Making Maniacs: How a Football and Basketball Promotion Campaign Fostered Fan Interest at Southern Methodist University from 1978 to 1981

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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Making Maniacs: How a Football and Basketball Promotion Campaign Fostered Fan Interest at Southern Methodist University from 1978 to 1981

Shortly after Southern Methodist University hired Russell Potts as athletic director in 1978, he and his staff launched the promotional campaign Mustang Mania with the intent of recapturing a Dallas audience that had lost interest in the university’s football and basketball programs. Through relentless promotion of SMU athletics and the revolutionary use of corporate sponsorships to support the massively scaled campaign, Mustang Mania yielded remarkable results in terms of attendance, media coverage, and fundraising for the athletics department.

The following study examines the campaign primarily through print articles and advertisements appearing in The Dallas Morning News from January 1, 1977, to December 31, 1981. Research includes interviews with SMU athletics staff at the time of Mustang Mania, as well as members of the Dallas media during the period of the campaign.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Heading into the post-World War II era, Southern Methodist University appeared to be thriving. The private school nestled in Highland Park, an affluent borough three miles north of downtown Dallas, Texas, was a flourishing academic institution in a rapidly growing urban area.

By 1950, the university had reached an enrollment of 8,585 and was one of a handful of top-tier higher education institutions in North Texas. The university boasted a law school, a burgeoning fraternity and sorority scene, and an athletic program that competed in the legendary Southwest Conference.

Most of its notoriety outside the neighborhood of Mockingbird Lane and Hillcrest Drive was the university’s football program, which touted a 1935 national title and two of college football’s most notable stars in Doak Walker, an All-American playing at several positions in 1947, 1948, and 1949, and Don Meredith, an All-American quarterback in 1958 and 1959. According to Temple Pouncey, a sixteen-year sportswriter for The Dallas Morning News who covered SMU athletics from 1977 to 1979:

SMU was a school with a reputation nationally and locally that was much greater than it should have been—because of athletics. If you really looked at the school and the campus and what they did in their programs, it wasn’t that much different from any other Methodist school somewhere in Texas. Their rep was due entirely to the fact that since the ’30s they had done things in athletics that had given them a nationwide reputation. They were national collegiate football champions in 1935 according to three polls, the year before the AP poll started. They went to the Rose Bowl; they beat TCU in “The Game of the Century.”

But by the 1970s, underneath its palatial exterior, SMU found itself struggling to remain competitive in the classroom and on the field. The university trudged out of the 1975 fiscal year saddled with an estimated $6 million budget deficit and what SMU’s then-vice president for administration, Hoyt G. Kennemer, called “a reputation for being
wasteful” in an otherwise fiscally sound city. SMU’s enrollment, meanwhile, tumbled from 10,136 in 1970 to 8,677 in 1977, in part prompting administrators to eliminate dozens of faculty positions.

On the playing field, SMU was mired in mediocrity in the conference’s marquee sport, having put together just two winning football seasons in the 1960s. The team made it to the midway point of the 1970s posting an anemic 32-32 record.

Searching for a remedy, SMU shuffled through three football coaches from 1972 to 1976. In the process, the Mustangs’ home football game attendance at Dallas’ renowned seventy-two-thousand-seat Cotton Bowl declined consistently as the team’s number of wins remained paltry from year to year.

Coach Hayden Fry touted winning records in only three of his eleven seasons at the helm of the football program and was fired in 1972 after a 7-4 season in which the Mustangs lost to all three Texas public universities in the Southwest Conference: Texas, Texas A&M, and Texas Tech. SMU’s Faculty Athletic Council also had discovered a laundry list of NCAA violations under Fry’s watch as head football coach and athletic director, prompting his termination that year. Fry’s replacement as coach and athletic director, Dave Smith, fared little better, amassing a record of 16-15-2 in three years only to be fired after allegations arose in the 1975 season that he and his staff had been violating NCAA rules by paying players for making tackles.

By 1977, the schools’ latest head coaches, Ron Meyer (football) and Sonny Allen (men’s basketball), could barely fill a fraction of their respective sports venues. Attendance at football games, which averaged 28,518 in 1971, had dipped to 26,635 by 1977, leaving more than two-thirds of the cavernous Cotton Bowl empty on fall
Saturdays. SMU basketball, meanwhile, rarely drew more than three thousand fans to Moody Coliseum for home games, leaving around three-quarters of the Mustangs’ home arena vacant each time the Ponies (a popular nickname for the Mustangs) took the court.

Throughout 1977, sports reports in The Dallas Morning News—the highest circulation newspaper in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area—focused almost as much on the poor turnout at SMU athletic events as they did on the outcome of the events themselves. The athletics program, particularly its key spectator and revenue-generating sports of football and men’s basketball, were not spared from tongue-in-cheek jokes or blatant insults about their poor on-field performance and the pitiable attendance they generated.

But a turnabout was on the horizon. Almost two months after SMU athletic director Dick Davis resigned in March 1978, the university took arguably its most significant step to change its status as the laughingstock of both the Southwest Conference and the pages of the local sports section. On May 11 of that year, the university named Russell “Russ” Potts athletic director. Potts—a diminutive marketing firecracker who had previously worked in the athletic department at the University of Maryland—appeared aware of and prepared for the task ahead of him.

“My major challenge,” he told the News, “is to have SMU compete successfully for the entertainment dollar in the Dallas market, the eighth largest in the country. I believe very positively we can do so. And winning is only the roof on the house. You do a lot of other things for the foundation.”

By the end of the year, Potts and his sports promotions director, Brad Thomas, had begun to turn Dallas on its ear and revive SMU’s name and athletics program with a
massively scaled, high-energy promotional campaign that bore a simple but catchy and alliterative name: Mustang Mania.

Within months of their hiring, Potts and Thomas began making SMU a household name again in North Texas by driving Mustang Mania into the public consciousness through the widespread distribution of promotional items, along with ticket giveaways, special events, and hundreds of print ads. Perhaps most importantly, the campaign name became a fixture in the Dallas media’s vernacular. The campaign slogan would go on to appear in *The Dallas Morning News* alone more than four hundred times in the four years after it debuted in September 1978.

The following study examines the Mustang Mania promotional campaign, primarily through print articles pertaining to SMU athletics and academics, as well as advertisements, appearing in *The Dallas Morning News* from January 1, 1977, to December 31, 1981. The five-year time window allowed for a season-long examination of media coverage of SMU athletics (including football, basketball, and several less-popular sports) under athletic director Dick Davis before his resignation in March 1978, while also allowing for a similar examination of media coverage of SMU athletics under Russ Potts, including the start—and evolution—of Mustang Mania. The research window closes at the end of 1981 after the first football season under athletic director Bob Hitch, who replaced Potts following his February 1981 resignation to become the vice president of marketing and advertising for the Chicago White Sox.¹⁵

Coverage of SMU and Mustang Mania in the *Dallas Times Herald*, the smaller Dallas daily newspaper, also was reviewed at critical junctures in the promotional campaign and around significant events in the athletic program. In addition to print
articles, the research includes interviews with SMU staff and administrators at the time of Mustang Mania, as well as members of the Dallas media during the period of the campaign.

The study also examines why Mustang Mania burned out quickly following Potts’s departure, both in terms of media coverage—and the SMU athletic department’s promotion, or lack thereof—of Mustang Mania under the new athletic director, Hitch.

From an historical standpoint the study provides an early snapshot of sports marketing techniques, mainly the use of corporate sponsorships and large-scale promotions, which have become commonplace in modern day-to-day promotional efforts and even special campaigns but, as sources and articles suggest, were considered revolutionary at the time of Mustang Mania. By evaluating such factors as on-field performance of athletic teams, recruitment of high-profile athletes, and the popularity and growth of the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area that all took place during the execution of Mustang Mania, the study addresses the previously unanswered question: Why did Mustang Mania work? In doing so, the research serves as a longitudinal case study of arguably one of the most successful and high-profile sports marketing campaigns of its era, in turn providing a basis for future study of such promotional programs in sports and entertainment.

