

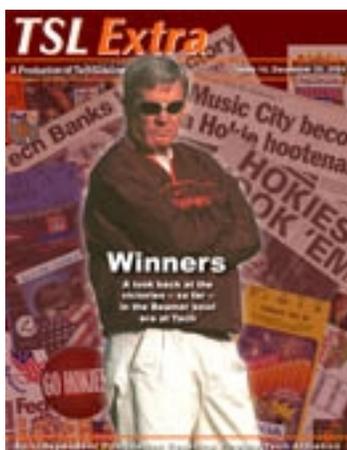
# ***TSL Extra***

Issue 14, December 20, 2001

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Photo of Frank Beamer by Michael Ingalls. Bowl memorabilia owned by Will Stewart.

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## TSL EXTRA

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Dear Readers:

Another year, another bowl. It never gets old, does it?

I was concerned that Hokie fans would react with disinterest to this year's Gator Bowl bid, Tech's third such invitation in five years, but fortunately, my fears were for naught. As I write this (on Dec. 20, 2001), Tech has sold over 14,000 tickets for the Florida State matchup next January 1st, with another 3,000-4,000 estimated tickets being purchased by Tech fans through Ticketmaster.

The matchup no doubt helps. They may be down this year, but Florida State is still Florida State, and a win over the 'Noles would be a feather in Tech's cap and something to treasure for years to come.

That set me to thinking about other VT bowl victories under Frank Beamer, and the next thing you know, a theme for this issue had been set. I decided to take a look at the four bowl wins the Hokies have under Coach Beamer: the 1993 Independence Bowl, the 1995 Sugar Bowl, the 1998 Music City Bowl, and the 2000 Gator Bowl. Each win had its own characteristics and was important for its own reasons, and a big win is a story that always deserves retelling.

The twist I added was to present each bowl game through the eyes — and voice — of a different person. We interviewed defensive tackle Jeff Holland for the Independence Bowl, Bud Foster for the MCB, and Ronyell Whitaker for the 2000 Gator Bowl. And for the 1995 Sugar Bowl, I decided to add a twist to the twist and write it from the perspective of a Hokie fan: me. You'll see what special significance that Sugar Bowl holds for me when you read the article.

The result is four great stories that will not only enhance your understanding of each bowl and help you relive it, but the articles will remind you of things you may have forgotten, and each win is put into its proper perspective. It's the kind of thing that can only be done in a magazine format like the TSL Extra, and I think you'll enjoy it.

Wrapped around those four articles like bookends are a behind-the-scenes look at the Gator Bowl and an "Inside the Numbers" that examines bowl payouts. Be sure to take a look at the ITN article, because there are, as Cliff Claven might say, some "little known facts" there. You can use them to amaze and amuse your friends on the message boards.

"Inside TSL" is absent from this issue but will return next month with some interesting insights into the football players Tech is recruiting this year and what it's like to interview them.

One more thing: thanks to everyone for their support of TSL and TechLocker.com this holiday season. We've had a great December, and I wanted to express our appreciation. Now, be sure to stop by TechLocker.com and spend your Christmas money there too, okay?

Enjoy issue 14.



## The Gator Bowl... It's a Year- Round Thing

If you think January 1st is the beginning and the end of it for the Gator Bowl, think again.

*by Neal Williams*

Years ago, a fellow from Virginia Tech took a job with the Orange Bowl. Friends kidded him mercilessly. What a life. Live in Miami and work, essentially, one day a year.

If only they knew.

The actual bowl game is the most visible and obvious function of any bowl committee. Most people think that's all there is to the job.

"Probably 75 percent of the people think that," said Rick Catlett, president of The Gator Bowl Association. His main event is the Jan. 1 meeting between Virginia Tech and Florida State at Alltel Stadium in Jacksonville, Fla. "If you're not involved in the bowl

volunteerism, you're not aware of what all the bowl does for the community."

Here are some numbers that casual fans might find staggering:

- People think his job is part-time, Catlett said. Nope. He's full-time. He's one of *nine* full time employees of the Gator Bowl Association. He has a vice president of media relations, a director of marketing, a director of events, a ticket operations manager and "the ever important business manager." Assistants to some of those positions fill out the rest of the full-time staff. Three seasonal employees join the staff in October through the end of the bowl game. And those are the paid folks.
- More than 500 volunteers serve the Gator Bowl in a variety of capacities, from directing events to manning the hospitality room in the media hotel (maybe the toughest job of all). There's an 11-member executive committee and a 92-member board.
- The Gator Bowl is one of 31 events the Gator Bowl Association produces a year. That's right, 31, or more than two a month. There are a trio of major golf outings, a pro-am that last year drew 11 professionals from the PGA Tour and Senior PGA Tour, a Shania Twain concert, the 5K US Championships, a national-level junior tennis tournament, a soccer tournament and more. A year ago, the Gator Bowl Association conducted the Pigskin Classic football game between Florida State and Brigham Young.

In addition to the events it produces, the Gator Bowl Association has to raise money – about 5.5 million bucks worth - through sponsorships. If Catlett had to describe his job without using the name of the bowl, he'd call himself a sports marketer.

Yep, it's a busy job for Catlett and staff. More than just one football game.

Most of the money – about 75 percent – raised by the game goes to the two participating teams. Other events, Catlett said, raise approximately \$250,000 for various charities in the Jacksonville area.

The man in charge is a 50-year-old lifelong college football fan and almost life-long resident of Jacksonville. Catlett was born in Athens, Ga., where his father played football for the University of Georgia. By the time he was two years old, Catlett lived in Jacksonville, and he's been there ever since.

He has a government background and never envisioned a job in sports. "I worked in the mayor's office for three different mayors here in Jacksonville," Catlett said. "One of my assignments was the sports complex, overseeing the operation. That led me into our NFL task force when we were chasing the NFL team. In 1990, Touchdown Jacksonville was formed and they hired me away to be executive vice president.

"When we got the team (the Jacksonville Jaguars), the Gator Bowl job opened up and I came over here in 1993. By a fluke of circumstances, I ended up in sports."

Down time doesn't come when the game ends. The teams go home and unwind. Catlett and his staff regroup and rewind. Let's let Catlett give us a walk-through of a year in the life:

**January.** "We spend about 70 percent of our dollars during November, December and January. The first week (after the game) is getting everything back, getting everything inventoried and stored away and beginning the process of making sure all the bills get paid.

"On Jan. 15, we'll have our first executive committee meeting and we'll lay out our entire calendar. What events, who will chair those events."

Not that there isn't some fun involved. "We also have our big celebration, our volunteer party. It's a major event for 700 people, a sit-down dinner with a dance afterwards."

**February.** "We've done our planning. We begin our marketing. We spend a tremendous amount of time renewing our sponsorships, selling our renewals to the community. We have 44 sponsors that we have to renew every year. It's Marketing 101."

**March.** "That's the month of the Players Championship (on the PGA Tour) held here in Ponte Verde. We do a sponsorship and bring in the Toyota and Gatorade people for the players championship."

**April.** "That's the month we host the First Union Gator Bowl Junior Tennis Championships." Catlett said 252 juniors from across the country participated last year. Anyone who thinks running such a tournament is easy ought to try doing it just once.

**May.** "We don't have any events in May. We spend much of the month going and knocking on business doors in Jacksonville, selling packages and drumming up support for the game."

**June.** "We finally get a break. Everybody takes their vacations. We sort of slow down in June."

**July.** "It's time to bring all of our sponsors together for our summer weekend splash. This is kind of like another opportunity to say thank you for renewing for this coming year."

**August.** "We put on the Toyota golf outing for all the dealers throughout the country (Toyota is the

Gator Bowl's title sponsor). We call it the Toyota Drivers Cup. We also attempt to produce a preseason game, and we're still trying to get one for 2002."

**September.** "This is kind of our kickoff month. All of our committees and everything go into full swing. We usually have some major public kickoff event held at the stadium."

**October.** "Florida-Georgia." 'nuff said. The annual SEC game between the arch-rivals is played in Jacksonville. The city puts it on, the Gator Bowl Association assists in its operation.

**November.** "We have our Gator Bowl Pro-Am golf tournament, we wrap up sales and we try to wrap up team selection in late November."

**December.** "We start dealing with the teams and all that goes with that." Coaches are brought in early for press conferences. Practice sites are readied, activities for the participating teams are finalized.

Much less time is spent traveling to see potential teams, Catlett said. When he started, his budget for team selection, he said, was in the \$50,000 range. This year, he said, "I don't think we even spent \$10,000."

With league tie-ins, the Gator Bowl already knows it is going to get the first choice of teams from the Atlantic Coast Conference and Big East Conference after Bowl Championship Series representatives are determined.

Both leagues conduct their annual meetings in the Jacksonville area. Catlett and his staff take advantage to get to know the people in the leagues then. Going to a game is not the best time to get to know an athletic director, who is busying entertaining sponsors of his own.

"Four or five days on a golf course is much more valuable than going to a football game on a weekend," Catlett said. "Plus, so many games are on TV so we can sit and watch and get a very good idea about all the teams in both leagues."

The week of the actual game is probably the easiest and most enjoyable for Catlett. As football coaches like to say, the hay is in the barn. The work is done, enjoy the fruits of all that labor.

