

Transparency, every-man attitude endeared former Buff leader to many on campus

By Kyle Ringo *Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera*

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Long after Tad Boyle had finished talking at the Colorado basketball recruiting luncheon in 2011 and the room had cleared of all but a handful of workers and media members, former University of Colorado athletic director Mike Bohn stayed behind helping the cleanup crew clear tables.

It was not typical of an athletic director at a Bowl Championship Series-level school, maybe any athletic director for that matter, but it was nothing unusual for the fifth full-time AD in CU history. Bohn was not afraid to stray from the conservative well-worn path followed by many of his peers.

Bohn's eight-year tenure ended this week when he submitted his resignation after Chancellor Phil DiStefano informed him he planned to hire a new athletic director and offered Bohn reassignment within the university.

Opinions vary on Bohn and his track record leading the Buffs, a program he grew up rooting for as he came of age here in Boulder.

For some it begins and ends with the failures of the football program under his leadership. For others, Bohn will always be the AD whose tenure was scarred by football but also the man who led the school into the Pac-12 Conference, rejuvenated the basketball programs, brought women's lacrosse to Boulder and started the Pearl Street Stampede tradition on autumn Friday nights before home football games.

Bohn has a booming voice to match his passion and energy. He has an unconventional and inclusive style. One of his first acts as AD back in 2005 was changing the doors to his office from solid wood to glass so that everyone would feel welcome. Regardless of the opinions, Bohn is an original in the way he went about the job.

"He never said 'no' to speaking to a class on campus, doing an interview for a student project, or offering advice on the profession of college sports," his longtime chief of staff Gail Pederson said in an email. "His calendar was booked solid day and night with the business commitments of running the department but he always made time for our student athletes and he worked tirelessly because his passion for young people is a priority."

Bohn earned praise for taking risks such as deciding to reward 50 of the most consistent student supporters of the basketball programs with a trip to the 2012 Pac-12 Conference tournament in Los Angeles. Few know that after a disappointing loss at Oregon the week before, he told a reporter outside the locker room, 'Ryan, we're going to win the Pac-12 tournament.'

When the Buffs won the tournament, he doubled down and took the students the following week to Albuquerque for the NCAA Tournament.

But there were less public ways Bohn tried to build relationships and improve the experience for those who supported CU athletics.

One cold night after a basketball game at the Coors Events Center traffic backed up as thousands of fans tried

to leave several nearby lots and the parking garage at the same time and CU Police were short staffed. Few of those stuck in the logjam had any idea the man in the overcoat in the middle of the street directing traffic was the athletic director.

Longtime sports information director David Plati has served under four athletic directors in his time at CU. He believes each had their strengths and did the job the best they could in their own way. Plati credits Bohn for going the extra mile in being accessible and transparent.

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Plati said Bohn held 22 roundtable meetings with the media in his eight years. By comparison, Plati said the previous three CU ADs held a combined total of five similar events.

Plati also noted how Bohn did his best to find ways to connect with the average fan and didn't focus all his attention on those with the most expensive seats or biggest donations.

Bohn would personally deliver season tickets to individuals who had a birthday, were dealing with a illness or in an effort to reconnect with someone who had endured a bad experience with ticketing or at a CU event in the past.

He also cared about the people who worked for him. Plati said Bohn was "often one of the first to visit an injured athlete in the hospital. Heck, he drove me down to Anschutz last summer for a minor procedure I had to have."

Women's basketball coach Linda Lappe described Bohn this week as someone who "rarely took a day off."

Lappe, who was hired by Bohn away from Division II Metro State in Denver in the spring of 2010, enjoyed how Bohn took a genuine interest in the details of her program.

"My Mike Bohnism is after we beat No. 8 Louisville this season, he came over to the office to congratulate us but also to find out exactly what we were trying to do to break their late game press," Lappe said in an email. "Anybody who watched that game, knows we didn't execute like we wanted but found a way to hold onto our lead. We ended up drawing plays on the whiteboard for about a half hour."