**Literature Review**

Increasing fan interest and boosting attendance at sporting events are two of the fundamental responsibilities of collegiate athletic directors and athletic marketing personnel. But very little research has been done examining the creation and implementation of formal sports marketing plans and objectives, particularly at the
collegiate level. Moreover, much of the research concerning sports marketing has been limited almost exclusively to trade publications and journals and examines secondary factors that, as Mark McDonald, George Milne, and JinBae Hong argued, “are largely out of the marketer’s control” rather than examining the promotional and marketing efforts directly overseen by such sports personnel.\textsuperscript{16}

While studies are limited in regard to sports marketing plans, researchers have examined influential factors in sports attendance and viewership. Hal Hansen and Roger Gauthier identified four categories of factors that influence sporting event attendance: economic; sociodemographic; attractiveness of the game; and residual performance.\textsuperscript{17} Economic factors include ticket price; per capita income; substitute forms of entertainment; television effects; and the effects of other sports attractions in the area.\textsuperscript{18} Sociodemographic factors include population size of an area; ethnic population; and geography.\textsuperscript{19} Residual performance factors concern fan accommodations and scheduling of games.\textsuperscript{20} For the sake of this research the most important category is attractiveness of the game, which deals with promotions; special events; star players; the team as a contender; and team placement in league standings.\textsuperscript{21} Hansen and Gauthier surveyed the heads of marketing and promotion of 164 collegiate and professional teams from the United States and Canada, and respondents were asked to indicate the relative importance of the aforementioned factors when promoting and marketing their teams. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that marketing and promotional efforts were done most importantly to increase the team’s number of sponsors (economic) and to draw attention to the team when it was performing well and considered “a contender” (attractiveness of the game).\textsuperscript{22}
Using the same four overarching categories, Timothy DeSchriver found statistically significant relationships between fan attendance and four specific factors: a team’s winning percentage, promotional efforts done by the institution, ticket price, and weather. DeSchriver and Paul Jensen later found a statistically significant relationship between attendance and two factors: promotional efforts and on-field success of the team.

McDonald, Milne, and Hong also found that a team’s on-field success correlates with higher viewership. The researchers surveyed 1,611 participants and asked them to rate their motivation to watch nine listed sports. Participants rated college football highest among the nine sports in the motivational category “Achievement,” which suggests fans may be more motivated to watch college football in particular when their team of choice is consistently winning and thereby providing a personal sense of success, pride, and accomplishment for the viewer.

By the late 1980s, researchers began concluding that effective sports promotions demanded corporate sponsorship and the use of special events in conjunction with the featured sports event. Sponsorships serve to infuse much-needed funding into cash-strapped athletic programs while broadening the promotional reach of both the institution and the sponsoring company. Such special events include providing in-game entertainment and activities, and organizing giveaways and prizes to boost fan attendance. Researchers also suggest that sports promotions directors should employ ticket giveaways, discounts on tickets, and the distribution of free or discounted tickets through third-party sponsors or companies. As A. Testa reasoned in a 1992 article in
Athletic Management, “Creativity and effort on the part of the promotions director are the keys for expanding the crowd at sports events.”

Corporate sponsorships, as described in the February 1991 edition of Athletic Director, “can reverse the cost-cutting trends affecting athletic programs” and provide college athletic departments with “needed dollars, allowing programs to continue and in some cases expand. Sponsorship also gives the corporation visibility and favorable exposure to the teen and family market.”

Joe Castiglione, who worked as a graduate assistant for Russell Potts at the University of Maryland athletic department and went on to become the athletic director at the University of Oklahoma, argued in a 1989 article in College Athletic Management that local companies would not be inclined to enter into a sponsorship agreement with a university’s athletics department simply because of geographic proximity. Instead, both the program and the sponsor must benefit from the sponsorship, and all marketing plans should be devised with that in mind. In order to foster corporate sponsorship deals, Castiglione wrote, collegiate athletic departments first should develop a promotional concept in writing, outline the purpose of the promotion including its expected outcomes, and present the needs of the institution. Marketing and promotions personnel should research local companies by using a variety of resources such as the local media and chamber of commerce to determine which companies would be best suited to sponsor certain promotions.

In all, sports marketing research suggests that an athletic institution’s spectator interest, attendance, and fiscal wellbeing can be positively influenced by an effective sports marketing campaign that is funded in large part by corporate sponsors; employs a
creative approach to special promotions, events, and giveaways; and ideally is the beneficiary of a winning product on the field. But winning consistently—not just a flash-in-the-pan season—is perhaps the key to drawing fans on a consistent basis. And while sports promotional plans and the use of corporate sponsorships may broaden awareness of a team or institution, marketing alone may not produce a strong fan base that will show up at the gate each time a team takes the field or the court. Eventually coaches and players must do their part (winning games with regularity) to help develop a stable following.

Jim Kahler, who served as senior vice president of sales and marketing with the Cleveland Cavaliers from 1991 to 2002 and has been the executive director of Ohio University’s Center for Sports Administration since 2005, said that when it comes to attracting fans, professional and collegiate programs alike must find a balance between winning and promotions, both of which are necessary to succeed at the turnstile. It is impossible to keep fans routinely coming back if a program is relying on marketing and promotions alone to attract a crowd, he said. Putting a successful team on the field or court is not sufficient on its own either. Kahler said:

Winning cures all, but you can’t just win and expect that to be enough. You’ve got to play off the momentum you get. You bring about change. A change in the logo gives you opportunity. Change the coach. Change the brand. . . . Depending on where a program is and what the fans are used to, you have to supplement winning with marketing and promotions.35

NOTES


2 Temple Pouncey, interview by Charles Thomas II, October 2, 2009.

Comparisons of SMU Headcount Enrollments, 2-3.

Susan Yoachum, “SMU to Cut 35 Faculty Positions,” The Dallas Morning News, December 14, 1977.; Kathleen Hast, “Some Glad to See SMU Reductions,” The Dallas Morning News, December 18, 1977; and Lloyd Grove, “Academic worries fester under SMU’s façade,” The Dallas Morning News, September 9, 1979. Yoachum wrote that the reduction of staff positions would increase the student-to-professor ratio from 14-to-1 to 15-to-1. SMU’s student enrollment, which never fell below 10,000 from 1970 to 1974, was predicted by SMU administration to decline in coming years. In 1978, the school’s enrollment was approximately 8,623.


“The Bishops’ Committee Report on SMU,” June 19, 1987, accessed at www.smudailycampus.com/polopoly_fs/1.1377705!/bishops.pdf on March 2, 2013. The subtitle of the report is: “Report to the Board of Trustees of Southern Methodist University from the Special Committee of Bishops of the South Central District of the United Methodist Church.” The forty-eight-page document details the investigation of the bishops’ committee into SMU’s numerous violations of NCAA rules in the 1980s leading to the “death penalty,” the news media’s nickname for the suspension of the university’s football program. The report also provided historical context of NCAA violations at SMU in the 1970s under previous head coaches and athletic directors.

Pouncey, Mustang Mania, 243-44.

Ibid., 234.

Ibid., 266.


Ibid.

Sam Blair, “Potts Takes Job with White Sox; SMU Faces Probe,” The Dallas Morning News, February 12, 1981.

NOTES


Ibid.

Ibid.
20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.


26 Ibid.


29 Testa, “Netting the Crowds.”

30 “Revenue Opportunities,” Athletic Director, (February 1991): 14, 27.


32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

CHAPTER 2: THE CROWDS THAT NEVER CAME

It was no secret in the late 1970s: The image of the Southern Methodist University football team was in dire straits. Nearly two decades of violating NCAA rules only to still be pounded into oblivion on the playing field most Saturdays had that effect.

