



FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, IS BIG BETTER?

Posted on August 17, 2015

By Ed Waldman

Think of it like stepping up to a Maserati after 60 years of driving a Cadillac.

That Caddy had treated you well. It was comfortable. You knew where every dial and gauge was -- in fact, you helped design it. Now, after driving that Maserati for a year, you now keep asking yourself, "What the heck was I worried about?"

The University of Maryland will begin its second year of Big Ten competition this month, and by nearly every measure, the move from the Atlantic Coast Conference, which the Terps helped start in 1953, has been a rousing success.

In fact, if not for the secrecy that surrounded the negotiations that brought Maryland into the Big Ten, and the debate over whether the Board of Regents should have been consulted on the move, there'd be precious little conflict to the story.

The concerns that were raised at the time -- the loss of traditional rivals, such as North Carolina and Duke, the increased travel distances that would take athletes away from College Park, Md., for longer stretches of time and make it harder for fans and parents to follow their teams on the road -- have generally been silenced.

The benefits have been many and significant, as have the successes. The Terps reported a 13.8 percent increase in football attendance (largest in the Big Ten) and a 25 percent increase in season tickets last season -- a direct result of having Ohio State, Iowa and Michigan

State come to Byrd Stadium instead of Syracuse, Clemson, Virginia and Boston College.

Head coach Randy Edsall led the team to a 7-6 record, 4-4 in the Big Ten, including victories on the road at Michigan, Penn State and Indiana.

Ticket revenue for men's basketball was up 7 percent, and head coach Mark Turgeon's squad was 28-7 (15-4 in the Big Ten) and made it to the Round of 32 in the NCAA tournament.

And the on-field success -- as well as the increased revenue from the Big Ten Network and the travel subsidy worth between \$20 million and \$30 million that the Terps got from the conference -- has helped Maryland see the light at the end of the tunnel of a reported \$21 million athletic department deficit.

Athletic director Kevin Anderson told PressBox in an email that the athletic department plans to have a budget surplus by 2018.

"We are confident with our plan in place that we are heading in the right direction," Anderson wrote.

The move to the Big Ten has even brought unforeseen benefits -- championship tournaments being held in Chicago instead of Greensboro, N.C., for example, and a boost to the effort to remake College Park into a world-class college town.

A TURTLE CAN'T MOVE BACKWARD

No more taunting Coach K. No more rivalry with next-door-neighbor Virginia. No more trips to Greensboro for ACC tournaments.

"In general, we had been trained to hate Duke, and everybody looked forward to the Duke-Maryland basketball game and even the North Carolina game," said David Nevins, a member of the Maryland Board of Regents for 12 years, including two years as chairman. "I think the country -- appropriately -- embraces traditions. This move violated that. No question about it. This move was a violation of tradition."

But Nevins, founder of Nevins & Associates, a Towson, Md.-based communications firm, said that even the Maryland fans who thought they would die without their yearly fix of Blue Devils or Tar Heels when president Wallace D. Loh announced the move in November 2012 seemed to have come around.

"They've seen not just the short-term financial benefits, but they've seen that fun and the excitement that the world is not just about Duke and North Carolina," Nevins said. "That it's pretty cool to play Michigan and Wisconsin and Ohio State and Northwestern and Indiana in basketball."

Ken Ulman graduated from Maryland in 1997 with a degree in government in politics. He met his wife, Jaki, there. He watched at Cole Field House as Joe Smith led the men's basketball team to consecutive Sweet 16 appearances.

"Some of the best memories of my life were in Cole watching basketball or at Byrd Stadium watching football," Ulman said. "I was as impassioned about Duke-Maryland games as anybody."

After two terms as the Howard County executive, and an unsuccessful run at the lieutenant governor's job on a ticket headed by Anthony Brown, Ulman started a consulting firm called Margrave Strategies. His first high-profile gig was with the University of Maryland, where he also has the title of chief strategy officer for economic development.

Ulman said the current ACC is different than the ACC of when he was a student.

"When the ACC admitted Pitt and Syracuse, after admitting Boston College and Virginia Tech and Miami, it wasn't the ACC anymore," Ulman said. "The fact is, we didn't even have a guaranteed home-and-home [basketball series] with Duke anymore."

Even Sasho Cirovski, who is entering his 23rd season as the Terps' men's soccer coach, said people around campus "aren't really talking about the ACC anymore."

"We obviously cherish our history in the ACC, but I think everyone is excited about looking forward," Cirovski said. "That's what we Terrapins do. A turtle can't move backward. It can only move forward. We are forward-looking people."

Off the field, Nevins and Ulman said the Big Ten, with more state universities, has proven to be a better fit for Maryland.

"As good as the schools were in the ACC, I think you'd have to say that overall, the schools in the Big Ten are even better, reputationally," Nevins said. "While it might have been really good for us to have an association with North Carolina and UVA, there were other schools in the ACC that didn't particularly advance our reputation."

"But the Big Ten is closer to being uniformly outstanding. And I'm not even talking about athletics here. I'm talking reputational enhancement. So the likes of Michigan and Northwestern and Wisconsin and the remainder are really good company to keep. I think you'd probably have to put the check mark in the column that that's an improvement."

Ulman said his "main mission" at Maryland is to help "create a great, vibrant College Park that includes new businesses, new retail and new residential opportunities. That it becomes a great place for someone to locate their business and becomes a great place for people to live."

