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Will the Tom Bowl participants ever show up?

Saturday, December 24, 2005

As noon approaches today, Tom Cantrell will scan the parking lot at Beal City's Frank A. Schafer Stadium in search of busses carrying the Southern Cal, Texas or Penn State football teams.

If they do arrive, at last a "Tom Bowl" can actually take place.

In reality, Cantrell doesn't expect it to happen, but it's part of an annual tradition he established in 1989. That's when Cantrell formed the Tom Bowl, a mythical football bowl game designed to match the top two college teams in the country.

Cantrell came up with his bowl idea as a way to protest the college bowl system, which still is without a bona fide playoff system to determine a national champion. In 1989, Colorado and Miami, Fla., were the top two ranked teams in the country at the end of the regular season, but didn't play each other in a bowl game.

Cantrell was a student at Michigan State University at the time, and decided to take matters into his own hands. He formed Tom Bowl (because that's all he could think of at the time, plus that happens to be the President's first name). He sent out invitations to the athletic directors at both universities and to the conferences they represented. Included in the package is an official Tom Bowl bid and a game program.

What started on a whim, actually drew a response that first year when Colorado Athletic Director Bill Marolt wrote Cantrell back, thanking him for the invitation but informing Cantrell that the Buffaloes were going to accept their bid to the Orange Bowl instead.

More money, more exposure. What's a Tom Bowl to do?

What Cantrell did was turn his Tom Bowl into a labor of love. He formed a Web site www.tombowl.com. He designed a Tom Bowl trophy and official bowl logo. He delighted as the nostalgia grew with each passing year. He's received numerous letters from universities and conferences thanking him for the invitation to the Tom Bowl, but declining the bid just the same.

Respect is tough to come by when you're a Tom Bowl representative. The Tom Bowl still has no corporate sponsors, no sanction from the NCAA and no television contract (other than a video camera or two).

Each year, the invitations were sent out to selected universities, and each year around Christmas time, Cantrell and a few others (why? I don't know) joined him at the site of the game. The first five Tom Bowls were "held" at Stanley P. Meade Field in New Canaan, Conn. After relocating to DeWitt, Cantrell "moved" the game to Beal City, home of his wife Cammie. In fact, Cantrell is trying to withstand a movement by the "Return the Tom Bowl to Stanley P. Meade Field in New Canaan Committee." Cantrell admits the committee regularly offers bribes in the form of chocolate chip cookies to get the game returned to new Canaan. There also are suspicions that the committee is behind the disappearance of the original Tom Bowl Trophy. As for the "game," fans actually turn out. Two years ago, three fans showed up. All were descendants of Schafer, who the stadium is named for. Last year 28 fans turned out, including a security personnel to direct the traffic.

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Tailgating and pre-parking the night before the game is allowed, although in the 16 years of the Tom Bowl Cantrells says he's only had two tailgaters. "They actually were two people who came to the game but didn't want to get out of their car to go into the stands."

Cantrell has had to remain flexible in how he formulates his matchups because, as he admits, there are some years when college football gets it right and the top two teams do play for the national title. One year, the Tom Bowl was forced to hold the Big Ten Championship game in a year when Iowa and Ohio State tied for the conference title, but didn't play in the regular season.

This year, Cantrell devised a formula to include the top three teams in the country, USC, Texas and Penn State. The "game" will consist of thirds instead of quarters, with each team playing against each other for one half of a football game. Cantrell will total the scores to determine the Tom Bowl winner.

Each year, Cantrell finds that his make-believe game draw more fans and more attention. The Tom Bowl recently was featured on CNN's "Headline News." National publications CNN/SI and The Sporting News also have mentioned it, as have several state media outlets.

And now, 16 years later Cantrell's wife even is on board.

"In the last year or two she finally came to accept that this probably isn't going to go away," Cantrell says.

Who knows? If enough money was guaranteed to the participating teams you can bet busses carrying the teams actually would pull into the parking lot at Frank A. Schafer Stadium to play the game.

I'd even pay the price of admission to see the expression on Cantrell's face when it happens. v

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