The Mustangs cobbled together a combined 7-15 record in 1975 and 1976, Dave Smith’s final year at the helm and Ron Meyer’s first season as the Mustangs’ head coach.¹ For the Ponies, blowout losses to the Southwest Conference’s powers of Texas, Texas A&M, and Arkansas were the norm at that time. “That first year coach Meyer was here, a good high school team could have beaten us,” SMU linebacker Putt Choate recalled in an August 1978 article in *The Dallas Morning News*.²

1977 represented a pendulum year for SMU football, and Meyer knew that all too well, hoping five wins would be enough to give him momentum in the recruiting race for the next few years. Because of his focus on recruiting, the typical week for Meyer rarely consisted of football shoptalk. Instead it was rife with fifteen-hour days of press outings, player visitation trips, alumni meetings, and various other glad-handing opportunities including breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners with boosters and bigwigs. As the *News’s* Steve Pate described it in a 1977 article:

> There was a time when a major college head football coach could concern himself with the X’s and O’s on his blackboard and not busy himself with off-the-field promotions. Of course the duck-tail used to be an accepted hair style, too. Time has a way of changing everything.³

Regardless of all the off-the-field promotions the head coach was doing, Meyer said the onus of football promotions still fell squarely upon the shoulder pads of his team. “Right now, TCU is our biggest selling point,” he said little more than a month before his team’s 1977 opener against Texas Christian University, a rival school forty miles to the
west. “We have to beat them. You can go out and wave flags and fly model airplanes all you want. But you’ve got to win to fill stadiums. We have to worry about TCU first.”

Winning certainly had not been SMU’s calling card, and it was not going to be easy to turn that corner, Meyer acknowledged, in pointing out the lack of depth and skill on the team that consisted mainly of less-talented holdovers from Dave Smith’s recruiting classes. Meyer called the 1977 Mustangs “woefully weak in the offensive and defensive lines.” Temple Pouncey, the SMU beat writer for The Dallas Morning News at the time, noted that at the team’s big-man positions, the Mustangs were “small, thin and young” and “only two deep at several positions.”

Two weeks before the opener against TCU, Pouncey’s preview article portended failure for the Mustangs: “The team has almost all new faces. Nobody has any idea who the quarterback will be. Freshmen are contending at every position.”

Weeks before the season even kicked off, the Ponies already had encountered a tough run of luck. Tom Hanks, the team’s center, blew out his knee in a flag football game, while offensive guard Don Mudd injured his back in a loading dock accident. Then, in an almost comically unfortunate incident, star linebacker Putt Choate was sidelined when, during a pep rally before the season-opening game against TCU, two girls opened a window to throw confetti, causing a window screen to plummet two stories and strike Choate in the eye.

Nonetheless, Meyer remained optimistic about his team despite its youth and lack of depth and size. “Boy I like what I see so far, and I think the team does, too,” he said. “We’ve got a good, GOOD freshman class.”
Meyer’s freshman class included a stout quarterback from nearby Mesquite, Texas, named Mike Ford whom Meyer called “a tremendous talent” who had “more moxie, charisma, leadership than a freshman.” Ford drew some lofty praise from Pouncey, who wrote that the 227-pounder threw the long ball like Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw and left bruises on receivers’ chests like a young Craig Morton, a longtime NFL quarterback at Dallas, New York, and Denver.

Ford told the media he could throw the ball seventy-nine yards, and it was that arm strength that put the freshman at the top of the quarterback competition in fall practices. And when the Mustangs took the field against TCU in Fort Worth on September 10, the young upstart Ford became the first freshman in Southwest Conference history to start a season-opening game.

While Ford was not particularly prolific or accurate that night, he threw two touchdowns in leading the Mustangs to a 45-21 win over TCU.

The win might have added a touch of intrigue to the early part of schedule, but it did not generate much frenzy in the sports pages of the *News*. Preview articles and postgame recaps about the Mustangs rarely made it above the fold on the front page of the sports section. SMU’s first three games on the schedule—against TCU, North Texas State University and Tulane University—likely were seen as little more than a row of speed bumps leading to an October 1 “Cotton Bowl clash,” as Pate called it, with The Ohio State University Buckeyes.

The meeting with Ohio State represented arguably the biggest football game of the decade for SMU in terms of attendance and national attention. The Buckeyes were ranked in the Top 10 in national polls during most seasons, 1977 was no exception, and
the boys from Columbus were making their first-ever appearance at a venue in the Southwest.¹⁸

Media chatter about the Ohio State game started before players even reported to campus in late summer for preseason two-a-day workouts. Nearly two months before the SMU-Ohio State game, Pate described the contest as “a critical game, particularly from an attendance standpoint, in SMU history.”¹⁹

Three weeks before the Buckeyes arrived in Dallas, News sports columnist Sam Blair tackled the matter of attendance and fan interest surrounding the historic event:

Idealists say the Ohio State-SMU game should pull a sellout crowd of 72,000-plus to the Cotton Bowl on the night of Oct. 1, proving football fans here really will support the Mustangs for a big intersectional game, uphold the neighborhood sports reputation, etc. Realists say the Mustangs should be pleased if they draw 60,000 which is far above what they’ve attracted for even their biggest Southwest Conference games in years.²⁰

By the first week of September, however, it hardly seemed likely the SMU ticket staff could coax even a “realist’s” sixty thousand fans into the Cotton Bowl for the Big 10-versus-Southwest Conference contest. Only about thirty-five thousand tickets had been sold by September 5, a figure SMU ticket manager Mike Justice said was roughly ten thousand fewer tickets than he had expected to sell by that point. One thing, Justice said, could certainly help boost ticket sales: “If we win our three games before Ohio State, that could help sales greatly, of course.”²¹

Unfortunately for the SMU ticket manager, the Mustangs shot themselves in the foot the week after bowling over TCU. Playing forty-five minutes northwest of Dallas in Denton, SMU flopped against North Texas State and its coach Hayden Fry (the former SMU football head coach and athletic director), whose Mean Green pulled out a 24-13 win.²²
The loss to NTSU, a non-conference opponent with just two bowl appearances in program history, dealt a blow to SMU’s hopes for a turnaround year and became a feather in Fry’s cap. On September 20, the gregarious Fry spouted off to the press during a Monday sports media luncheon and took aim at his replacement at SMU, athletic director Dick Davis, and Davis’s promotional technique—or lack thereof.

There were 26,000 people at the game. We sold 20,000 of those tickets and SMU sold 6,000. We spent $7,000 advertising and promoting the game and SMU didn’t spend a penny. Of course, Ron [Meyer] is the football coach, not the athletic director, so you can draw your own conclusions as to whom that’s aimed at.\(^{23}\)

Fry might have had a valid argument. North Texas advertised its games in the News regularly, even touting low-profile home matchups against the University of Texas-Arlington and New Mexico State University. SMU, by contrast, almost never ran print advertisements, placing just one ad for a sporting event in the News in all of 1977—a football game ad on September 26.

Unlike Fry, Davis was not the promotional type. The stockbroker and former vice president in the Dallas office of Merrill Lynch Pierce Fenner and Smith Inc. was there to do one job, and that was to balance the books in the athletic office.\(^{24}\)

SMU President Paul Hardin had hired Davis as athletic director in 1974 after ignoring the overwhelming recommendation of a university selection committee not to select him, a man the committee felt was “unqualified and unacceptable” for the job.\(^{25}\) Davis was what Pate dubbed a “super fan” who had bled for SMU since his days as the center on Doak Walker’s teams in the late 1940s.\(^{26}\) He was brash, not the humble sort, and reportedly clashed with powers on the SMU campus as well as fellow athletic directors in the Southwest Conference.\(^{27}\)
He was also no fan of the media. Brad Sham, the longtime radio play-by-play voice of the Dallas Cowboys, first met Davis in 1976 when he was hired as a radio sportscaster for KRLD in Dallas. In addition to his duties providing color commentary for Dallas Cowboys games alongside play-by-play man Verne Lundquist, Sham most often was busy covering SMU sports including football and men’s basketball. Davis was quick to make a negative impression on Sham, a future Texas Radio Hall of Fame inductee.