"At that time, the volunteers are working at their highest point," Catlett said. "For us, the staff, it really is a celebration. Everything is in place and it just has to operate. We just kind of roll from event to event.

"We certainly have our largest impact that week. The focus of Jacksonville is on the Gator Bowl and Gator Bowl week. You have the players in here and the fans in here, and watching them enjoy everything is the biggest part for me."

## The 1993 Independence Bowl: Jeff Holland

Memories of Beamer's first bowl win from a player who altered the course of the game.

*by Will Stewart, TechSiideline.com*

### The 1993 Independence Bowl

Virginia Tech 45, Indiana 20

To find out about the beginning of the Beamer Bowl era at Virginia Tech, you have to go all the way back to 1993, and the Poulan-Weed Eater Independence Bowl. It was a humble beginning, but for the Hokies and their fans, Tech's 45-20 win over Indiana felt like the pinnacle of college football.

Just one year after finishing 2-8-1, Virginia Tech had surprised the nation by going 8-3, including 4-3 and a fourth-place finish in the

first year of Big East round-robin play. Under first-year offensive coordinator Rickey Bustle, the Hokies had a high-powered offense that set a Tech record by scoring 400 points and averaging 36.4 points per game (a mark that is now third behind the 1999 and 2000 Hokies).

Tech's attack featured a 2,000 yard passer in junior quarterback Maurice DeShazo (129-230, 2,080 yards, 22 TD's, 7 INT's) and a 1,000 yard rusher in sophomore tailback Dwayne Thomas (1,130 yards and 11 rushing TD's). They also had a future NFL pro-bowler in receiver Antonio Freeman, who caught 32 passes for 644 yards (20.9 yards per catch) and 9 TD's. The Hokies had the tenth-ranked rushing offense in the country.

DeShazo's stellar junior year would make him a legitimate Heisman candidate entering his senior season in 1994. His 22 TD passes were a Tech single-season record that still stands, and Thomas's 11 TD's were the most since James Barber had scored 13 in 1972. Meanwhile, Freeman's 9 receiving TD's were a Tech single-season record. With unanimous All-American Jim Pyne anchoring the offensive line at center, the Hokies were an offensive powerhouse.

Defensively, it was a different story. The Tech defense was in its first year of a new eight-man front "attack" scheme, which had been implemented by new defensive coordinator Phil Elmassian. The Hokies were starting a slew of freshmen and sophomores, with senior linebacker Ken Brown, senior whip linebacker Dwayne Knight, and senior defensive back Tyronne Drakeford being the only starters on the defense that weren't freshmen or sophomores.

Among the younger players, the Hokie defense featured future stars in linebacker George DelRicco, defensive end Cornell Brown, defensive tackle J.C. Price, and defensive backs Antonio Banks and Torrian Gray.

That young defensive nucleus would go on to be one of the all-time great Tech defenses in 1995, but in 1993, they were learning on the job, and it showed. The Hokies had some good defensive outings (7-point first halves against Rutgers and Miami, plus strong showings at Virginia and West Virginia), but it frequently got slaughtered, too, most notably against Boston College (a crushing 48-34 defeat in which the Eagles had over 600 yards of offense).

Sophomore lineman Jeff Holland played a key role on that defense. J.C. Price would later be an All-American in 1995, but in 1993, he and Holland split time evenly at the tackle position. "We were co-

starters, 50-50,” Holland recalled in a recent interview with the TSL Extra. “He started six games, and I started the other six.”

Like the defense as a whole, Holland had his moments in 1993. The high point of his season came when he recovered a fumble against the Virginia Cavaliers and turned it into a short touchdown run in a 20-17 Hokie road victory. That was Tech’s last game of the regular season, and it came after the Hokies had already earned an Independence Bowl bid the week before by pasting Syracuse 45-24 in Lane Stadium.

Holland, now the Town Planner/GIS coordinator in Smithfield, Virginia and a sometimes TSL columnist, remembers the Independence Bowl vividly, as do most of the players, coaches, and 6,500 or so Hokie fans who made the trip to Shreveport, Louisiana that year.

As noted earlier, 1993 was the first year of round-robin play in the Big East, and the league had done well. West Virginia (7-0 Big East) posted an undefeated 11-0 record and got a Sugar Bowl invitation to play Florida. Miami (6-1) went 9-2 overall and headed to the Fiesta Bowl to play Arizona, and a Boston College team coached by Tom Coughlin and quarterbacked by Glenn Foley went 5-2 in the conference and 8-3 overall, with an invitation to the Carquest Bowl to match up with Virginia. Those three teams, along with the Hokies, gave the Big East four ranked teams at the end of the season.

“All three (Tech) losses were to ranked teams on the road,” Holland remembers (21-2 at Miami, 14-13 at WVU, and 48-34 at BC). “It wasn’t that bad of a season, although West Virginia, we should have won. We did pretty good on defense. We had our moments. We were either really good or really bad.”

The Big Ten and Indiana had an impressive year as well. The conference sent seven teams to bowls that year, and Indiana had posted a strong 8-3 record, their best since 1988. “Looking at their schedule,” Holland says, “they were kind of in the same boat as us. They were 8-3, and their losses were to Big Ten powers, and most of them were close.”

The Independence Bowl bid was, of course, Virginia Tech’s first bowl bid under coach Frank Beamer, and it was the first Virginia Tech bowl bid since the 1986 Peach Bowl. The Indiana Hoosiers had suffered no such drought, going to six bowl games in eight years under coach Bill Mallory. The Hoosiers were 3-4 in the previous seven bowls under Mallory, and they entered the 1993 Independence Bowl with a reputation as a tough, physical defensive team, giving up just 14 points a game.

The game was billed as Virginia Tech’s high-powered offense versus Indiana’s stingy defense, but before it was over, the story would be the Hokies’ defense and special teams, and a frantic 35 seconds at the end of the first half that sealed Indiana’s fate.

## **Bowl Week**

It has taken years for the Virginia Tech Hokies to get any national respect, and some would argue that they don’t have it even now, after two straight 11-1 seasons in 1999 and 2000, and a trip to the national championship game in 1999. But imagine what it was like back in 1993, as the upstart Hokies from the fledgling Big East prepared to kick it off against a big, bad Big Ten team.

“We were excited to play a Big Ten team,” Holland remembers. “They did have an arrogance about them, like they were Big Ten power football, and back then, the Big East was the new kid on the block. We were all expecting that.

“They brought their whole team, including all their freshmen and redshirts, so at all the pre-game functions, they outnumbered us. We only brought 60 or 70 guys.” (For the record, the Hokies traveled with 65 players, and Indiana brought a staggering 109).

By all accounts, the Hokies and Hoosiers got along during the week building up to the bowl. They weren’t going to be the best of friends, but there was little belligerence between the two teams as game day approached.

Holland concurs. “They were okay at all the team functions, when we had both teams there. They were definitely nicer than Tennessee (whom Tech would play in the 1994 Gator Bowl the next season) as far as getting along.”

But the Hokies and Hoosiers weren’t necessarily pals. “Then at the pep rally the night before the game was when they started to talk trash. Things like, ‘What’s a Hokie?’ and all that. But I guess they had to do that, peer pressure and all. They had to talk a little smack.”

Traveling for their first bowl game in seven years (and the first under Beamer), and facing a team from a tradition-laden power conference, a natural question is what the Hokies were looking to accomplish. A good showing? A win? A blowout?

“We were looking for a win,” Holland notes. “We knew our offense was going to score. We were just hoping the defense would show up for four quarters.”

Speaking of the Tech defense, they noticed that the media buildup during game week centered on the Hokie offense and the Indiana defense. There was little to no mention of the Tech D. “That was used as a motivator,” Holland remembers, “and it definitely motivated us.”

## **Game Time**

Friday, December 31st, 1993 dawned bright and beautiful in Northwest Louisiana. The Hokies were appearing on ESPN for the first time since a nationally-broadcast 38-13 win over UVa in 1990, and the weather obliged. It was sunny and 49 degrees when the ball was kicked off at 12:42 Eastern Standard Time.

In hindsight, the mismatch on the line of scrimmage was immediately apparent. The Hokies kicked off, and from Indiana’s opening drive onward, the Tech defenders created havoc in the Hoosier backfield, pressuring Indiana quarterback John Paci relentlessly. The smaller, quicker Tech defenders simply ran around, over, and through Indiana’s hulking offensive line, none of whom were shorter than 6-3 or weighed less than 285 pounds.

Meanwhile, behind the blocking of senior Jim Pyne, the Hokie offense was enjoying great success running up the middle against Indiana’s defense. Tech moved the ball well on their first drive but did not score. Indiana responded by scoring a TD on their second possession when Paci hit star re-

ceiver Thomas Lewis on the right sideline. Lewis broke a tackle and raced 75 yards for the score, putting the Hoosiers up, 7-0.

On the Tech sideline, nobody panicked.

“Personally, I liked it whenever we scored first, because I always thought we were going to win. That was my mentality,” Holland admits. But in just the first ten minutes of the game, he had seen how things were going. “The offense was moving the ball easily. I knew we were going to be okay. They got that one long touchdown, but that happens. I thought we were in good shape.”

The Hokies came back strong. Tech responded with a 14-play, 73-yard drive and scored on Dwayne Thomas’s 13-yard reception off a double-screen, making it 7-7 at the end of the first quarter.

