booster will "try to run" the program.

The late Robert Six, who ran Continental Airlines, once had a similar role with CU (in the Crowder era), regularly presenting significant funds to the department and providing offseason jobs for the players.

Bohn did say that the "loyalty of the \$1,000 donor, the season-ticket holder, the students and the alumni who care about this program is just as important as anything else we try to do."

But CU has been damaged by the weak economy, plus a leaking of revenue and support because of the lack of progress by — and the controversy surrounding — CU football coach Dan Hawkins, who was retained at season's end.

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The Solich proposition, when publicized, will receive a mixed bag of reactions in the Republic of Boulder and, specifically, on campus. Many in the CU academic community will question a \$50 million fundraising plan for athletics and not the science or business schools. But there has been a strong fundraising effort by new CU president Bruce Benson, and the results can be seen in construction additions at the state-supported university and in monies being delivered to nonsports departments.

The opinions of Benson and CU-Boulder chancellor Phil DiStefano will be critical as the plan moves forward. DiStefano formerly was CU's faculty athletics representative (2000-05), and Benson is a pragmatic CU football fan. But they may be reluctant to sign off on a deal that could allow outside influences on the direction of the athletic department.

If Buffs boosters can step up, Colorado can't take a step back.

All aboard the \$50 mil train, CU.

Woody Paige: 303-954-1095 or  
[wp Paige@denverpost.com](mailto:wp Paige@denverpost.com)

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