Dick Davis is the only person in my now forty-plus year broadcasting career who ever told me or tried to tell me what I could or couldn’t say on the air. Dick had become athletic director and we had a [1976 men’s basketball] road trip to UCLA and Arizona, Tuesday-Thursday. UCLA had a freshman named Kiki Vandeweghe. Arizona had [Bob] “Big Bird” Elliot and Herm Gilliam. Great, great players. First and only time I had a chance to do a game at Pauley Pavilion. And SMU got killed. Like forty points killed.

And at one point I said during the broadcast, “SMU doesn’t belong on the court with UCLA.” They just didn’t. And when we went to Tucson [Arizona], Dick called me into his hotel room and [head coach] Sonny [Allen] was there, and he said, “You can’t say that.” He said, “We’re trying to build a program and we’re selling it to people, and you can’t go on the air saying they can’t be on the same court with UCLA.” I told him, “Dick, but they can’t, right now. I didn’t say they’re bad kids or that your program is not going to get to that point. But right now they can’t play on the same court as UCLA.”

He told me that I couldn’t say that or I’d be looking for a new job. I said OK. The next night they went out and got beat by thirty-five.

Sham described Davis as “all enthusiasm” with a salesman’s mentality—a man who tried voraciously to stifle any negativity about his beloved but struggling SMU athletics program. “He didn’t care much about anything other than controlling the message,” Sham said. “He wasn’t particularly good with the media. He didn’t really care for the media.”
But Davis nonetheless had a chance at retribution against all of his naysayers if the Mustangs could draw a record crowd for the 1977 Ohio State game.

To that end, SMU did itself a favor by going to New Orleans the last week of September and topping Tulane, 28-23, to set up a meeting of 2-1 teams. Ohio State took some wind out of the game’s sails, however, by losing the same weekend on a last-minute field goal to the University of Oklahoma.

Despite SMU’s rebound and Ohio State still bringing in a No. 6 ranking, ticket sales for what was supposed to be the Mustangs’ most important game of the decade were still below expectations in the final week before the matchup. Sales reached the forty-five thousand mark by September 26, five days from the big game.

The absence of a mad-grab for tickets harkened to a valid question the News’s Pate posed in an August 7 article: “If the Mustangs can’t draw for Ohio State, who can they draw for?”

The sluggish ticket sales might have been, in part, attributable to seemingly sluggish promotions on the behalf of the SMU athletics office, which advertised the Ohio State game just once in Dallas’s largest newspaper. The lone ad, a plain textbox ringed in stars, appeared on the bottom right corner of page 7B on September 26, five days before the Mustangs and Buckeyes squared off, saying nothing of the football game other than “S.M.U. vs. OHIO STATE.” Among the festivities listed in the ad, however—if the game alone were not enough to draw a full house—were a pregame show by three Dallas-area high school bands and a halftime show featuring the SMU and Grambling State University Tigers marching bands, who also would go head to head in a postgame “battle of the bands” competition.
The ad also plugged one of Davis’s ill-fated promotional schemes: a prize giveaway for two fans who would leave the Ohio State game with a 1978 Ford Mustang and a thoroughbred quarter horse. One day before the game, however, Dallas County District Attorney Henry Wade determined the promotion was an illegal lottery, seeing that the prize “giveaway” was contingent upon a ticket purchase to the game.\(^{35}\) Almost immediately thereafter, SMU’s ticket manager, Justice, had an attorney draw up documents releasing him from all liability connected to the illegal lottery.\(^{36}\) Davis, meanwhile, scoffed at the district attorney’s conclusion and his threat to prosecute SMU if the giveaway were to proceed as planned, telling the press:

> I got a letter this week from [SMU attorney] Frank Scurlock telling me it is illegal. But we’ve come too far now to back out. We have a responsibility to the public, to whom we have advertised this and sold tickets, so we’re going ahead with it. If they want to put me in jail, they know where to find me.\(^{37}\)

SMU President Dr. James Zumberge failed to match Davis’s nonchalance and instead made the executive decision on the day of the game to cancel the prize giveaway.\(^{38}\)

For any optimistic fans hoping to leave the SMU-Ohio State game with a horse or a Mustang, all hope was lost. And hope for a monumental upset of Ohio State was dashed almost immediately, as the Buckeyes, led by quarterback Rod Gerald—a Dallas native and product of nearby South Oak Cliff High School—marched over the Ponies with ease in a 35-7 victory.\(^{39}\) Gerald reportedly spent much of the fourth quarter on the Ohio State sidelines giving high-fives to, and signing autographs for, friends and former teammates from Oak Cliff.\(^{40}\)

It was thought that many of the announced 51,970 fans came out to see the powerhouse Buckeyes and hometown hero, Gerald, rather than support the hapless
Mustangs, who entered the game as twenty-one-point underdogs. But three days after the Buckeyes smothered SMU, it was revealed that far fewer spectators had passed through the Cotton Bowl turnstiles to witness the throttling. Davis conceded that the previously announced attendance of 51,970 was nothing more than a guess after “eyeballing” the stadium seats midgame. Instead, after further review, Davis said the attendance was closer to forty-five thousand, well below the ideal count of seventy-two thousand mentioned a month before by the News’s columnist, Blair, and fifteen thousand fewer fans than had been expected to show, according to the News’s SMU beat writer, Pouncey, just four days before the game.

Davis came to his own defense shortly after revealing the disappointing turnout for a game that had been dubbed by the News as “a gala attraction for the home team.” The SMU athletic director told the Dallas press, “I don’t think it [the crowd] quite met what I hoped we would do. But I am very pleased, because it’s a vast improvement over what we have been doing.”

To be sure, the game drew well beyond SMU’s average football attendance, which had lingered in the mid-twenty thousands throughout the 1970s. But the turnout did not do justice for a game that Pouncey had previously referred to as “a great plum for SMU” and a chance for its largest single-game attendance since 1970, which it failed to exceed or match. Reporters speculated that the poor turnout for the game, along with the fiasco that was Davis’s doomed prize giveaway, led the SMU ticket manager, Justice, to resign his position the week after the Ohio State game.

Also just days after the Ohio State game, Pouncey reported that Davis and his staff had “spent most of their advertising and promotional budget for the year on this one
game, hoping for a crowd of 55,000 or better. Either the advertising budget in the athletics office was slim in 1977 or the money went almost entirely toward broadcast spots, because the lone advertisement that hit the pages of the News to promote the Ohio State game, discussed previously, appeared to have little impact on fan turnout, considering the News reported on September 26 that forty-five thousand tickets had been sold—the same day the lone ad ran in the paper—and the same number of fans showed up for the game five days later.

As the 1977 football season progressed, signs seemed to indicate that Davis’s promotional shortcomings, combined with SMU’s ineptitude on the football field, worked hand in hand to keep fans out of the stands.

After the loss to Ohio State, the Mustangs’ record dropped below .500 for the year with a 9-6 defeat to Baylor University in Waco, Texas, as quarterback Mike Ford was held to five pass completions. Although SMU bounced back on the road against the University of Houston, scoring twenty points in the final thirty-nine seconds to beat the Cougars, 37-23, in the Astrodome, the Mustangs’ precipitous decline began almost as soon as they left the Bayou City. Returning to Dallas, SMU received a sixteen-point setback from No. 2 Texas and future Heisman Trophy winner Earl Campbell in front of 36,151 fans at the Cotton Bowl. The Mustangs then fell, 38-21, to Texas A&M University at Kyle Field in College Station.

Stunningly, the underwhelming turnout for the Ohio State game and the back-to-back double-digit losses to Texas and Texas A&M paled in comparison with the embarrassment awaiting the Mustangs the first week of November. When fellow Southwest Conference bottom-feeder Rice University came to Fair Park to take on the
Ponies and their 3-5 record, what shocked Dallas sports writers had nothing to do with what occurred on the field.