Tech stuffed Indiana, got the ball back, and went on another long drive, going 59 yards in 7 plays and making it 14-7 on fullback Joe Swarm’s 6-yard run.

With the game threatening to slip away from Indiana, the Hoosiers returned the kickoff 51 yards (the Hokies had a miserable day in kickoff coverage), followed immediately by a 34-yard pass that took the ball inside the Tech 15. The Tech defense stiffened and limited Indiana to a 26 yard field goal, and it was 14-10, Tech.

Then the Hokies did their best to keep the Hoosiers in it. DeShazo threw an interception that Indiana turned into another field goal (14-13), and then DeShazo threw an incomplection to Thomas that was actually a lateral. Thomas failed to cover the ball, and Indiana recovered deep in Tech territory.

The bleeding stopped on the very next play when Paci threw an interception in the end zone to Tyronne Drakeford. The Hokies were done helping Indiana score points.

## **35 Seconds**

With the score 14-13, time was winding down in the first half. The Hoosiers were trying to tack on more points and had the ball at the Tech 49-yard line with 35 seconds to go when Paci dropped back to pass. He was hit by George DeRicco and Dwayne Knight, and he fumbled the ball. J.C. Price pursued it and tried to pick it up, but all he could manage to do was kick it farther downfield.

Defensive end Lawrence Lewis drew a bead on the bouncing ball and ran it down. As he approached it on the 20 yard line, it hopped obligingly up into his arms, and Lewis ran into the end zone untouched. It was 21-13, Hokies, with 23 seconds to go.

“I remember J.C. claiming he kicked it (on purpose),” Holland smiles, “but I don’t know about that. We got all the right bounces that year.”

Back the Hoosiers came with another long kickoff return, this one to the Tech 42. Indiana completed an eight-yard sideline pass to the Tech 34, but the referee ruled that the Indiana receiver was in bounds, and the clock expired.

Or did it? Indiana was trying to call a timeout after the play, and after a huddle, the referees decided

to grant them the timeout (the replay clearly shows that they did not get it called in time). One second was put back on the clock, and while Tech Coach Frank Beamer raged on the sidelines, Indiana lined up for a 51-yard field goal.

Big mistake. On the field goal attempt, Holland muscled the Indiana snapper aside, burst up the middle, raised both arms in the air, and blocked the field goal with his left hand.

The ball fluttered over the line of scrimmage and downfield, where Tech freshman defensive back Antonio Banks was waiting on it all alone. "You're supposed to get away from the ball in that situation," Banks told the press after the game, "but it came in so high and looked so good that I just had to go for it."

Banks hauled the ball in on the Tech 20, cut right, reversed his field, and raced down the left sideline for a shocking touchdown that made it 28-13, Hokies, with no time left in the first half. Banks was met in the end zone by the Tech assistant coaches, who had left the press box and were on their way to the locker room when Banks pulled his feat.

"It seems like for the last eight or nine years, Tech always scores in bunches, I mean real quick," Holland says. "I don't know if that's just luck or what."

## **The Second Half**

Whatever it was, the flurry finished off the Hoosiers. The second half was yet to be played, but there was never any doubt how it was going to go. The Hokie defense was stuffing the Hoosier offense (Indiana had just 5 yards rushing in the first half and 133 total yards, 109 of which came on just two plays). Tech had scored on offense, defense, and special teams.

Neither team scored in the third quarter. The Hokies added a little drama in the quarter with another DeShazo interception (in Indiana territory) and a fourth-down stop of the Hoosiers (at the Tech 31-yard line), but the quarter was played mostly between the 30's, and neither team seriously threatened. Paci put together a string of incompletions, and he was pulled from the game in favor of backup Chris Dittoe.

In the fourth quarter, with just under ten minutes to go, the Hokies finally scored again when DeShazo hit Freeman with a 42-yard TD pass that made it 35-13. Freeman's score came just a minute after Indiana had failed on a fake punt attempt, when a wide-open Hoosier receiver had dropped the ball. It was just two plays later that DeShazo hit Freeman.

"Once DeShazo hooked up with Freeman and it was 35-13," Holland says, "I knew we had them then. I knew they weren't going to score on our defense anymore."

The turn of events (from failed fake punt to long TD surrendered) broke what was left of Indiana's spirit. Indiana fumbled inside their own 10-yard line on the next play from scrimmage. The Hokies scored again and would eventually run it up to 45-13. They gave up a 42-yard TD reception by Lewis late in the game to make the final margin 45-20.

“We shut ‘em down,” Holland says of Tech’s defensive performance. “We finished with six or seven sacks and probably should have had more.”

The victory, following a seven-year bowl drought, released a flood of pent-up emotion in the Hokie faithful who were on hand. As the clock wound down, Tech fans poured out of the stands and lined the sidelines and end zone, creating a logjam on the sidelines. And when the Hokies ran out the clock, the fans flooded the playing field.

Holland didn’t miss the opportunity to capture some memories on film. “I went back in the locker room and got my camera and took pictures of people celebrating on the field.”

In the final analysis, Virginia Tech simply dominated. They only outgained Indiana 318 yards to 296, but Holland notes, “That was probably our best defensive game all year. You take away a couple of big plays, and they wouldn’t have had anything.”

Indeed. Indiana gained 188 yards on four plays, but just 108 yards on their other 64 plays (1.69 yards per play). Tech held the Hoosiers to just 20 yards rushing for the game, and if not for a 37-yard fake punt late in the fourth quarter, Indiana would have had negative rushing yards on the afternoon. Tech held Indiana to 4-of-16 third down conversions. Receiver Thomas Lewis (6 catches, 177 yards, 2 TD’s) was the lone bright spot for the Big Ten team.

The reason why the Hokies D played so well? “They weren’t ready for our speed,” Holland says simply.

## **After the Game, Divergent Paths**

Though the 1993 Independence Bowl was the beginning of a string of bowl trips for Frank Beamer’s Hokies, it was the end for Bill Mallory’s Hoosiers. Indiana has not played in a bowl game since that fateful day in 1993, and the Hoosiers haven’t even won more than five games in a season since going 7-4 in 1994. Indiana sunk to a 2-9 record in 1995 and then went 3-8 in 1996, leading to Mallory’s dismissal.

For the Hokies, the 1993 Independence Bowl was a launching pad to future greatness. The team would stumble a bit in 1994, as DeShazo’s performance under new offensive coordinator Gary Tranquill suffered (his yardage and completion percentage were comparable to 1993, but his TD-INT ratio slipped to 13-13). The 1994 Tech defense would suffer from injuries and a lack of depth, causing them to fade down the stretch.

But in 1995, they would come back strong behind a defensive nucleus that showed itself in the Independence Bowl, plus a redshirt junior quarterback named Jim Druckenmiller, who played one uneventful series in this Independence Bowl.

Holland put the Independence Bowl into its proper perspective. “After that game,” he remembers, “I knew Tech was going to be good as long as Beamer was there. Elmassion’s (preseason) prediction was right, we went to a bowl. He was extremely happy with our defensive effort. I remember on the

team bus on the way back to the hotel, he was already starting the celebration.” Holland laughs. “It was one of the few times I saw him happy. We dominated the whole game.

“After that season, I knew we were going to be good. I remember me and J.C. were talking, and we were saying, ‘You know, we’ve got two more years of this stuff. We’re going to be good.’”

And it all started in Shreveport, Louisiana, on a sunny New Year’s Eve day.

## The 1995 Sugar Bowl: Will Stewart

For this fan-turned-journalist, the 1995 Sugar Bowl was the end of an era.

*by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com*

### The 1995 Sugar Bowl

Virginia Tech 28, Texas 10

The 1995 Sugar Bowl holds a special place in the hearts of thousands of Hokie fans, but for me, the memories are unique and even more special than they are to your average Hokie fan. The '95 Sugar Bowl, you see, was the last Tech football game that I watched before starting Hokie Central.

Virginia Tech's first Sugar Bowl happened on

December 31st, 1995, and just over two months later, on March 12th, 1996, I started "Will's Hokie Sports Home Page" on the Internet. That small personal page would later evolve into "Hokie Central" (HokieCentral.com) and then TechSideline.com.

My evolution from Hokie fan into Hokie sports journalist (which is a never-ending process) has forever changed the way I view Virginia Tech sports. For most Hokie fans, a Virginia Tech football game is a production that involves travel, tailgating, seeing the game, and hashing it over again later with friends and family.

For me, a Virginia Tech football game is still an enjoyable event, but wrapped around the game is a plethora of work, analysis, and commentary. I write pre-game reports, I recap the game, and two days later, I write a detailed analysis. I try to remember the flow of a game, I watch game tape and analyze it, and I try figure out the reasons why a game went as it did. All the while, I worry about making a mistake, I consult endless reference materials, and I wonder if the fans I'm writing for will appreciate the article I'm writing, or if they'll even read it at all.

In short, a Hokie football game has become a lot of work for me. Most of the fun has been sucked out of it, and what I used to enjoy as a fan has become my business and my life's blood. It is now my calling and my career, not my hobby. I like it, but it's different, very different, from just being the fan that I used to be.

But in late December of 1995, that wasn't true. I had only a slight inkling what the Internet was, starting my own site wasn't even a thought for me, and I was a hard-core Hokie fan who watched the 1995 season unfold with fanatical interest.

