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College sports try to fend off blitz from economy - College Football

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College sports try to fend off blitz from economy

Associated Press

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ATHENS, Ga. -- While Georgia practices just beyond the walls of his office, Alan Thomas toils over his own game plan. He's no Mark Richt, but this administrator's work from behind a desk is just as important to the Bulldogs' success as a strong-armed quarterback.

Thomas is the head coach, so to speak, for fundraising season.

Normally, it's not much trouble getting folks to fork over hundreds or even thousands of dollars for the chance to sit between the hedges for every home game.

But these are hardly routine times. The economy has plunged into one of its worst crises since the Great Depression, with little hope of quick turnaround. The downturn couldn't have come at a worse time for big-time athletic programs, which are just getting started on their fundraising and ticket-selling drives for next season.

Whether their school is big or small, winning or losing, administrators across the country are nervous about getting deserted by boosters as the downturn becomes increasingly severe. They're hoping fans' devotion -- some would call it obsession -- will bail colleges out.

"It's hard to get a full gauge on what will happen," said Thomas, Georgia's associate athletic director for external affairs. "I do believe that people will still give, especially when it comes to Georgia football. It's part of their culture, part of being a Georgia Bulldog. But will giving levels reach what they did last year? I'm just not sure."

The Bulldogs are among the lucky ones. They finished No. 2 in the rankings last season and were having another Top 10 year until a 49-10 loss to Florida. Such success makes it easier to require a hefty check from the faithful. The school is sending out renewal notices starting this weekend, requiring a minimum donation of \$250 just for the privilege of buying a season ticket.

What about a school that's struggling on the field?

Washington has yet to win a game in 2008 and already announced that coach Tyrone Willingham will be dumped at the end of the season. While the hiring of a new coach might loosen up some wallets, there could be little enthusiasm for giving to a program that has won just 11 times during the Willingham's four-year tenure.

"We're very cognizant of our donors and know that a lot of them have taken big hits in their portfolios," said Scott Woodward, the Huskies' athletic director. "Hopefully we come out of this valley of death stronger than what we were. That's the hope."

Nebraska was once among the nation's top programs, but the Cornhuskers had already suffered through a significant downturn on the field before the economic woes hit. The school has relied on 14,000 donors to raise \$17 million a year -- not counting capital programs that go toward renovating or building new facilities. But officials acknowledge it might be difficult to maintain that level of funding when some fans may have lost jobs, or find themselves struggling to pay the mortgage.

"We haven't seen any effect yet. We expect we'll see some effects in the future," said Paul Meyers, the associate athletic director who's in charge of keeping the coffers full. "No question the economy comes up. Right now it's a very popular topic. If I had 15 conversations in a day, it would be discussed 10 times."

Oklahoma State has taken the most noteworthy sack of the economic crisis.

Nearly three years ago, billionaire booster T. Boone Pickens made a \$165 million gift to his beloved Cowboys, the largest donation ever for a college athletic program. Through investments, he expected to grow the fund to a staggering \$420 million, the money going to

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renovate the football stadium, build an indoor practice facility and construct a massive athletic village with new facilities for the baseball, softball, tennis, equestrian, soccer and tracks teams.

The plan fell apart along with the stock market. An area of several city blocks was cleared to make room for the construction, but the projects were put on hold until there's enough money. Pickens recently kicked in another \$63 million, making up for some of the shortfall but far shy of his original goal.

On a far smaller scale, other schools should be planning for similar cutbacks.

Michal Ann Strahilevitz, a professor of marketing at Golden Gate University, has done research on charitable spending and believes athletic departments will be among the first to feel the pain of a downturn.

"People are very worried about their futures and looking for places to cut spending," she said. "If you are someone that can afford to make large donations to sports teams, you probably also have a stock portfolio, and it has probably taken one of the biggest hits you have ever experienced."

If people are forced to make a choice, Strahilevitz said, athletic programs would likely go to the head of the chopping block. "If you regularly contribute to a cause that feeds hungry children, would you cut that out first, or would you first cut out the annual check you write to your college sports team?" she said. "I rest my case."