SMU marched to an easy victory over the Owls, 41-24. But the story, and more importantly the photographs, that ran on the front page of the News sports section on November 6, 1977, painted the picture all too well. One photo displayed SMU head football coach Ron Meyer clapping from the sidelines with sections of empty Cotton Bowl seats shown behind him, while underneath a caption read, “FAN HUNT: SMU coach Ron Meyer might well be pleading: ‘Hang in there guys, somebody might show up yet.’” A separate photo in the late edition of the News ran on 1B showing a lone man in a sea of empty metal fold-down seats above the caption, “Elbow room: There was plenty of it at the Cotton Bowl as one of the smallest crowds in the stadium’s history watched SMU outscore Rice.”

On a sunny, seventy-degree fall Saturday, a paltry 6,918 fans trickled into the Cotton Bowl to see the Mustangs take on Rice, leaving about sixty-five thousand seats of the iconic stadium empty.52 Pouncey, who covered the SMU-Rice game for the News, began his game recap story with a comical lead: “SMU’s football players harvested Rice Saturday in the Cotton Bowl, then introduced themselves to every fan in the stands.”53

Carlton Stowers—who had his joined fellow staff writer, Pouncey, to work up a sidebar on the SMU-Rice game—barely mentioned the on-field performance of the Ponies, instead giving a multiple-paragraph recount of the surreal, if not laughable, environment at the Cotton Bowl that afternoon:

Officials announced that there were 6,918 scattered throughout the cavernous Cotton Bowl to watch the Mustangs defeat Rice, 41-24, but I didn’t take time to count. I was distracted by a creative youngster who busied himself throughout the
afternoon by going from empty section to empty section, pulling down seats to form a variety of artistic designs and initials.

The pre-game traffic was not much worse than one expects to encounter on a Sunday drive in the country. One optimistic soul stood at the main entrance to the stadium asking, “Who needs tickets?” Obviously his goal was financial gain. Long before the teams were summoned for the kickoff he was a defeated man. “Anyone,” he finally shouted, “want a couple of good freebies?”

Beneath the stands, all-but-idle concessionaires leaned against their counters waiting for the crowds which never came. At one, the smell of hotdogs mixed with the sounds of the Texas-Houston game that was being broadcast on a portable radio. Young children roamed freely, safe from the prospects of getting lost in a sea of humanity.54

The attendance of 6,918 marked the lowest turnout ever for an SMU game at the Cotton Bowl and was the smallest SMU home crowd since the team left the twenty-thousand-seat Ownby Stadium on the university campus in 1948.55 The Mustangs were forced to abandon Ownby that year as SMU, led by future College Football Hall of Fame players Doak Walker and Kyle Rote, regularly drew far more fans than the modest venue could handle. The same year the Ponies made the move to the Cotton Bowl, more than sixty thousand Dallas-area fans showed up for SMU home games as Walker and Rote led the Mustangs to a 9-1-1 record and Walker won the Mustangs’ lone Heisman Trophy.56

Twenty-nine years after that memorable season, the maligned Mustangs could not have filled a third of cozy Ownby Stadium with the meager crowd that turned up at the Cotton Bowl for the 1977 game against Rice. Putting it in even more shameful perspective, News writers Pouncey and Sam Blair acknowledged in separate articles after the game that Highland Park High School, just down the street from the SMU campus, drew 9,800 fans to its game against Garland High School the night before the Mustangs took on Rice in the Cotton Bowl for a crowd two-thirds the size.57
While two stories dealing with the meager attendance appeared in the *News* the day after the SMU-Rice game, sports writers did not let the terrible turnout quickly slip from readers’ minds. On Monday, November 7, two days after the Rice game, columnist Mike Jones took a jab at the lagging fan interest in SMU football:

6,918. It’s hard to believe. And then, it is not. In case that number puzzles you, that was the actual turnstile count of the number of locals who braved 70-degree weather Saturday afternoon to watch SMU play the Rice Owls. There were more cars on Central Expressway at any given time than those parked at Fair Park. It’s obvious a lot of people had other things to do.\(^{58}\)

Matters did not improve for the Mustangs, who lost their final two games of the season against Texas Tech University and the University of Arkansas by a combined score of 92-14. Though they would play only one of the final two games at home, the Ponies’ ticket sales struggled almost as much as the team’s offense and defense. SMU hosted Texas Tech at the Cotton Bowl on November 12, 1977, hoping for a large homecoming crowd. *News* columnist Sam Blair previewed the event that day, writing:

SMU has its own ambitions. One of them, regardless of that shockingly small turnout of 6,918 spectators for last Saturday’s 41-24 Mustang win over Rice, is to attract enough people to the Cotton Bowl to support a major college football program. The Mustangs figure to come much closer to it this time, thanks partially to the presence of Tech’s sizable following and partially to the fact that this is homecoming weekend at SMU. And the most famous Mustang ever, Doak Walker, will be among that alumni coming back to see this one. Walker, the All-America halfback and hero of SMU’s golden days of the late ’40s, is being honored with a “day” by the City of Dallas, the town he helped make one of the hottest spots in college football. But that was yesterday.\(^{59}\)

After the Mustangs failed to score on a meaningless last-second rush near the Texas Tech goal line and the final whistle blew, the Red Raiders had blasted SMU 45-7.\(^{60}\) Blair’s follow-up story to the game used more than one thousand words to contrast the Doak Walker glory days—when the Mustangs flattened Texas Tech 41-6 on homecoming day in 1948—and the school’s football malaise of the mid-1970s. In 1948,
SMU walloped the Red Raiders in front of a crowd of more than sixty thousand. Nearly three decades later, Tech annihilated the Ponies in front of a modest Cotton Bowl crowd of 21,689. Blair wrote that it was reasonable to assume the Raiders’ fans bought as many of these tickets as the Mustang fans.61

A photo caption in the News’s sports section, below shots of Walker waving to the crowd and the Ponies’ failed effort at a late touchdown, emphasized the lack of fan interest in SMU: “The scoreboard, the empty stands, an official signaling a final SMU touchdown effort no good, and a Red Raider leg raised in triumph—all told the story of SMU frustration as the greatest Mustang of them all, Doak Waker [sic] sat through a dismal homecoming.”62

The following week, SMU limped out of Fayetteville, Arkansas, in the final game of the year, falling to the Razorbacks, 47-7, to finish 4-7 for the season.63 It became the Mustangs’ third consecutive losing campaign and second under head coach Ron Meyer.

When 1977’s college football attendance was totaled, the Southwest Conference averaged 39,131 fans per contest.64 Average attendance at NCAA Division I football games nationwide increased by more than 2.5 percent that year to 30,805.65 But in five home games at the Cotton Bowl, SMU drew 34 percent fewer fans than the conference average, bringing in just 25,643 spectators per matchup—a figure not far from the Mustangs’ annual attendance tallies throughout the 1970s. Still, as Blair pointed out: “If there hadn’t been the all-out push to sell tickets for the Ohio State game, resulting in a crowd of 45,000, and the Texas game hadn’t pulled 36,151, the numbers would be much, much lower.”66
Indeed, when the Ohio State and Texas games were excluded, SMU averaged just 15,689 fans in three other home games that year—about 60 percent less than the conference’s per-game average and about half the national per-game norm.

Sadly, the Mustangs’ attendance woes were not just limited to football games. The SMU men’s basketball team entered the 1977-78 season hoping to rebound from a miserable 8-19 campaign the year before. But it seemed the Mustang “cagers”—as the News’s sports writers often called basketball players at the time—were not destined to pull themselves from the funk that permeated the previous season.