He said the move is helping him do that.

"We are a much better fit with the institutions in the Big Ten," Ulman said. "Everyone I talk to, even folks who opposed the move early, says we are a better fit with the Big Ten, composed of large public research universities, except for Northwestern."

"That's not to say the ACC doesn't have those schools ... North Carolina. But the ACC does have smaller schools. We have more in common with Penn State, Ohio State and Michigan than we do with Duke and Wake Forest."

"Being the flagship university of the state of Maryland, we are now in a league with our colleagues."

The Big Ten schools, Ulman said, view Maryland as their "Washington" school.

"When you think about how many alums from Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio State live in the Washington corridor, it's been a nice fit," Ulman said.

"We have a real opportunity with our research park and conference center to leverage that relationship."

SUCCESS ON THE FIELD

The biggest surprise of the Terps' first year in the Big Ten was, without a doubt, how successful they were on the field.

"For us to come into the league and win seven championships and be tied with Michigan for the most in our first year is pretty incredible," Cirovski said.

Nevins also said when the move was announced, he wondered if Maryland could be immediately competitive with schools that seemed to put more emphasis on their athletic programs than many East Coast universities.

"I never thought this would be a longer-term issue," Nevins said. "And the jury is still out, but you'd certainly have to say as a result of the first year, you'd have to give us an A-plus on that one. Maybe it's real, and maybe it was lucky, but they were absolutely competitive."

Anderson said he is excited and proud of what the Terps were able to accomplish during their first year in the Big Ten.

"Our goal, from the start of our partnership with the conference, was to compete at the highest level," Anderson said. "I am proud that we won seven regular-season and tournament conference championships in our first year in the Big Ten, and now our next challenge is to continue to consistently achieve these goals. I am very

confident we can do so."

MONEY OVER TRADITION

The negatives?

There's absolutely a lingering bad taste in the way the deal was done, even as Maryland's on-field success as well as the financial stability received from the move have gone a long way toward eliminating it.

Nevins said if he had still been on the Board of Regents in November 2012, when Loh announced he had negotiated -- in secret -- the deal to move Maryland, "I would not have been supportive with the manner in which it was dealt with."

"This was a multi-hundred million dollar contractual relationship that the university was entering into," Nevins said. "Not to mention the one they were breaking. If that's not a matter to be dealt with by the Board of Regents, I don't know what is."

"I suppose that the leadership of College Park might argue that there are certain contract negotiations that require secrecy, and I don't disagree with that. I think there are certain ones that do. And there are certain ones that maybe they do, but they also require the input from the board that is assigned by law to have fiduciary responsibility for the governance of the institution."

"I'm only glad that I wasn't on the board at that time, because I don't know what my position would have been. But I would not have been pleased with the secrecy attached to it."

And even though it seems the athletes haven't missed appreciably more class time with the longer road trips, fans and parents have certainly been at least inconvenienced by trips to Iowa City, Iowa, and Lincoln, Neb., instead of Raleigh, N.C., and Charlottesville, Va.

"We just traded planes for buses, basically," Cirovski said. "It really hasn't been much of an issue. In fact, I think we missed less class time, because we do play a lot of games on Sundays."

Parents and other fans often don't have the option -- or means -- to hop on a plane instead of into their car to watch their teams play. Nevins said that plays into hands of cynics of college sports.

"It's like, what do you do next for money?" Nevins said. "That's just a permanent negative."

Nevins said that leads to another negative, but one that doesn't have to be permanent.

"It's certainly disappointing that Maryland -- our beloved institution -- became the poster child for selling out for money over tradition," Nevins said.

Ulman said he heard a few complaints about the distance issue during the Terps' first year in the Big Ten, but said he thinks people have gotten over it.

"It's not like Tallahassee [home of Florida State] or Syracuse are pretty close to Maryland," Ulman said.

A WIN-WIN

For Cirovski, an end to the athletic department's financial problems, which had been lingering for all of his time at Maryland and led to the elimination of seven sports in 2012, made the move worthwhile.

"Seeing programs dropped was one of the hardest things we had to go through here -- when you see your fellow coaches and student-athletes hurting and moving on, that was really tough," Cirovski said. "And I don't think anyone at Maryland ever wants to go through that again. I think the financial resources that the Big Ten is providing us are going to be incredible for the future of Maryland athletics."

Nevins also said the economic benefits made all the difference.

"If indeed over the next 10 to 20 years the difference in revenue to the College Park athletic department from the Big Ten versus the ACC is expected to be literally hundreds of millions of dollars, then you certainly have to say that's a hugely significant benefit and

probably one that is so overriding of any other concern that it made it essentially an easy decision," Nevins said.

"I think you have to look back and say, all in all, that it appears that it may be a pretty clever move. All things considered, notwithstanding the negatives, notwithstanding the criticism. The fact that there is so much additional money coming College Park's way, so much additional media exposure coming College Park's way, because there's more interest in a Maryland-Ohio State football game than there is a Maryland-North Carolina football game, for example. They have among the country's top media markets, including now New York, with Rutgers coming in. So from New York to Chicago, it's a pretty significant reach.

"The bottom line? I think it's going to be a win-win."

And for Ulman, the chance to use athletics to build the overall reputation of both College Park and the University of Maryland has made all the difference.

"Elevating our profile through athletics, academics, adds up to create this engine of opportunity for our state," Ulman said. "The Big Ten piece has been a major enhancement to our profile."