When the 1995 Hokies received a Sugar Bowl bid to play 9th-ranked Texas, I, like 32,000 other Hokie fans, bought my game ticket, made my New Orleans travel plans, and wondered what the future would bring. For those of us who had waited so long to see Virginia Tech become a national power in football, the game was a critical turning point in VT history. Like thousands of other Hokie football fans, my hopes and dreams for Virginia Tech football were on the line.

This is the story of the last football game I witnessed as a simple Virginia Tech football fan, before Hokie Central became a part of my life and eventually took it over. Here's what I remember about my trip to New Orleans, how the game went, what the sweet feeling of victory was like, and what happened in the hours after the game.

## The Hokies Get the Bid ... Barely

Virginia Tech started the 1995 season 0-2 with home losses to Boston College and Cincinnati, but they righted the ship with a monumental 13-7 home victory over the Miami Hurricanes. Tech went on to win 9 in a row and finish 9-2, with a 6-1 Big East record. That Big East record was a tie with the Hurricanes for first place.

At the end of the season, the Hokies were ranked #13, and Miami was ranked #21. The Bowl Alliance was in its first year, and despite VT being ranked higher and having won the head-to-head battle, the Orange Bowl appeared to be leaning toward selecting Miami instead of Virginia Tech.

There was one fly in the ointment, though: the Canes had faced the NCAA's Committee on Infractions for a hearing on November 10th of that year and were in danger of NCAA probation for numerous violations involving the football team and other sports. Normally, the NCAA takes four to six weeks to get back to schools on such matters, but the Hurricanes asked for a quicker ruling.

Miami did not want to hit the recruiting trail and tell recruits that they wouldn't go to a bowl in 1996, so they elected to take their medicine, which they assumed would be scholarship and bowl penalties, early. The NCAA obliged, taking just two weeks to hand down a ruling that reduced Miami's scholarships for three seasons and barred them from postseason play in 1995.

In hindsight, Miami's request that the NCAA hurry up and hand out punishment was a poor decision that cost them big money, because the Canes would have been selected by the Orange Bowl in 1995. They passed on it and would not go to an Alliance- or BCS-caliber bowl again until the year 2000.

With the Hurricanes out of the way, the Hokies became the Big East's representative to the Bowl Alliance. Tech was eventually picked by the Sugar Bowl, dead last out of six Alliance teams (the Rose Bowl was not part of the Alliance, so there were only three bowls selecting six teams). Tech was matched up with the Southwest Conference Champion Texas Longhorns ... and the whining and the outcry began immediately.

The national press, which had wholly embraced the resurgent Northwestern Wildcats during that 1995 season in a love-fest of gigantic proportions, were not so kind to the Hokies. ESPN had traveled to Blacksburg late in the season to do a story on the Hokies, only to run a one-minute piece that called a Hokie a "castrated turkey" and talked about Virginia Tech's "ugly" color combination and uniforms. Tech fans were not pleased with that, but it was nothing compared to the bashing Tech got after being invited to the Sugar Bowl.

Instead of rallying around the underdog, media around the country decried Tech's unworthiness to be in an Alliance Bowl. The Texas press in particular was insufferable, moaning about how the Hokies were not worthy to play their glorious, tradition-laden Texas Longhorns.

Leading the charge was ESPN talking head Lee Corso, who said it was a joke that Virginia Tech was in the Sugar Bowl and guaranteed that Texas would win in a romp. Corso's actions leading up to the game made him the most hated college football analyst in the Hokie nation for a long time. The affable Corso is generally well-liked by Hokie fans these days, but back then, had he ventured into Blacksburg, he would have been tarred and feathered and sent home on the back of an ESPN

satellite truck.

## The Matchup

On top of the generally hostile media attitude towards the Hokies, the Longhorns presented a formidable opponent. Their offense featured the “BMW” attack, consisting of sophomore quarterback James Brown, junior running back Shon Mitchell, and freshman running back Ricky Williams. Brown had broken school records with 2,477 passing yards and 19 TD’s that season, and Williams, who would go on to be the NCAA’s career rushing leader and Heisman Trophy winner before graduating, had set a Texas freshman rushing record with 990 yards. Mitchell had added 1,099 rushing yards of his own.

Defensively, the Longhorns weren’t as stout, but they featured future NFL players in defensive end Tony Brackens and cornerback Bryant Westbrook.

Offensively, Tech countered with a productive unit that averaged 31.7 points per game and featured quarterback Jim Druckenmiller (2,103 yards and 14 TD’s), tailbacks Dwayne Thomas (673 yards) and Ken Oxendine (593 yards), and wide receiver Bryan Still (32 catches, 628 yards, and 3 TD’s). On defense, the Hokies were a senior- and junior-laden squad that showcased defensive end Cornell Brown (14 sacks) and were ranked #1 against the run and #10 overall.

## The Days Before the Game

I don’t remember much about the trip down, just that it’s about 830 miles from the New River Valley, and much of it is flat, long, and boring. After driving through Mississippi, I felt sorry for the denizens of that obviously poor state (I don’t know much about Mississippi, but the view from the Interstate is somewhat depressing, and simple conveniences like rest areas are few and far between).

There’s also a funny little town named “Quitman” along the way (when you’ve been driving about 10 hours straight and you’re a little punchy and you hit that sign, it’s good for a few laughs).

I made the long trip with my girlfriend Nan, who would become my fiancée four months later and my wife six months after that, in October of 1996. The trip to New Orleans was actually one of two pivotal events that made me want to marry Nan. The second one was meeting her family, whom I actually liked and got along with.

I figured if (a) I could travel 14 hours in a car with this woman and have a good time, and (b) I liked her family and they liked me, then she was marriage material.

I remember very little about what I did in New Orleans the day or two before the game. I had been to New Orleans before, in 1986 as a junior at Tech, so I had done the whole Bourbon Street/Cajun cuisine thing, and to be honest, I was too worked up over the upcoming game to enjoy myself. The way I saw it, I was there for a specific reason, to see a football game, and anything else — shopping, eating, hanging out in bars — was just “noise.”

Fortunately for Nan, our traveling party included no less than 32 college friends. I had graduated in 1987, so it had been nearly a decade since we had all gotten out of Tech, and the 1995 Sugar Bowl would be the last time that many of us would see each other.

I'm sure it was that way for many people. The thinking at the time was that the Sugar Bowl would possibly be a once-in-a-lifetime event, that the Hokies might never make it back to a bowl game that big again. So we flocked from far and wide to gather in New Orleans for the big game ... and since it was New Orleans, our spouses and girlfriends, many of whom ordinarily might not make a bowl trip, came with us. So while I milled around, watched college football, and talked over the upcoming game with my buddies, Nan had plenty of women to go shopping and sightseeing with.

It sounds sacrilegious to go to New Orleans and not go crazy on Bourbon Street and the French Quarter, but you have to understand, that's how I was back then. I couldn't fully enjoy them with the specter of the biggest game in Virginia Tech history looming over us. Sure, I went out to eat and all that, but when it came to a sightseeing or shopping excursion, I wasn't interested.

## Game Day

December 31st dawned, and the Virginia Tech athletic department had arranged a special treat for us. The Hokie men's basketball team, which was nationally ranked in 1995-1996 (pick your jaw up off the floor — it's true), had moved a home game with Wright State down to New Orleans so that Tech fans who were down there for the bowl game could see them play.

Around noon Central Standard Time, just over 4,000 of us gathered at Lakefront Arena to watch the Hokies whip Wright State 62-46, behind 20 points from Damon Watlington and 16 points from Ace Custis. It was Coach Bill Foster's 500th career win, and as appetizers go, it was pretty enjoyable.

That left us with a few hours to kill before the 6 pm (local time) start of the Sugar Bowl, and for the life of me, I have no idea how I spent those few hours. I'm sure my stomach churned as I filled my time in idle chit-chat and travel time to the Superdome.

The next thing I remember is standing before the Superdome.

It was at that moment that the magnitude of the game hit me. My friends and I stood outside the huge domed structure, jaws agape, and watched as lasers drew first a VT, then a Texas Longhorn logo, both dozens of feet high, on the exterior wall of the Superdome.

*Wow, I remember thinking. They didn't do this at the Independence Bowl or Gator Bowl.*

Inside we went, making our way through the turnstiles, up the stairs, and out through the ramp, into the Superdome interior.

If you've never seen the inside of the Superdome, words can't describe it. It's utterly enormous. Standing on one deck and staring 150 yards or so over to the deck on the other side, it's hard to grasp that it's an *indoor* football field. Surely nothing that huge can be under roof.

Once I had acclimated myself to the cavernous interior of the Dome, I discovered to my utter joy that my seats were in the *very front row* of the upper deck. I was on roughly the ten yard line, but that didn't matter. I was so high up that I could see the field clearly, and there wasn't a single person in front of me. I could just lean on the railing and watch the football game. It was amazing.

(By the way, proving that everything balances out in life, I was stuck in the second row of the end zone at the Orange Bowl the following year — the worst bowl seats I've ever had.)

I was in a Tech section, but for some odd reason, we had a row of Texas fans right behind us. They were a pain in the neck at first, but my Hokies would quiet them down soon enough.

## The Game

Lost in the glow of Tech's eventual 28-10 romp over the Longhorns is the fact that the Hokies didn't play well in the first half, and in fact, you could say they played horribly.