Before a recent game at West Virginia, several alumni tailgating on a hill overlooking Mountaineer Field said the economic woes would make them reconsider how much they give to their alma mater.

"Obviously, the economy as it is right now makes you think twice about giving money to here or any other place. There's no question about that at all. How can it not?" said Jim Campbell, a 1983 graduate of the West Virginia law school and a former Mountaineer mascot. "Anybody who is not being very careful about how and where they spend their money is being foolish."

The financial pain is especially acute in Michigan, where much of the economy is based around the struggling automobile industry.

Foreclosure signs are everywhere, even in the ritzier neighborhoods. The unemployment rate is one of the nation's highest. Many residents have simply packed up and left, hoping to find greener pastures elsewhere. Those left behind have tightened their belts like never before. Athletics is a luxury that many simply can't afford.

"I'm contracted to Chrysler, so I'm reconsidering everything," said Tracie Liszewski, a Michigan State graduate and donor to both the athletic program and the business school. "I'm glad I'm able to give what I can give and I've been doing it since I've graduated, but we've never had an economy like this."

At rival Michigan, the Wolverines couldn't have picked a more inopportune time to have one of their worst years. They are headed to a rare losing season under new coach Rich Rodriguez. Four of those losses have come at the Big House in Ann Arbor, further irritating those who dole out big money to watch their favorite team.

With the economy tanking along with his program, Michigan fan Larry Adkins pondered the options while tailgating recently at a motor home painted in the school colors -- right down to the large winged helmet on each quarter-panel. A graduate of the school who now works in the struggling construction business, he wouldn't say how much he gives to the athletic program, but it must be a pretty penny judging from his prime parking spot near Michigan Stadium.

"You have to start thinking about how much you give. You have to start thinking about everything," Adkins said. "The auto industry here is in big trouble, and that affects my business and all kinds of other businesses. The first things you stop spending money on are the things you don't absolutely need."

At LSU, home of the defending national champion Tigers, officials are expecting a significant drop in the number of stock transfers made to the athletic program. When the market was strong, such donations were a popular way to give because any profits from the rise in a stock's price could be donated to charity to avoid paying capital gains tax.

(Yes, the tax code does allow a deduction for donations to an athletic program. For instance, those who pay into Georgia's seat-licensing program can deduct 80 percent of the cost, according to Thomas.)

"The stock thing is something that's going to be a factor, particularly if you want big contributions to something, like if we're going to build something. That's where people have the capacity to make a really big gift," said Joe Alleva, LSU's athletic director. "A lot of people were donating their appreciated stock, but now the stock has gone down so they're obviously not going to donate it."

For now, the stands are still packed at most top schools.

College football is more than just a discretionary expense in these places -- it's a way of life.

"The culture in Georgia is based around returning to campus on fall Saturdays," Thomas said. "The university is strong in people's hearts and minds. Football is strong in people's hearts and minds."

Ditto for the [Texas Longhorns](#), who were briefly ranked No. 1 this year. While the school has noticed some "slippage" in suite sales for its basketball program, officials had no trouble selling out a stadium that was expanded to 94,000 seats this season.

On a recent Saturday in Baton Rouge, La., it was business as usual for Laura Kleinpeter. She hosted a pre-game party serving jambalaya and fried turkey from her family's motor home, custom painted with purple and gold trim and LSU logos.

A salvaged statue of a tiger from an old Esso gas station had been retrofitted on the roof. The interior walls were decorated with autographs of numerous past Tigers players, the latest being Matt Flynn, quarterback of the 2007 national championship team.

"We've been doing this since 1995," said Kleinpeter, wearing an LSU visor, sunglasses with a tiger-stripe design on the rims, tiger paw earrings and a Mardi Gras necklace of small plastic purple-and-gold painted footballs. "We may not go out to eat as much, but we will continue to buy our tickets and pay whatever we have to pay to keep our tickets."

AP Sports Writers Tim Booth in Seattle, Eric Olson in Lincoln, Neb., John Raby in Charleston, W.Va., Larry Lage in Detroit, Brett Martel in New Orleans and Jim Vertuno in Austin, Texas contributed to this report.

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