Candy Parkhurst worked for Bohn as his administrative assistant helping to organize his schedule and to manage the mountains of paperwork in and out of the office. Parkhurst shared this story:

"Mike was walking by the bike rack between Dal Ward and the Rec Center when he saw a student checking out the bikes," Parkhurst wrote. "Her bike had been stolen a few days earlier and now it was locked to the bike rack. She didn't want to be late to class, but needed to contact the police. One of our student workers, Kristen Conrad, was walking by. Mike told Kristen to call the police and he would wait by the bike until the police arrived and then explain the situation. The student got her bike back because Mike took time out of his day to help her. Definitely Mike."

Jim Senter has worked in several roles in the CU athletic department since joining Bohn's team in May 2006. He is currently the associate athletic director for sport administration and oversees the football program.

It doesn't take long for Senter to produce an example he believes sums up who Bohn was as an athletic

director at CU. It's a story Senter has told many times.

It happened not long after Senter was hired in the late spring or early summer of 2006. Bohn and other CU officials were attending an informal event at a golf course with CU boosters and fans. A man approached Bohn and commented that he liked the new CU pullover Bohn was wearing.

"He literally took the shirt off his back or whatever the pullover or garment was and took it off, folded it up and handed it to the guy," Senter said. "The guy was like, 'Hey, thanks. That's awesome.' That was Mike Bohn."

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CU leaders aim to double athletics donations in 5 years

By Brittany Anas Camera Staff Writer Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

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CU athletic department fundraising

2003: \$7 million

2004: \$7.13 million

2005: \$6.46 million

2006: \$9.34 million

2007: \$10.79 million

2008: \$11.29 million

2009: \$14.22 million

2010: \$7.42 million

2011: \$7.59 million

2012: \$11.79 million

Days after forcing Athletic Director Mike Bohn out largely over fundraising concerns, University of Colorado officials said they want athletics to at least double the amount of money the department raises within the next five years, pushing it past the \$20 million-a-year mark.

CU President Bruce Benson said that while the university is restructuring its fundraising operations, the decision to replace Bohn "fits more into the fact that we need to raise more money."

Benson said it was Chancellor Phil DiStefano's decision to change leadership in athletics, but he acknowledged he works closely with campus chancellors and "was most certainly involved" with the decision.

"If we're going to be in the big leagues now, we've got to be doing more fundraising," Benson said.

CU-Boulder's athletic department -- which switched to the Pac-12 in 2011 -- pulled in \$11.79 million in donations last year. The entire university system raised \$228 million last year -- a figure that Benson wants to push up to at least \$400 million annually.

While Benson said athletics provides just a portion of total fundraising, it's the "front porch" of university giving. Donors may make initial donations and stay connected with the university through athletics before expanding their gifts to other CU programs.

But Bohn said he had several measures in place to steadily grow athletics donations and was stopped short.

"You don't just jump to that level; you have to grow donations," he said.

His "sustainable excellence" fundraising plan had significant donations in the queue, he said. He also implemented a donor seat tax in basketball that brought \$400,000 in annual revenue. CU has a "fragile, but loyal, fan base," said Bohn, adding that 50 percent of donors are non-alumni.

Bohn has defended his fundraising and business record, saying he's never received a poor performance review, he secured a half-dozen gifts of \$1 million or more during his eight-year tenure, and the athletic department has been the top fundraising unit on the campus.

In addition to doubling fundraising in athletics, the university and its athletic department will be relying on boosters to help drum up \$50 million for a \$170 million athletics upgrade announced in February.

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"I think the next athletic director would play a very central role in reaching that goal," said Bronson Hilliard, spokesman for the Boulder campus.

As CU begins its search for a new athletic director, it will be doing so in an era of an athletics arms race, where fundraising is becoming a larger part of a director's job description and universities are planning multi-million-dollar state-of-the-art facilities for athletes and fans.

CU donations below peers

Early in his tenure, when Bohn discussed his idea to create "The Buff Club Cabinet" -- an upper echelon of donors who give athletics at least \$25,000 a year -- he was met with naysayers who said getting people to give \$10,000 a year was hard enough.

The cabinet, Bohn said, has had up to 68 members.

When CU athletics last year pulled in \$11.79 million in donations, it was an increase from \$7.59 million the previous year. Prior to Bohn's arrival, fundraising in 2005 -- a turbulent period following the fallout from a football recruiting scandal -- was just \$6.46 million.

"I am extremely proud as a Boulderite of what we've accomplished," said Bohn, the most successful fundraising athletic director in the school's history.