The Hokie defense committed three offsides penalties in the first ten minutes, the last coming when Texas had a third and 5 at the Hokie 11. The penalty gave the Longhorns a first down that they rapidly turned into a touchdown when Brown hit tight end Pat Fitzgerald with a 4-yard TD pass to make it 7-0 Texas, with 4:32 to go in the first quarter.

Also in the first quarter, the Hokies fumbled, and Texas recovered on the Tech 31 yard line. After a trick play (flanker pass) was broken up in the end zone by William Yarborough, Texas committed a holding penalty that pushed them out of field goal range, and they failed to score.

The Hokies escaped the first quarter down 7-0, and on Tech's first possession of the second quarter, they were moving well when Druckenmiller threw an interception on the Texas 32 that was returned 35 yards to the Tech 33-yard line. Again the Hokie defense held, and Texas's Phil Dawson kicked a 52-yard field goal that bounced off the upright and went through, giving Texas a 10-0 lead with 13:19 to go in the half.

On the ensuing kickoff, Antonio Banks fumbled the ball in the end zone, picked it up ... and ran out with it. He didn't get very far, making it to the 5-yard line before he was flattened.

Tech moved comfortably away from their own goal line, but from their 30-yard line, Druckenmiller dropped back and threw an out pattern to tight end Bryan Jennings on the Tech 40. Texas safety Chris Carter anticipated the throw perfectly, cutting in front of Druckenmiller's pass before it reached Jennings. Carter had 40 yards of green turf in front of him and was looking at an interception return for a TD that would have put the Hokies in a 17-0 hole.

Up to that point, things had gone poorly for the Hokies, and as Carter closed on Druckenmiller's errant pass, they threatened to get a lot worse. But somehow, Carter missed it. The ball went through his hands into Jennings' hands, Jennings picked up 12 yards, and the Hokies got a first down, narrowly avoiding a disaster.

Tech wasn't able to do anything with that possession, but they finally stabilized, eliminating the penalties and turnovers that were haunting them. The Longhorns weren't having much offensive success, and the score stayed at 10-0 as the clock ran down on the first half.

Then, with under 3 minutes to go, Texas punter Mark Schultis kicked a low line drive punt to Bryan Still. Still fielded it at his 40, broke cleanly to the right, and raced up the sideline untouched for a TD that made it 10-7, Texas, with 2:34 to go in the half.

The Hokie faithful went nuts. The first half ended with Texas up by just 3 points, and I remember having the distinct feeling that Tech was in good shape. They had taken the Longhorns' best shot and were down by just a field goal. Sure, under coach John Mackovic, the Longhorns were 21-0-1 when leading at half time, but you could smell a Hokie comeback in the air.

All Tech had to do was eliminate the mistakes and start winning the field position battle. The average starting point on Tech's first seven possessions was their own 20 yard line, and they ran just 7 plays in Texas territory in the first half: Druckenmiller's interception, a sack, and five incompletions.

But by the same token, the Hokies were holding the high powered BMW attack of the Longhorns in check. During the first half, Texas was 0-7 on third-down attempts and accumulated just 126 first yards, 72 of which came on their touchdown scoring drive.

You could sense that all Tech had to do was get some momentum, and they would win the game.

You want momentum? You got it. The second half was all about momentum. The Hokies finally got theirs going when fullback Marcus Parker scored on a two-yard run with 2:32 to go in the third quarter, making it 14-10, Hokies. Parker's run capped a 6-play, 67-yard drive that included two 27-yard passes, one to Jennings and the other to Still.

The Hokie defense was stifling the Longhorn offense by now, forcing James Brown to run for his life, and battering him nearly every time he dropped back to pass. Into the fourth quarter the game went, and when Druckenmiller hit Still with a 54-yard touchdown pass early in the fourth quarter to make it 21-10, it was lights-out for Texas.

For the last 12 minutes of the game, the Hokie defense hammered Brown and the Texas offense repeatedly, and with about five minutes to go, Brown fumbled into the waiting arms of Tech defensive tackle Jim Baron, who returned it 20 yards for Tech's final score. Baron did an end zone dance that earned an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty, a shower of cups and ice from irritated Texas fans, and a verbal tirade from Frank Beamer.

But it didn't matter. It was 28-10, Hokies, and five minutes later, they were the 1995 Sugar Bowl champions.

The Hokies sacked James Brown five times in the game and limited him to 148 passing yards. He went 14-of-37 with three interceptions and a lone TD, and Texas had just 78 yards rushing and 226 total yards. Druckenmiller had 266 yards passing, Tech ran up 362 total yards, and Jennings and Still had 6 catches each, for 77 yards and 119 yards respectively.

To their credit, the Texas players were very gracious and respectful in defeat. And Bryan Still, as you can imagine, was named the MVP of the game. After all, they couldn't give it to the entire Tech defense.

## **The Post Game**

I watched the post-game celebration for a while. Tech defensive back Larry Green carried a huge VT flag around the field, and offensive lineman Jay Hagood and several other players jumped into the stands, where they were mobbed by enthusiastic Hokie fans.

I remember not wanting to leave the Superdome, and when I finally did, I made my way up to the tunnel, pausing at the top just before I left the stands.

And I had a bittersweet thought: it couldn't get any better than this. There were very few mountains left for the Hokies to climb. They had gone 10-2 and won the Sugar Bowl, and the only thing that could top the feeling I had at that moment would be a national championship. In the midst of the hysteria and celebration, it sobered me to think that there was now a long way to fall for the Hokies, but very little room to continue moving up.

I wanted the moment to last forever, but it couldn't. I had to go.

We did the Bourbon Street thing that night. I stood at one end of the street and watched for a couple of hours as thousands upon thousands of Hokie fans streamed into the French Quarter. Eventually, the players made their way down, and I met George Del Ricco and Ken Oxendine, among others.

But the perfect capper to the game came the next morning, as we sat around our hotel room and watched College GameDay on ESPN. When it came time to talk about the Sugar Bowl, Lee Corso did the unthinkable: he stared into the camera and apologized to the Virginia Tech Hokies and their fans. "You deserved it," he said, "and I take back everything I said about you."

The room was silent. "Well," I said, "time to pack up and go home. Our work here is done."

## Life Changes

These days, I don't enjoy Hokie football as much as I did back then. That 1995 Sugar Bowl was the last game I watched that I didn't have to write a recap afterwards. I haven't looked at the Virginia Tech Hokies the same since then, because the web site entered my life just a few months after that, and I've had a duty to write up the facts of the game and comment on it from that day forward.

I enjoy it, but it's different. It's more like work. I can't just watch the game and then relax later, like I used to be able to do. Most days, I don't know if that's good or bad, but I know that it's what I do, so I have to do it.

Or perhaps I'm just getting older and calmer. But I remember coming out of the tunnel to find my seats before the game that night, and as I located those beautiful, perfect seats on the front row of the upper deck, I heard the Marching Virginians kick into *The Twilight Zone*, my favorite piece of music that the MV's do.

I broke into an impromptu dance of joy, gyrating wildly to the music. The early-arriving fans who could see me all pointed and got a good laugh out of the young guy dancing like a maniac. It was the Sugar Bowl, I had great seats, and the MV's were playing my favorite song. Life was good.

I would never do that these days. That little piece of me is gone, for whatever reason, be it age, maturity, or the business of sports journalism that I'm involved in now. Besides, these days, if I pulled a stunt like that, a few dozen people would point at me and say, "Hey, isn't that that guy Will from TSL? What the hell is he doing? He looks like an idiot."

## The 1998 Music City Bowl: Bud Foster

Tech's rousing victory over Alabama put the Hokies and their defensive coordinator on the fast track to success.

*by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com*

### The 1998 Music City Bowl

Virginia Tech 38, Alabama 7

On December 29, 1998, the Hokie football team entered the frigid, wet cold of Vanderbilt Stadium in Nashville with nothing less than the future of the program on the line. The heady days of the mid-1990's, with two ten-win seasons and a pair of Alliance Bowl bids, were starting to fade in the distance.

Of greater concern to the Hokies was a lackluster 1997 season (7-5) that had ended with a 42-3 pasting at the hands of North

Carolina in the Gator Bowl, followed by a decent 1998 season (8-3) that was marred by opportunities missed.

The Hokies had led in all three of their losses but had seen them slip away, including a humiliating home defeat at the hands of the Temple Owls. After starting out 5-0 with impressive road wins at Clemson (37-0), Miami (27-20 in OT), and Boston College (17-0), the Hokies held a 17-0 lead against the Owls late in the first half. Temple strung together three straight TD's and hung on for a 28-24 win that knocked the high-flying Hokies back to earth.

They would drop two more big leads, squandering a 21-3 advantage at Syracuse (the Orange won 28-26) and losing a 29-7 half time advantage over Virginia in the last game of the season (the Cavaliers won 36-32).

The 8-3 finish was haunted by thoughts of what might have been. Tech had suffered through key injuries to quarterbacks Al Clark and Dave Meyer, forcing them to move safety Nick Sorensen back to his original quarterback position for starts against Boston College, Temple, and UAB.

Even when Clark was at the helm, the offense had been anemic at times, particularly against Syracuse in the Carrier Dome, and the Hokies and their fans were left wondering what the team could have done had they had a more potent offensive attack.