Not long after the basketball campaign tipped off in November 1977, it became evident the Ponies could hardly draw flies to Moody Coliseum, SMU’s basketball arena. In home nonconference games against Texas Lutheran University, Ohio University, and Top 10-ranked Duke University, SMU attracted a combined 8,800 spectators—five hundred fewer people than Moody’s 9,300 seats could hold for a single game.67

The Mustangs were more popular on the road than they were in the not-so-friendly confines of Moody Coliseum, it seemed. In November road losses to Top 10-ranked teams from the University of Kansas and Kansas State University, SMU played before crowds of thirteen thousand and eleven thousand, respectively.68 When they were 1-3 in the early goings and readying for a home matchup with Duke, SMU player Reggie Franklin told the News’s Pouncey that he expected a win against the heavily favored Blue Devils, saying, “A lot of it is Moody Coliseum. Home games are made to be won.”69 After Duke trounced the Mustangs by twenty-four in front of an underwhelming gathering of 4,400, SMU center T.J. Robinson said, “With the home crowd, I thought everybody would be fired up. But it seemed like people were kind of down.”70
Moody Coliseum’s name seemed appropriate, as dejected or generally apathetic SMU fans passed on seeing the Ponies in their Highland Park arena. Conversely, opposing teams gained ticket revenue and, usually, victories when SMU rolled into town. The Mustangs lost to Indiana University on the road in front of 10,643 in mid-December and then fell by two points to Texas Tech in Lubbock as nearly eight thousand Raider rooters looked on. In Fayetteville, the Arkansas Razorbacks nipped SMU by seven with 6,300 fans on hand.

For their home conference games against Houston, Texas Tech, and Baylor in Moody Coliseum, the Mustangs pulled in an average of just four thousand spectators. As with football, filling an SMU home venue usually required Dallas’s large alumni bases of other Southwest Conference schools to buy up tickets en masse, as former SMU beat writer, Pouncey, acknowledged years later. People would come out [to an SMU game] because it was Southwest Conference basketball or football, or a good intersectional team came in. It wasn’t only to watch SMU; it was to watch SMU play Texas or SMU play Arkansas. But the great majority of the people in Dallas didn’t have any identification with SMU. They didn’t really know about it. They had no emotional ties to the school. It was not like the atmosphere was in Austin at the time for UT where most of the people in town had some connection with UT. It was the opposite of that.

Much as the Texas Longhorns did for SMU football, helping draw the second-largest crowd of the 1977 season, so they did for SMU hoops as well. On January 28, 1978, the Longhorns basketball team came to Dallas—along with a 7-0 Southwest Conference record and a hefty number of their followers—and helped pull a respectable crowd into the Ponies’ home venue. The Texas game drew a standing-room-only fan count of 9,758 to Moody Coliseum as the Longhorns escaped with a five-point win. Two weeks later, No. 1-ranked Arkansas came to Moody, the first top-ranked team to
ever play on SMU’s home court, and 9,890 onlookers packed the arena to see the Hogs hold on for an eleven-point victory. It was the second-largest crowd in Moody’s history.

SMU finished the year 10-18, its second consecutive losing season under third-year coach Sonny Allen. But what was worse, some writers argued, was the damage SMU basketball was suffering on the recruiting trail because of Allen’s unenthusiastic personality and his team’s poor showing on the road against national and conference powers. During Allen’s tenure, SMU hoops compiled just eighteen wins in consecutive seasons against thirty-seven losses, including the worst defeat in SMU basketball history—a 95-55 demolition at the hands of the Houston Cougars on February 13, 1978.

Whatever positive strides Dick Davis seemed to have made in pulling the SMU athletic program out of the gutters of NCAA probation and rampant recruiting and player payment violations—acts that continued through Davis’s tenure, it would later come to light—the athletic director was struggling to put his revenue sports of football and basketball anywhere near the top of the Southwest Conference.

Moreover, despite his best efforts, Davis failed to develop a fan base at SMU, as Sam Blair summed up in a spring 1978 article in the News:

During his four years as athletic director at his alma mater Dick Davis occasionally would lament the lost generations of fans. These were the people whom SMU, for a variety of reasons, failed to attract to its football games from the early 1950s on. Davis, characteristically, then would talk enthusiastically about the aggressive, innovative approach his school must take to pull those people into the Cotton Bowl and make them fans. And Davis, in his way, tried, but nothing happened.

After four years on the job, and far more losing than winning, on March 14, 1978, Davis called it quits at SMU.
At his resignation press conference, Davis lamented his situation at SMU. “I probably inherited more problems than most people face in a lifetime,” he said, adding, “It’s physically impossible to win the popularity award when you sit in this chair.”

By the time Davis officially parted ways with SMU on June 1, 1978, by his own admission he was not the most popular man in Dallas, but more importantly the SMU athletic program he had tended for the previous four years could not be mistaken for a celebrated North Texas institution. Remedying that situation would fall to another man.

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NOTES

1 Temple Pouncey, Mustang Mania (Huntsville, Alabama: Strode, 1981), 252, 257.


4 Ibid.


9 Pouncey, “Meyer on Offense: ‘Pass the Aspirin.’”


12 Pouncey, “Whittington, Rice Slated to Start Against Frogs.”


15 Pouncey, “Whittington, Rice Slated to Start Against Frogs.”

29

17 Pate, “Added Momentum Meyer’s Goal.”


19 Pate, “Added Momentum Meyer’s Goal.”


21 Ibid.

22 Pouncey, Mustang Mania, 259.


27 Ibid.

28 Brad Sham, telephone interview by Charles D. Thomas II, March 11, 2013.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Pouncey, Mustang Mania, 259.

32 Pouncey, “What’s a Football Game?”

33 Ibid.

34 Pate, “Added Momentum Meyer’s Goal.”


37 “SMU Gambles on Illegal Lottery.”

38 Pouncey, “Davis Says Crowd Was About 45,000.”


40 Temple Pouncey, interview by Charles Thomas II, October 2, 2009.

42 Pouncey, “Davis Says Crowd Was About 45,000.”

43 Pouncey, “What’s a Football Game?”

44 Pouncey, “Davis Says Crowd Was About 45,000.”

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.


49 Ibid.


53 Ibid.


55 Pouncey, “Ponies Feast on Game Owls, 41-24.”


60 Pouncey, *Mustang Mania*, 261.

61 Blair, “Doaker Returns, but Crowd Doesn’t.”


65 Ibid.

66 Blair, “Doaker Returns, but Crowd Doesn’t.”


70 Pouncey, “Duke Shows How It’s Done.”


74 Pouncey interview.


77 Ibid.


80 Pate, “Mustang AD Davis Resigns.”

81 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3: THE MANIAC MESSIAH

SMU’s brass knew the type of man they wanted for the athletic director position vacated by Dick Davis: a man with a business background, some familiarity with sports management, and a silver tongue. SMU faculty athletic representative Mike Harvey told the News that the new athletic director needed to be “someone who meets the public well.”¹

Simply put, as SMU beat writer Temple Pouncey concluded his first article about the athletic director search, the Mustangs needed “an administrative version of Ron Meyer.”²

The thirty-seven-year-old Meyer had been a winner at every level, starting in his teenage years in Westerville, Ohio, in the late 1950s. He was one of four Meyer children who were all high achievers despite growing up in a broken household fathered by a largely absent and temperamental alcoholic truck driver.³ He was considered “hugely popular” in high school and was a standout athlete who earned ten varsity letters, all-conference honors in football, basketball, and baseball, and was voted class president in each of his four years at Westerville High School.⁴ He dreamed of playing football for The Ohio State University and idolized its head football coach, Woody Hayes, who later opted against offering a football scholarship to the five-foot, ten-inch stringy kid who did not match the Buckeyes’ archetypal athlete.⁵

Convinced by a former Purdue University graduate assistant named George Steinbrenner, who had become a business deal-maker in Columbus, that a football scholarship would await him in West Lafayette, Indiana, Meyer packed his bags with his pregnant wife in tow and showed up at the Purdue athletic office in the fall of 1959.⁶
There, he found that Steinbrenner—who went on to own the New York Yankees—had failed to secure him a scholarship. Meyer walked on and spent the next spring working his way up the Boilermakers’ depth chart, eventually earning a scholarship and starting defensive back position on the team. He led Purdue in minutes played during his final two seasons and was considered a team leader thanks to his “tenaciousness, cockiness, and smartness,” according to his defensive backs coach, Dale Samuels.

