

# Woelk: Fundraising effort could change face of CU athletics

By Neill Woelk Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 01/25/2010 11:49:57 PM MST

## The Millionaire Buff Club?

As crazy as it sounds, it might just happen.

If some heretofore uninterested -- or uninspired -- Colorado Buffalo fans follow through with their plans, the CU athletic department may yet someday be in position to hop off the porch and resume running with the big dogs.

Over the weekend, the Denver Post reported that Denver energy magnate (and CU grad) George Solich is spearheading a group that aims to raise \$50 million from 50 people.

If such a plan indeed comes to fruition -- and given Solich's background, I wouldn't want to bet against him -- it could be the beginning of a new era of CU athletics.

As it stands now, the Buffs are in no position to compete with the elite of the Big 12. It's a simple economic fact. CU fans want to blame myriad other issues for the athletic department's decline this decade, but more than anything, money is at the heart of the problem.

If you didn't see Forbes Magazine's recent article on the most valuable programs in college football, it's worth checking out. Right there at the top of the list is Texas, which last year -- according to Forbes' formula -- generated \$82 million in revenue and a profit of \$59 million.

In comparison, according to figures last year provided to the Dept. of Education, Colorado's football team generated roughly \$27 million in total revenue. The profits were a fraction of that.

Also on the Forbes list were Big 12 members Nebraska (No. 4), Oklahoma (No. 10), Texas A&M (No. 18) and Oklahoma State (No. 20). And yes, if you want to draw a correlation, it's easy: of the five programs listed in Forbes' top 20, four of them finished in the nation's top 25 or were receiving votes in the final rankings.

According to the magazine, "Of the \$82 million generated by the (Texas) team last season, \$30 million came from donations by alumni and fans to get in line for season tickets. Another \$33 million came from ticket sales to seven home games at the newly expanded Darrell K. Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium, which now fits 101,000 fans."

And that's just for football. That doesn't include other donations to the UT athletic department's general fund.

CU can't even dream of those numbers. But a one-time \$50 million shot in the arm would go a long way in helping CU close the gap on its Division I brethren. Such a boost would give Colorado the chance to improve facilities (new basketball and volleyball practice arena; indoor football and general athletics facility) as well as provide a significant increase in salaries for coaches and administrative personnel.

Of course, such a club of donors would no doubt have its detractors -- particularly in Boulder, a city that has never embraced major college athletics with the same fervor as many other locales.

I can hear them now: "But what about the Sociology Dept.? What about music? What about (fill in the blank)? Why can't that money go to a general fund and be divided up equally?"

The reason is called "reality."

Simple fact: When people choose to support an athletic department, they are doing it for a very specific reason. Denying them the chance to support athletics won't cause them to turn around and donate that money elsewhere within the university.

In other words, the athletic department's loss wouldn't be the music department's gain. Force big donors to give to a general fund, and most will simply walk away. If they're going to invest, they want to know exactly what they're investing in.

And if they like point guards better than piano players ... well, that's their choice.

What will be most interesting is to see how CU president Bruce Benson reacts to the news.

Benson is not a sports fan. When he took the job as CU's president, some folks who know him said he had no idea how passionate people could be about college athletics -- and he was also evidently unaware that people with lots and lots of money also occasionally shared that passion.

It's a safe bet that he is well aware of that fact today. The furor that arose when CU decided to retain football coach Dan Hawkins reached all the way to his office, and he has spent more time than he'd like answering questions from donors, fans and the media as to exactly what role he played in the decision.

But while he might not be a sports fan, Benson is indeed a businessman -- and a major part of his business today as CU's president is in the art of fundraising. As legislative support for higher education in Colorado continues to dwindle, the task of keeping a university afloat becomes more and more difficult.

Thus, it's hard to imagine someone with Benson's business acumen saying "no" to as much as \$50 million -- even if it's not going to the university's general fund. At the very least, it would mean that a department that's been tap-dancing with financial solvency for the last decade would now at least have firm financial footing and then some for years to come.

Simply, it would mean one less potential headache for Benson down the road.

There are, of course, some dangers with such a fundraising effort -- the same dangers that exist at other major players in Division I sports. When you agree to engage in the college athletics arms race, you are also agreeing to the influence of college sports' version of the Golden Rule: "Them that give the gold want to make the rules."

Don't think that's true? Guaranteed, Texas athletic director DeLoss Dodds doesn't make too many major decisions without at least consulting a number of the program's major donors.

I promise that Oklahoma State A.D. Mike Holder makes sure Boone Pickens (who has given OSU more than \$200 million) is in the decision-making loop.

And you'd be crazy to think that Oregon A.D. Mike Bellotti doesn't consult regularly with Nike chairman Phil Knight.

The process would likely be the same at CU if the fundraising group comes to fruition. In return for their money, the group would have an "advisory board" that would have direct input into CU's major decisions.

Certainly, that's enough to give any athletic director -- or chancellor or president -- pause.

But if you're going to compete in today's world, if you're going to engage in the arms race that is college sports, that's the price of competition.

My guess is that Colorado won't turn down the opportunity.

Close Window

Send To Printer