The defense, on the other hand, was stellar. The Hokie defense featured a fearsome pass rush, led by Big East Defensive Player of the Year Corey Moore, who had 13.5 sacks. The team as a whole registered 48 sacks, more than four per game. They coupled that fierce pass rush with an amazing 23 interceptions.

The special teams did their part, turning in a team-record 12 blocked kicks. Between the two of them, the defense and special teams scored a remarkable 9 touchdowns, adding significantly to the Hokies' points per game average of 31.2.

The Hokies were very much perceived, rightfully so, as a defensive and special teams unit with a mediocre offense.

Bud Foster was in his fourth year as the Hokies' defensive coordinator and his 12th year at Virginia Tech overall. He had seen good defenses at Tech before, and he knew the Hokies were sitting on top of a special unit, not just for 1998, but beyond.

"Defensively we were pretty good that year," Foster recalls. "Corey Moore came into his own, Jamel Smith and Michael Hawkes started for the first time, and we had a lot of guys there that were really good players for us. If I'm not mistaken, we were top 10 in just about every category that year, too. Loren Johnson, Keion Carpenter, those guys had great years as seniors.

"We really did some good things on D that year. We lost three games that season, and the three games we lost were all heartbreak losses. It just showed how close we actually were to being an elite football program."

In retrospect, that's a true statement (Michael Vick would light that candle the next season) but going into the Music City Bowl, Hokie fans weren't sure. The team had lost eight games in two seasons, hardly the hallmark of an elite program, and if they didn't pull off a win against Alabama in the Music City Bowl, it would be their third bowl loss in a row — not a good thing.

## **The Lowdown on the Tide**

Foster respected the challenge that Alabama presented. Like the Hokies, they were a young team, and they were improving. "Going into that game, I remember, Alabama had a good football team that year, too. I felt good about our plan going in. Also, we were getting ready to play one of the most storied programs in college football and it looked like they were back right again. I just know they were kind of getting some things turned around."

Alabama featured running back Shaun Alexander, who not only had 1,276 yards rushing but had caught 26 passes for 385 yards. He had scored 17 TD's and was the total package, an NFL prospect all the way. Junior offensive tackle Chris Samuels (6-6, 285) was a formidable force, as well.

But what really made the Tide roll was its redshirt freshman quarterback, Andrew Zow. Zow reminded the Hokies of James Brown, the Texas QB they had squared off against in the 1995 Sugar Bowl. Zow had been handed the starting job midway through the season and had made some mistakes along the way, but he had thrown for nearly 2,000 yards and had 11 TD's against only 7 interceptions. He was a threat to run as well as pass.

Add in the fact that the Hokies were 0-10 all-time against Alabama, including a 77-6 pasting in 1973, and the Hokies were up against a titan. At a time when they needed a win, Tech was facing a tall order.

## **The Game**

By now, you know what happened. The Hokies dominated Alabama with their characteristically strong defense and special teams, and their opportunistic offense.

The mismatch along the line of scrimmage was evident from the beginning. The Hokies scored easily on their first possession. Shyrone Stith returned the opening kickoff to the Tech 43, and after the Hokies picked up a first down, Al Clark evaded an eight-man rush and scooted up the right

sideline for a 43-yard TD. Less than three minutes into the game, the Hokies were up 7-0.

The Tech defensive line brought the heat on Zow immediately. Corey Moore sacked Zow on his first pass attempt, and when the Tide lined up to punt, Keion Carpenter, playing in his final game, blocked it. The Hokies had possession deep in 'Bama territory, but Clark squandered it with an end zone interception.

On Alabama's second possession, the Hokie defense fooled him again when defensive end Ryan Smith dropped back into coverage on a zone blitz. Duped by the scheme, Zow threw it right to him, and Smith returned it to the Alabama 36 yard line.

"Any time you can get to that quarterback early and make him think about some things, it's always a plus," Foster noted about Tech's quick defensive start. "We didn't do it out of blitz pressure as much as we did our front four. If you can get that kind of pressure there and then throw in a couple of extra guys, it gives that QB even more to think about."

Tech squandered this opportunity as well, when a personal foul on Smith's return pushed the ball back to the 49 yard line of Virginia Tech. The Hokies moved the ball to the Alabama 25, but then Shayne Graham missed a 42-yard field goal in the wet, cold conditions.

Alabama responded with their one bright spot of the game, an awesome 18-play, 75-yard TD drive that took nearly *ten minutes* off the clock and made the score 7-7 with 9:56 to go, first half. Zow completed eight straight passes on the drive, and the Tide converted three third downs and a fourth down.

But even though the Tide had been successful on the drive, they seemed to spend all their energy and luck making it down the field. Zow ran for his life repeatedly, and the Tide got a break from a Tech penalty and a bad call from the referee on a trapped Alabama reception that kept the drive alive. Sure, Alabama went 75 plays in 18-yards, but the entire drive was a near-miracle that wasn't likely to repeat itself.

It didn't. Tech controlled the remainder of the first half but could only add a field goal, and they took a 10-7 lead into half time.

The Hokies were dominating the game, but they only had a three-point lead to show for it. Nothing was a done deal, because their defense had failed them in all three losses during the regular season (with a nod and some credit to the opponents), and it could possibly repeat itself.

No dice. Corey Moore would have none of it.

Moore and his mates continued to hassle Zow constantly in the second half, and the freshman finally made a huge mistake, throwing an interception to Tech's Phillip Summers deep in Alabama territory. Summers returned it to the 2 yard line, and a couple of plays later, Lamont Pegues scored to make it 17-7, Hokies.

Then Moore blocked a punt, Tech's second of the game, and the Hokies took over at Alabama's 29. One pass interference penalty and one 4-yard Shyrone Stith run later, the Hokies had pushed their lead out to 24-7, with 5:08 to go in the third quarter.

From that point on, with the Hokie defense hounding Zow, it was just a matter of running out the clock. Alabama continued to press, and they contributed to the Hokies' cause by bobbling a punt on their own 20 that Tech recovered and drove in for a touchdown.

The final stroke came with 7:33 to go in the game when Zow launched a pass under heavy pressure that Tech's Anthony Midget picked off and ran 27 yards untouched for the TD.

Four second half touchdowns by the Hokies, with all four coming after Alabama turnovers or Hokie special teams plays. In the end, Tech won going away, 38-7. The Hokies only outgained Alabama 278-274, but they had just one turnover — a harmless one — to Alabama's four.

(Incidentally, in one example of how sometimes the time of possession stat means nothing, Alabama held the ball 36:17 to Tech's paltry 23:43.)

"They had the Alexander kid, who was a great player," Foster acknowledged, and Alexander did indeed get 142 of Alabama's 274 yards. "They had some speed receivers. They spread us out. We were able to get pressure on them, though, and we stopped the run. We did a couple little things, a couple little wrinkles we threw in, and forced them to throw a pick early. We took them out of some formations they wanted to use, and we didn't give up any big plays.

"That particular bowl game, we had the ice storm (earlier in the week)," Foster recalls, "and they were traveling us all over to find us a practice site. Our kids didn't bat an eye. I remember Alabama, they were complaining about this and that, but our kids were very resilient, and we went out and played that way."

## **The Aftermath**

The rousing victory over a traditional power put the 24th-ranked Hokies back on the college football map. Tech had been there once before with Sugar Bowl (1995) and Orange Bowl (1996) trips, but they had slipped off with their mediocre 1997 season and embarrassing 1998 Temple loss.

The national media sat up and took notice of the whipping the Hokies laid on the Tide, and the win set the stage for Tech to be highly ranked (preseason #13) to open the 1999 season. You can argue that had the Hokies lost to Alabama in this bowl, they would not have been ranked as highly to start the 1999 season, and even with the 11-0 regular season, might not have climbed to #2 in the BCS rankings in 1999.

So in a big way, the Music City Bowl set the stage for Tech's national championship game appearance the following season.

Foster, and everyone else associated with the Tech program, knows that. "That win opened a lot of eyes for our football players as far as yeah, we can compete with the big national programs. It carried over to the 1999 season. It was just a great win for our program to beat the type of team and tradition and history that Alabama has."

While the win brought national attention to the Tech team, it brought attention to Bud Foster, as well. Around that time, Bob Stoops left his position as defensive coordinator at Florida to be head

coach of the Oklahoma Sooners, and Florida's Steve Spurrier asked to interview Foster for the position of Gators defensive coordinator.

Was this the game that cemented the national reputation that Bud Foster now has? "Maybe," Foster says. "After that game is when Steve Spurrier called me. A lot of people recognized that maybe we'd played pretty good D over the years. I think game helped my career a little bit."

It is a matter of Tech football myth and legend whether or not Spurrier ever offered the job to Foster, and whether or not Foster declined it, but one thing is true: Foster did not leave for Florida, and he is still at Virginia Tech, where he is becoming widely regarded as the most likely successor to Frank Beamer, should Beamer step down any time soon.

That is a matter for the future, but when looking at Tech's football past, one thing is clear: the Music City Bowl ranks not just as one of the most enjoyable Tech bowl wins of all time, but as one of its most important.

## The 2000 Gator Bowl: Ronyell Whitaker

The attention was on Michael Vick, but Ronyell Whitaker not-so-quietly played a major role.

*by Art Stevens*

### The 2000 Gator Bowl

Virginia Tech 41, Clemson 20

Virginia Tech's Hokies hadn't been in Jacksonville, Fla., too long. They'd arrived just that afternoon in fact, six days away from their meeting with Clemson in the 2001 Gator Bowl.