Meyer got his start in coaching a year later as a graduate assistant at Purdue, where he eventually became a fulltime assistant coach for the Boilermakers. His primary duty at the time was recruiting. As David Whitford wrote about Meyer in his 1989 book *A Payroll to Meet: A Story of Greed, Corruption, and Football at SMU*:

> At Purdue, Meyer emerged as a salesman deluxe. Good-looking, charismatic; knew your name, knew your wife’s name, did everything right. If he was the best-liked assistant at Purdue, it was because he made an effort. As soon as the game was over he was shaking hands with parents, talking to players on the other team, walking up to opposing coaches and saying, “Good game!” Some people thought it was phony, but others weren’t so sure. At least Meyer was no Elmer Gantry; he seemed genuinely to believe in his product.

Meyer spent twelve years recruiting for Purdue, in turn signing three players who later went on to be selected in the first round of the National Football League draft. Then, in 1971, after divorcing his wife of thirteen years, he moved to Texas and joined the Dallas Cowboys’ staff as a talent scout—the same year the team won its first Super Bowl. He stayed with the Cowboys for just two years before taking a head coaching position with the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, an NCAA Division II team that had struggled mightily and was coming off a 1-10 season. He turned around the program in little time, leading the Rebels to an 8-3 record in 1973, followed by a perfect regular
season and a 12-1 overall record in 1974 with the lone loss coming in the semifinal round of the national playoffs.\(^{15}\)

From Westerville, Ohio, to the campus of SMU, Meyer’s modus operandi was the same: Speak, dress, and act sharply. He was charming, a flashy dresser, but also witty and prone to use self-deprecating humor to get a laugh out of any audience. SMU insiders later described him as slick, hip, charismatic, and a media darling.\(^{16}\) *News* columnist Skip Bayless wrote of him, “Meyer could make news ordering coffee at Denny’s.”\(^{17}\)

One minute he would woo a top recruit with his raw enthusiasm and flash—and, allegedly, one-hundred-dollar bills—the next he would be backslapping reporters, throwing back cocktails with boosters, or blubbering uncontrollably with players after a heart-wrenching loss.\(^{18}\)

In addition to his ever-likable persona, Meyer had earned credibility early in his coaching tenure when three top players flunked out in midterm exams. As Pouncey wrote: “Meyer took the initiative and announced the news, rather than ducking it as predecessor Dave Smith would have done. Immediately, SMU’s relations with the press and public took an upward swing. Meyer brought a breath of fresh air to the Hilltop.”\(^{19}\)

So when the SMU athletic director position opened in 1978, it was no surprise that his name was among the list of potential hires. Meyer, however, quickly put to rest any speculation that he was a legitimate candidate for Davis’s job. “I won’t be the new athletic director at SMU,” he told the *News*. “I hardly ever see my wife as it is. There are very few people still holding both jobs outside of Bear Bryant, and he’s an historic figure.”\(^{20}\)
Pouncey reported that it was SMU President Dr. James Zumberge who quelled any suggestion to have Meyer in the A.D. role and instead wanted all of Meyer’s energy focused on the head coaching job. Pouncey also wrote that Meyer was not offered the dual jobs because his superiors feared he would be so successful in both capacities that he would be hired away by 1981, leaving SMU with vacancies in the two most important positions in the athletic department.

Meyer did his part to laud the athletic director opening at SMU, calling it “a plum job.” Others around the country evidently agreed. Faculty athletic representative Mike Harvey admitted that in the three days following Davis’s resignation, the university received “numerous calls” from hopeful applicants.

Despite the on-field problems plaguing the Ponies, Meyer seemed quite optimistic about the athletic director’s spot. “It’s tailor-made for some new man to step in, make a few changes and look like a Messiah,” he said.

In the spring of 1978, SMU identified a prospective savior, interviewing Russell Potts for the athletic director spot. In typical Potts fashion, the thirty-nine-year-old from Winchester, Virginia, was the first man to apply for the job and had picked up the phone and called the SMU office at 9 a.m. on the day the position became available. “He was similar to Ron Meyer,” Harvey told the News. “He went after the job with tremendous tenacity. He stayed after me.”

At the time, Potts was the assistant athletic director at his alma mater, the University of Maryland. He began working in the Maryland athletic office in August 1970, when he became the country’s first-ever collegiate sports promotions director.
He had come into that role in a somewhat unlikely manner. As a short, skinny kid, he was never a standout athlete save for a few decent years on the high school track team in Winchester. But he had developed a strong work ethic at an early age. Growing up in a “ramshackle apartment house” in conditions that bordered on poverty, Potts took his first job in grade school tossing papers from his bike. He said:

I was eight years old, and you had to be ten years old to deliver papers. So I told my first lie, a little fib, to get my first job. I was so small, too small to lift the papers onto my bike that somebody had to help me. And if they ever fell out when I was on my route I had to go up to the door and asked somebody to help put them back in the basket for me.

Throughout his secondary school years, Potts had one job or another—delivering papers or milk from door to door. His mother worked the late shift on the assembly line at Zeropack Apple Products and his father was rarely around, leaving the young Potts to fend for himself most of the time. “Survival was a big thing. I started paying for my meals and my clothes when I was eight years old,” he said.

After running track and playing fullback on the high school football team, Potts graduated and enrolled at the University of Maryland where he majored in journalism. It was there he first experienced sports promotions by helping publicize the track team for the track coach and Maryland’s future athletic director Jim Kehoe. Potts described Kehoe as “a hard charger” who made a permanent impression on him. “He would always say, ‘Give me a guy you’ve gotta hold down, not a guy you gotta pull up,’” Potts said. “And that’s the philosophy I’ve had my whole career. I’ve surrounded myself with hard workers who were always ready to try new things. I didn’t want people I had to pull up.”
Also while in college, Potts worked as the sports editor and later the managing editor for the school newspaper, *The Diamondback*. At the same time, he was making forty dollars a week working part-time as the sports editor for the weekly paper, the *Loudoun Times-Mirror*. After graduating from Maryland, he was offered the sports editor job at his hometown newspaper, the *Winchester Star*, where he stayed for six years. It was during that time that Potts laid the foundation for a future in large-scale events promotions. As a side project, he took a part-time position as the director of the Shenandoah Valley Apple Blossom Festival at only twenty-eight years old. “That’s where I picked up a lot of promotional and organizational experience,” he said. “[The festival] was in the red when I took it over and I put it in the black. I was learning that by doing it. I had over three thousand volunteers and had to work with all those egos and work with all those coalitions and raise a lot of money.”

Potts turned down job offers from the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Star* while working in Winchester. But when the University of Maryland and his former boss, Jim Kehoe, came calling in 1970, he could not resist the temptation of going back to College Park. “I took a fifty percent cut to take that job but I saw the potential,” Potts said. “I moved from a beautiful home on Country Club Terrace to a tiny apartment in Washington with my wife and little girls.”

In many ways, the situation Potts was hoping to inherit at SMU in 1978 was similar to the one he inherited at Maryland in 1970. Heading into that season, the Terrapin football program had not earned a conference title in the fifteen years following the resignation of head coach Jim Tatum in 1955, two years after he led his team to a national championship. In that same fifteen-year span, Maryland had logged just three
winning seasons, the best of which was a 7-3 mark in 1961.\textsuperscript{47} As Potts would later describe it, “We were flat on our back in both football and basketball.”\textsuperscript{48}

And much as SMU experienced an attendance embarrassment against Rice before just 6,918 fans in 1977, Maryland drew just 16,500 fans in a 35-7 victory over Atlantic Coast Conference foe North Carolina State University in Potts’s first football season in College Park.\textsuperscript{49}

But unlike SMU, with its modest enrollment and alumni base, in the early 1970s Maryland was one of the largest institutions in the country and was by far the largest in the Atlantic Coast Conference. Its undergraduate enrollment of more than thirty thousand students was more than twice the student population of any other ACC school.\textsuperscript{50}

As Larry Keech speculated in the October 2, 1971, edition of \textit{The Sporting News}, Maryland’s on-field woes were a byproduct of leadership:

Why has Maryland been unable to win? There certainly has been no lack of financial resources. . . . Not only that, but the athletic department has had access to sufficient funds to build dynasties. . . . So the lack of available funds has not been the problem for Maryland football (and basketball). What about recruiting? Tatum developed the fertile coal-mining fields of nearby western Pennsylvania. Even closer to College Park is the rich Washington, D.C., area. So there has been no absence of available prospects. Hence, Maryland’s long drouth \textit{[sic]} must be blamed on leadership within the athletic department and coaching staff. But now, at long last, it appears that at least one and perhaps both of those problems have been solved.\textsuperscript{51}

Potts, specifically, was instrumental in solving the problems in College Park. As \textit{Washington Post} writer Ken Denlinger succinctly described his approach at Maryland:

“Potts knows more angles than Euclid.”\textsuperscript{52} He was able to experiment thanks to the faith that his boss, Kehoe, had in him. As Potts described it:

He let me do my thing. He gave me my hand and I was able to create a lot of things. I negotiated with him a commission basis that paid me twenty-five percent
for everything I sold. I made twelve thousand dollars a year but I made twenty-five percent off programs, scoreboards sales, the radio networks, you name it.