But CU officials don't want the athletic department to be measuring its success against past years. When stacked up against peer universities across the country, CU's athletic department falls woefully behind.

The department raises only one-third of the money that other athletics fundraisers bring in at peer universities, according to CU leaders.

The Pac-12, especially, has some fundraising powerhouses, including the University of Oregon's athletic department, which is well funded by Nike co-founder Phil Knight and his wife, who, in 2007-08, gave \$100 million to the program.

The biggest year for CU athletics fundraising was in fiscal year 2009, when the department raised \$14.22 million. That year, CU realized a major gift: Louise Bennett Reed, who died at age 103, left the university with more than \$4.75 million for athletic scholarships, making her the largest individual donor to the department.

CU's ambitious plans

CU officials -- as they explore ways to bring in additional revenue -- are on the brink of restructuring the way the university's foundation is run, and Chancellor DiStefano has outlined ambitious fundraising goals for the entire campus.

Under the new structure, campus fundraisers will report to university leadership instead of the CU Foundation to allow for clearer and more direct reporting lines from fundraisers to administrators, including deans, the athletic director, chancellors and Benson.

"The whole goal here is to get a total chain of command from me all the way down to the person doing the fundraising on the campus," Benson said.

Additionally, Benson, his chief of staff and campus chancellors will carry out a search for an "executive vice president for advancement" who will be in charge of coordinating fundraising efforts across the CU system.

DiStefano last fall announced fundraising goals for the Boulder campus. Only 8 percent of CU-Boulder alumni are donors to the school. On average at Pac-12 schools, 15 percent of alumni give back to their school. DiStefano has said by 2016, he wants to at least double the alumni giving figure rate to 16 percent.

The campus also has a plan to increase campus fundraising to \$100 million a year within the next five years. The fundraising goals for the athletic department mirror the broader goal for the campus.

"If support for athletics increases in tandem, that would lead to more than \$20 million a year in giving," said Jeremy Simon, spokesman for the CU Foundation.

Meanwhile, CU will be leading a fundraising push for its major athletics facilities upgrade that includes renovations and new construction plans for a student-athlete academic center, a permanent indoor practice gym and, eventually, a new soccer and lacrosse field.

"As President Benson has recently indicated, inspiring private support is, and will become, more and more critical to what we do at CU, in athletics and in all areas," Simon said.

Fundraising challenges in Colorado

Chuck Neinas, a Boulder-based sports consultant and former league commissioner, said CU faces unique fundraising challenges, partly because of an influx of people who move to Colorado from other states and have ties to their alma maters.

Also, CU has to compete for the entertainment dollar against so many professional sports, he said.

"(University of) Nebraska football may be the state's most important natural resource, and there's no professional sports in Nebraska," Neinas said. "The Cornhusker football team is the state's team."

Athletic directors, he said, need to do more than just raise money, and they can't leave personnel management responsibilities to coaches.

"To be an effective athletic director, you have to spread your tentacles further than being a fundraiser," he said.

"You become the face of the athletic department."

Increasingly, schools are picking athletic directors with definitive business backgrounds. The University of Michigan, for example, appointed David Brandon as its director of intercollegiate athletics in 2010. Brandon had played briefly for Michigan but was better known for his role as chief executive officer of Domino's Pizza.

DiStefano last week said the athletic department -- with a budget of \$50 million to \$60 million -- will be run more like a business and be headed by someone with experience in running a large operation.

Hilliard said the university is going to cast a wide net for candidates.

"No one should take away from this that we have our eyes set on a single type of person," he said. "We're looking for a talented individual who can connect at a deep level with fans, supporters and donors and raise money at a high level."

Changing roles of athletic directors

R.C. Johnson, former athletic director for the University of Memphis who retired a year ago, has witnessed the evolution of the top athletic administrative job over the past few decades.

He began his job in Memphis in 1995 after previously holding athletic director positions at Temple University, Miami University and Eastern Illinois University.

"It used to be that when you got tired of coaching, or tired of recruiting, or too old, you'd go into athletic administration and schedule football games," said Johnson, 71. "Over the decades, it's evolved and changed."

These days, he describes the job as being about selling more tickets, raising more money and being more visible to the public, all while graduating student-athletes, winning games and not cheating the rules.

Athletic directors were wary of fundraising in the beginning, he said. There was an old adage about boosters, he said: "We want you as donors, not owners."