Already, a function beckoned.

On arrival night, participating teams are taken to Dave and Buster's. That's an eatery with a huge game room attached. Players Media was invited to attend, so interviews

could grab some grub and play some video games. were mixed in with the fun.

It was at this event that Virginia Tech's Ronyell Whitaker got his first live look at Clemson's Rod Gardner.

Whitaker already knew plenty about Gardner. A cornerback, Whitaker makes it a point to learn everything he can about his "man" for the week. Gardner was a wide receiver who would end up as Clemson's all-time leader in receptions. He was big at 6-4, 230 pounds. He was being projected as a first-round draft pick (and that's exactly where he ended up, going to the Washington Redskins with the 15<sup>th</sup> overall selection).

He was playing in his hometown and was excited about that. Like Whitaker, Gardner is a guy who loves to talk. It promised to be quite a matchup.

"That was the first time I'd seen him and I was like, 'Gosh, he is a first-round draft pick.' I saw how big he was," the 5-9 Whitaker recalled. "I'd been watching him on film a lot, wondering is he that good?"

"Well, he is that good. He's a great receiver. He has the size, the speed, he's physical, he's strong. I knew it wasn't going to be any cakewalk checking him."

Whitaker had one advantage. Going against a top-flight receiver was nothing new. During the 2000 season, he earned second-team All-Big East Conference honors. That's a league well-stocked with receivers. Miami had two who went in the first round in Santana Moss and Reggie Wayne. Pittsburgh had Antonio Bryant and Latef Grim. Whitaker had seen big-time up close.

He saw the assignment of covering Gardner as an honor and a challenge.

"The package Coach (Bud) Foster had in for that game was brilliant and I'm glad they gave me the opportunity, that they believed in me and felt I could cover him one on one," Whitaker said.

Tech beat Clemson in convincing fashion, 41-20, for the final victory in its second consecutive 11-1 season.

Stars were everywhere. Quarterback Michael Vick, playing what turned out to be his final game in a Hokies uniform, was voted Most Valuable Player. He threw for 205 yards and a touchdown. He ran for another score.

Lee Suggs, the man with 28 regular-season touchdowns, added three more (though they don't count on his Tech record because the school doesn't count bowl-game stats).

Andre Davis didn't have a huge day at wide receiver, with only two catches for 70 yards. But one of the receptions was a 55-yarder, a sign that Davis was feeling much better after the various leg injuries that bothered him late in the season (he had surgery the week after the Gator Bowl).

On defense, there was a school of thought that tackle David Pugh should have been the game's MVP. He led a vicious pass rush that kept Clemson quarterbacks Woodrow Dantzler and Willie Simmons scrambling for their safety. The two were sacked six times. Jim Davis, only a freshman, had sacks of Simmons on successive plays.

"That was probably the best pressure we were able to get on a quarterback just with our front four," Foster, the defensive coordinator, said. "We didn't blitz as much as we have in other games, especially early. Our front four controlled the line of scrimmage. We just played fast. Pugh was outstanding, I thought a key force that day."

Whitaker?

Well, statistically it appears Gardner had a decent game. He finished with seven catches for 94 yards, not a bad outing. He caught a 23-yard touchdown pass from Simmons. Clemson does count bowl stats in its records and Gardner became No. 1 with his Gator Bowl showing.

That said, Whitaker had one of the better games of his career. Clemson tried to find Gardner deep early and couldn't get a completion. Much of his success came after the Hokies had assumed control.

Whitaker had one of Tech's two interceptions. He returned it 27 yards to tie a school record for the longest interception return in a bowl game.

"Ronyell played a great game," Foster said. "He was in the guy's face all day. He was very, very solid. I think just taking (Gardner) out of the offense was as big a contribution as we could get. They tried to take some deep shots at him early that were incomplete, that Ronyell contested, knocked away. He had some little quick gains, stop routes, that type of thing.

"Basically it just took a big part of their offense, a big weapon, right out of the game."

Gardner, like Whitaker, is all-world when it comes to talking. He wasn't shy in Jacksonville.

"At the beginning of the game, he had a lot to say," Whitaker recalled. "He was saying things like I wasn't on his level, what made me think I could check him, things like that."

Whitaker didn't respond with silence. He talked, too.

“Of course,” he said with a laugh. “I was just telling him we were about to see right now, about to prove in front of the whole world right now. Let’s do it.

“And a few other things.”

He even got into the act with Clemson coach Tommy Bowden. At one point, Whitaker and Foster said, Bowden implored Gardner by yelling, “Rod, baby, Rod, baby, the guy is only 5-9. Work your magic.”

Whitaker’s response? “I told him he would have been better off bringing Tulane (Bowden’s former team),” Whitaker said.

All in fun, he hastened to add. He respects the Bowden family, he said, and is looking forward to going against Tommy’s father Bobby and Florida State in the upcoming Gator Bowl. He also respects Gardner, who Whitaker said stayed pretty quiet as the game progressed.

The two didn’t get a chance to speak after the game.

“It was hard checking him,” Whitaker said. “He is good.”

Whitaker heaped praise on the Hokies’ pass rush that day, pointing out that it made it much easier to cover.

“They were stellar, the way they played that game was unreal,” Whitaker said. “They bottled (Dantzler) up, he couldn’t get going. That set the stage for the secondary. We really didn’t have to heat him up a whole lot because those guys were playing so well.”

He’ll take the same mindset into this year’s bowl as he did last year. “You want to go out and provide as much energy, as big a spark as possible,” Whitaker said. “That not only helps me, it helps the younger guys on the team see how to step up in games like this.”

It’s been said by many that a bowl game is as much the first game of the following season as it is the final game of the previous season. Many college football fans make it a point to catch as many bowls as they can on television, often the only time they’ll see a particular team. Reputations are made that carry over to the next year.

Whitaker is a believer in that theory. In 2001, he earned first team All-Big East honors and third-team All-America honors. Oh, he earned them with his play in 2001. If he’d stunk, his performance against Gardner wouldn’t have meant a thing. But it was his performance against Gardner that helped label Whitaker as one to watch and watchers – the voters for the various honors teams – obviously liked what they saw.

“That game gave me a confidence boost,” said Whitaker, who already had plenty of that. “It built my confidence to a whole ‘nother level. After that, I thought I could guard anybody.”

## Inside the Numbers: Bowl Payouts

To no one's surprise, the rich get richer in the bowl system.

*by Will Stewart, TechSideline.com*

**This season, there are 25 bowls paying out a total of \$147,140,000. That's nearly \$150 million to spread around 50 teams. But when you start digging into what teams from which conferences get all that money, you quickly discover to no one's surprise, that the rich are getting richer in the bowl system.**

This month in "Inside the Numbers," we'll break down the bowl payouts and tell you where all the money goes. We did this same

analysis two years ago, after the Hokies' run at the 1999 national championship, and we found that two years later, nothing much has changed. There are two new bowls that boost the total payout slightly, but it's still the haves — namely the BCS teams and conferences — and the have-nots.

First, let's define our terms: the BCS conferences are, of course, the ACC, Big 12, Big East, Big Ten, PAC 10, and SEC. The non-BCS conferences are everyone else: Conference USA (CUSA), the Mountain West, the WAC, the MAC, and the Sun Belt. Those are the only conferences that are tied into bowls.

Note that per-team payouts are not really the dollar amounts that go to each team. Bowl money goes to the conferences, and then the conferences distribute the money to their members as they see fit. In most of the BCS conferences, the total bowl money brought in by a conference is distributed evenly amongst all the teams in the conference. This is not the case in the Big East and the SEC, where participating teams are rewarded more handsomely.

The ACC, Big Ten, Big 12 and PAC 10 split revenues equally among all members. The Big East splits the revenues equally among all members after deducting "participation" allowances, which are based on conference standings. The Big East conference champion, which participates in a BCS bowl, has a \$4 million "allowance." Second place has an allowance of \$1.8 million, third place \$1.65 million, and so on through all their bowl tie-ins.

The SEC isn't quite as generous to participating teams, although it does split revenue based on a formula where participating members receive a larger share based on the bowl payout. Non-participating members split the balance.

Another little nugget about the BCS is that in addition to the big money that it pays out to the BCS conferences, it also pays out about \$5 million per year to non-BCS conferences. In 2000, the WAC, Mountain West, and Conference USA each got \$800,000 from the BCS. The MAC got \$600,000, and the Big West received \$300,000. Eight non-BCS Division 1AA conferences received another \$1.2 million (\$150,000 apiece).

Note that for purposes of this analysis, we'll assume the BCS payouts to non-BCS conferences are the same for 2001 as they were for 2000. We'll also assume that the Sun Belt, which didn't get a payment last year, will receive \$300,000, like the Big West did last year.