Johnson also acknowledged today's arms race in athletics.

"There's never enough," he said. "It doesn't matter if you're at the University of Texas or a small Division 1 school. I've never heard anyone say, 'We have enough.' There's always facilities upgrades."

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Paige: Two prominent Colorado Buffs boosters defend Mike Bohn

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

Posted:

DenverPost.com

Mike Bohn was callously, brusquely dumped by Colorado, and two of his most ardent supporters, both prominent alums, have responded.

"In my opinion, Mike was among the very best athletic directors in the entire country," said Hank Brown, a former CU president and U.S. senator.

George Solich — one of the school's most active and strongest financial boosters — was as adamant in his praise. In an open letter to "Buff Nation," released to *The Denver Post* on Saturday, the oil and gas billionaire stated that CU "was fortunate to have Mike Bohn's passion, loyalty, integrity, vision and steadfast commitment to the student-athlete, and also to faculty, fans, the community and the university as a whole."

Solich — who possesses a master's degree from the school where he sold soda at basketball games — has been speculated as a possible Bohn successor because president Bruce Benson and chancellor Phil DiStefano are searching for a CEO type with unique fundraising skills. But Solich, who rarely speaks out on CU issues, dismissed that possibility Saturday. "Although I am flattered that some of you think I would be a good choice ... there are other people that would be far better candidates. I care deeply about my alma mater, but ... I do not have interest in the position."

Solich stated he has "known and worked with Mike and others at the university for over eight years now in our collective attempts to transform the athletic enterprise and become a perennial top-25 program ... I assure you. If it was my decision, Mike would still be the AD."

Although Bohn increased fundraising 26 percent the past year while the football team finished with one victory, then made another coaching change, the leadership belief is that the department should be raising more than \$25 million, not \$11 million, and the athletic budget should be closer to \$80 million than \$60 million.

The timing stunk, but it was felt that Bohn should be kept on in December to hire another football coach and basketball season had begun. Now, school is out, and so is Bohn.

"I consider Mike a great friend and a great AD," Solich stated. "Did he make mistakes? Certainly he did. Could have been better in certain aspects of his job? Absolutely. Couldn't we all. ... Mike's willingness to strive to get better was real, but time and circumstances stunted that progress."

Bohn made very poor hires in Dan Hawkins and Jon Embree. But the advice he had been given the first time was that Hawkins and Rich Rodriguez were the top young hires. CU secured the wrong guy from Boise State, and Rodriguez eventually would spin out at Michigan. There was pressure from the university, the alumni and the media to replace Hawkins with a home-grown coach, so Bohn choose Embree. But he recognized that Hawkins and Embree had to be fired, and the president and the chancellor did agree on Bohn's current choice — Mike MacIntyre.

Benson says that the football team is CU's "window on the world." The failures under the past two coaches, and the president's urgency to double the university's overall fundraising from \$220 million to more than \$400 million, made Bohn a convenient fall guy — although he had raised the level of both basketball teams and was

primarily responsible for transferring Colorado into the Pac-12, putting it on the road to the ultimate financial rewards from the TV packages. Bohn had fundraising plans in place, but he has been displaced.

"Although I question the timing and execution of the move," Solich said, "I respect the president's and the chancellor's prerogative to make a change that gives CU's athletic program a chance at sustainable success — as long as there is a PLAN."

There is no clear-cut nominee, although, within 36 hours, three applicants with management and sports background had contacted the school. Booster bucks aren't flowing into the athletic department.

"If the sum total," Solich continued, "of the plan is to hire a replacement for Mike to 'run it like a business,' then I think we missed the boat ... again! If, on the other hand, the plan is for the entire athletic enterprise to have the organization, tools, resources and support to compete on the highest level — then we should all stand Shoulder to Shoulder to do our part.

"The opportunity for sustainable success in athletics at the University of Colorado is enormous. We certainly are blessed with a great college town, a world-class university. ... It will take true vision and leadership, resource ... good people and a culture committed to winning.

"Mike's trademark, whether in a speech, a press conference, a letter, a voice mail or a phone conversation was to end with a robust 'Go Buffs,' " Solich stated in his letter. "I think it's only fitting that we keep that tradition alive."

You're a good man, Michael Bohn.

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