## A Little-Known Fact About BCS Payouts

The BCS bowl (Rose, Sugar, Fiesta, and Orange) payouts are defined as \$11.67 million per team. This year, the Big 12 and SEC have two BCS teams each, so you would think the payouts would go like this:

Big 12 and SEC: 2 x \$11.78 million = \$23.56 million  
Other BCS conferences = \$11.78 million  
Total BCS payout = 8 x \$11.78 million = \$94.24 million

But there's a little-known wrinkle in how the BCS distributes the money. In order to keep the two-team conferences from profiting so much in comparison to the one-team conferences, this rule is invoked (from the BCS web site):

*This coming season, BCS participants will receive between \$11.78-14.67 million depending on the conference affiliation of the at-large participants. Should the at-large participants come from outside the original BCS conferences — ACC, Big East, Big Ten, Big 12, PAC 10 or SEC — those participants will receive \$11.78 million. If one or both at-large selections come from within the original BCS group, the first conference participant shall receive \$11.78 million and the second participant from that same conference shall receive \$6 million. The remaining dollars (the difference between \$11.78 million and \$6 million) will be split among the originating BCS conferences that have just one participant.*

What that means is this: Each conference gets \$11.78 million to start. Since the Big 12 and SEC have two teams, they each get an additional \$6 million (for \$17.78 million total), and another \$11.56 million (\$5.78 million times two) is distributed to the other four conferences, giving them \$14.67 million each:

SEC and Big 12: \$17.78 million  
Other BCS conferences = \$14.67 million

You can see that a split of \$17.78 million versus \$14.67 million is much more equitable than \$23.56 million versus \$11.78 million.

## The Data: Payout by Bowl

From a money standpoint, if you want to take a quick snapshot of the bowls and their payouts, here it is:

Per-team payout	# of bowls
\$750k-800k	11
\$1.0-\$1.8 million	6
\$2.0-\$2.2 million	3
\$4.25 million	1
\$11.78 million (BCS)	4
<b>Total Bowls</b>	<b>25</b>

The growth in the number of bowls in recent years has all been at the bottom end, the \$750k bowls (\$750,000 is the minimum payout required by the NCAA to certify a bowl). If you look at the \$1 million bowls and up, you see the familiar names: Independence Bowl, Sun Bowl, Gator Bowl, Peach Bowl, Citrus Bowl, etc.

If you look at the bottom end, you see the Johnny-come-latelies: New Orleans Bowl, Tangerine Bowl, Seattle Bowl, Galleryfurniture.com Bowl, Motor City Bowl, Silicon Valley Classic, etc.

And if you look at bottom end, you see the non-BCS conferences: WAC, MAC, Sun Belt, CUSA, and Mountain West. If you look at the upper end bowls (\$1 million and up), you see the power BCS conferences: SEC, Big 12, Big Ten, etc.

Take a look at this table, which clearly shows that the power conferences get the big-money bowls.

<b>Bowl Payout</b>	<b># of Bowls</b>	<b># of Bowl Teams by Conference</b>
\$750k-\$800k	11	<i>Sun Belt (1), Mt. West (2), MAC (2), WAC (2), CUSA (3), ACC (3), Big East (3), PAC 10 (2), Big 12 (2), Big Ten (1), SEC (1)</i>
\$1.0-\$1.8 million	6	<i>Big 12 (2), SEC (2), PAC 10 (1), Big Ten (2), Mt. West (1), CUSA (1), Big East (1), ACC (2)</i>
\$2.0-\$4.25 million	4	<i>Big 12 (2), SEC (3), PAC 10 (1), Big Ten (2)</i>
\$11.78 million (BCS)	4	<i>Big 12 (2), SEC (2), PAC 10 (1), Big Ten (1), ACC (1), Big East (1)</i>

Note: non-BCS conference teams italicized

You quickly note that once the payouts get above \$800,000, the non-BCS teams disappear. The one exception is the Liberty Bowl, which pays \$1.3 million per team and pits the Conference USA champion against the Mountain West champion. But other than the Liberty Bowl, non-BCS teams usually earn just \$750,000 for playing a bowl.

## BCS Conferences Versus Non-BCS Conferences

<b>Conf.</b>	<b>Bowl Teams</b>	<b>Conference Revenue from Bowls</b>			
		<b>Total Payout</b>	<b>Payout Per Bowl Team</b>	<b>Total # of Teams in Conference</b>	<b>Per-Team Payout</b>
SEC	8	\$29,780,000	\$3,722,500	12	\$2,481,667
BIG12	8	\$25,480,000	\$3,185,000	12	\$2,123,333
BIGTEN	6	\$24,070,000	\$4,011,667	11	\$2,188,182
ACC	6	\$20,120,000	\$3,353,333	9	\$2,235,556
PAC10	5	\$19,220,000	\$3,844,000	10	\$1,922,000
BE	5	\$18,320,000	\$3,664,000	8	\$2,290,000
CUSA *	4	\$4,350,000	\$1,087,500	10	\$435,000
MTWEST *	3	\$3,650,000	\$1,216,667	8	\$456,250
WAC *	2	\$2,300,000	\$1,150,000	10	\$230,000
MAC *	2	\$2,100,000	\$1,050,000	13	\$161,538
SUNBELT *	1	\$1,050,000	\$1,050,000	7	\$150,000
	50	\$150,440,000	\$3,008,800	110	\$1,367,636

\* Important note: Total Payout for non-BCS conferences also includes BCS money: \$800k apiece for CUSA,

the Mountain West, and the WAC; \$600k for the MAC, and \$300k for the Sun Belt.

Here are some items worth noting:

- The BCS conferences receive \$136,990,000 of the \$150,440,000 handed out. That's 91% of the total bowl money.
- The total payout of \$150,440,000 shown in the table exceeds the actual *bowl* payout of \$147,140,000 quoted earlier (a \$3.3 million difference) because the BCS organization distributes money to non-BCS conferences. This money, which totals \$3.3 million for the conferences shown, is not "bowl payout" money per se but should be included when calculating the total revenue from bowls.
- The edge that the SEC and Big 12 have over other BCS conferences is due, of course, to the fact that they have 2 BCS teams each.
- The Big East is 6th among the 6 BCS conferences in terms of total payout, but they're 2nd in payout per conference team — thanks to the fact that the Big East only has 8 teams, the fewest of the BCS conferences. I think it's fascinating that even with three \$750k bowls, the Big East's per-team take is second only to the SEC, thanks to the BCS money distribution among just 8 Big East teams.
- This table verifies through hard data what we already knew: the BCS conferences are making a boatload more from the bowl system than the non-BCS conferences. The BCS conferences take home roughly \$14 for every \$1 that the non-BCS conferences do.

## And Within the BCS Conferences, the Rich Get Richer

Within the-rich-get-richer scenario of the BCS versus non-BCS conferences, there is a rich-get-richer subplot going on right within the BCS conferences. Namely, the SEC, Big Ten, Big 12 and PAC 10 are getting richer, but the ACC and Big East are not.

In the four years the BCS has been in existence, the BCS bowl invitations extended to the conferences have gone thus:

BCS Bids, 1998-2001	
Conference	BCS Bids
SEC	7
Big Ten	6
Big 12	5
PAC 10	5
ACC	4
Big East	4
Notre Dame	1

The ACC and Big East have never had an at-large team selected for a BCS bowl ... and it may never happen, either. You can see that the SEC has had two teams selected for BCS bowls almost every year, and the Big Ten is right behind them, averaging two teams every other year. The Big 12,

PAC 10, and Notre Dame have picked up the three at-large bids in four years that the SEC and Big Ten have not taken up.

In short, out of 8 at-large bids, the SEC and Big Ten have had 5 of them.

In 1997, a very deserving North Carolina team, ranked #5 in the country, was passed over for a big bowl (okay, that was pre-BCS days, but you get my point). The at-large bids that year went to Kansas State (ranked #9) and Ohio State (ranked #10).

In 2000, a very deserving VT team, ranked #5 in the country and #5 in the BCS, was passed over for Notre Dame (ranked #10 and #11 in the BCS) in the Fiesta Bowl.

The snub of ACC and Big East teams in favor of teams from the other BCS conferences and yes, Notre Dame, is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, particularly in years where Florida State wins the ACC and Miami wins the Big East. The ACC and Big East are included in the BCS scenario primarily because FSU and Miami, two of college football's glamour teams, are in those conferences. Once you get beyond FSU and Miami, the college football power structure, which centers on traditional powers from the other four BCS conferences, doesn't have much use for the Big East and ACC.

The only way the ACC or Big East will ever likely get two bids is if FSU and/or Miami loses the conference championship but is very highly ranked at the end of the season (for instance, VT goes 11-0 and Miami goes 10-1, with the only loss coming to VT). In that case, the BCS will be forced to take the ACC and/or Big East champion, and might pick FSU or Miami at large.

But if you're waiting for the BCS to pick an at-large team from the ACC or Big East that is not FSU or Miami, then you'll be waiting for a long time. Last year, they passed up the #5 team in the country (VT) with one of the most exciting players ever in college football (Michael Vick).

The point is, that \$14.67 million figure that you see next to the ACC and Big East's BCS bowl revenue this year is likely to always stay at that number. The \$17.78 million figure that the Big 12 and SEC are enjoying this year is likely to get passed around between them, the Big Ten, and the PAC 10.

## The Data

You can download the bowl payout data and view it, either as a web page, or as a Microsoft Excel 97 spreadsheet.

<http://www.techsideline.com/tslextra/issue014/bowlmatchups20012002.htm>

To download the data yourself in Microsoft Excel 97 spreadsheet format, head to this link:

<http://www.techsideline.com/tslextra/issue014/bowlmatchups20012002.xls>

(Right-click the link and do a "Save Link As" or "Save Target As" to save the Excel file to disk.)

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