[Kehoe] understood you had to get out there and sell your product. We were flat on our back in both football and basketball. So he hired [Charles] “Lefty” Driesell and he was a great basketball coach, recruiter and promotional guy. He hired Jerry Claiborne, who had been a very successful assistant at Virginia Tech, and [beginning in 1973] we went on to six straight bowl games. 53

In his eight years there, Potts helped the Terrapins double their football and men’s basketball attendance. 54 Maryland’s football and basketball radio broadcasts also grew from just one station to fifty-five during that time, thirty-four of those within the first year alone. 55 In 1971, Potts spearheaded a fundraising effort that garnered six-figure total contributions to the athletics department—up from $33,000 the year before. 56 And most astonishingly, he had helped Maryland make the largest single-season attendance increase for football games in the country from 1971 to 1972. 57

It was this type of rabid promotion that made Potts a top candidate for the SMU athletic director post. The native Virginian was cut from a different cloth than most of the athletic directors of his day, including his two predecessors at SMU in Dick Davis and Haden Fry, who played and coached major collegiate football. The closest that the wiry, five-foot, seven-inch Potts ever came to the college playing field was as a sports journalist. 58 But he seemed to possess the best qualities of his predecessors: Fry’s flair for the dramatic and Davis’s no-nonsense approach to finance.

Because of Potts’s penchant for marketing and the zeal with which he pursued the SMU job, the News’s writers characterized him as a hustler, a promoter, and “a veteran star when it comes to pulling people into the stadium.” 59 He had turned down the athletic director position at Tulane University before his aggressive push for the same job at SMU, where he came in highly touted thanks to his wild successes at Maryland. 60
Potts’s recent promotional victories at Maryland were thanks in part to a tall, skinny kid from his hometown of Winchester, a spitfire named Brad Thomas. Thomas seemed to have unlimited energy. He developed business and media contacts across the D.C. area while plugging Maryland athletics to anyone and everyone as a graduate assistant to Potts and later as the university’s sports promotions director. Potts trusted Thomas with a variety of promotional projects and had given the young man his start in the business after Thomas had written him a letter in 1975 while studying at Madison College and asked Potts how he could get started in the sports business. When Potts gave him the green light to come aboard at Maryland, Thomas transferred schools and hit the ground running.

It was because of this trust that, when Potts caught wind of the SMU athletic director vacancy in early 1978, he charged his twenty-three-year-old right-hand-man, Thomas, with a reconnaissance mission. Thomas said:

Something very few people know is that in about February of 1978 when the SMU job became available and he started to pursue it actively and kind of try to get in the mix, Russ sent me to Dallas—we were still at Maryland—and paid for my trip down here. I remember staying at the Hilton Inn over here at Mockingbird and Sunrise, and spent three or four days here just learning about the city and big corporations and big groups and all the media and marketing stuff that would help us put together a presentation when he had an official interview.

Not long afterward, Potts nailed the interview and presentation in Dallas, and thanks to a seemingly endless list of supporters, he received and accepted the job offer from SMU in May 1978.

“We got over 100 letters of recommendation and 30 to 40 phone calls, from Methodist ministers to bishops to Congressmen to pro coaches and every major bowl,” Harvey told the News. “I think everyone but my wife recommended him.”
Right away, Potts made it clear that promotion was his primary task at SMU. “The college game,” he said, “is the superior product, with its color, pageantry and emotion. Our job is to market that product.”66

“All I can promise,” he added, “is a commitment to work, enthusiasm and imagination. Timing is everything, to be in the right place at the right time. I feel this is one of those situations. There is an opportunity for greatness at SMU.”67

“Opportunity” was a word Potts repeatedly used to describe the state of affairs at SMU. When asked about the Mustangs drawing only 6,918 fans for the 1977 Rice game at the Cotton Bowl, he said, “That’s not a problem. That’s an opportunity.” He echoed that sentiment in 2013 when describing his first days at SMU.

When I took the job, at the press conference I did, the press guys were asking me, “Do you realize what an unbelievable challenge you have here?” They asked me, “What do you think of a challenge like this? Last year, SMU-Rice drew six thousand people. How are you going to fill the Cotton Bowl?” I said, “Six thousand? So that’s 66,000 seats left to fill. I guess we’re leading the nation in opportunities.”68

The opportunity for improvement seemed to start with identifying the new breed of SMU rooters instead of the aging Doak Walker and Don Meredith disciples of old. As Sam Blair wrote: “If he is as enlightened as he is reputed to be, Potts will forget about that lost generation of fans. His most logical move will be to develop a new one.”69

Potts concurred. In an article two weeks later by Mike Jones, the new athletic director was quoted as saying, “When I was in Dallas the other day looking for a house, I saw thousands of kids out playing soccer. I thought to myself, ‘We’ve got to get SMU T-shirts on those kids.’ There is a whole generation of potential new fans for SMU.”70

But SMU’s new athletic director quickly acknowledged the difficult task of building a new fan base in Dallas. “As a realist, I know that’s going to be an uphill battle,
and it’s going to be a tougher job at SMU than it was at Maryland for several reasons. . . .

There’s much more competition in Dallas for one thing. Plus, Maryland is a state school with more resources, and there are more concentrations of different school loyalties in Dallas.”

It did not take Potts long to identify the problem areas in SMU’s athletics. From the athletic director’s office to the playing field, he characterized SMU as having “a negative attitude” and a “lack of imagination and lack of work ethic.” Creativity and hard work were Potts’s calling card, and having the freedom to implement new programs and try new ideas was arguably the most influential factor in his acceptance of the athletic director position. SMU President James Zumberge reportedly told Potts during an in-person interview for the job, “You need to turn this thing around. I need you to turn this thing around. You do your thing and we’ll support you.” Potts accepted on one major condition, saying:

When I was about to take the job, [Zumberge] asked me how long a contract I wanted. I told him, “I don’t want a contract. I don’t believe in security, I believe in opportunity.” I asked for one thing, and that’s to report directly to him. I didn’t want a whole lot of bureaucracy to get in the way of what we’re doing. He said, “Done.” He came around the desk and hugged me and we got started.

To help in his crusade to turn around SMU’s athletic department, just one week after starting the job Potts hired Thomas, who became the Southwest Conference’s first-ever sports promotions director. His duties that had helped Maryland athletics to its resurgence would be similar at SMU: overseeing season ticket, single-game, and group sales; radio and TV negotiations; advertising sales; marketing packages; and scoreboard advertising.
Thomas’s first task, though, was the distribution of three million pocket football schedules across the Dallas area between June and the first day of September.77

Potts, meanwhile, was trying to create intrigue in SMU sports by any means necessary, starting with the development of ties to nearby universities. Taking the opposite path of Dick Davis, who had grown to vehemently oppose playing against the out-of-conference neighborhood programs, by late July Potts already had penned agreements to play football and basketball with North Texas State University and the University of Texas-Arlington.78 As Potts told the press:

There were so few negatives that it was not a very tough decision. We’re entertainment oriented. We’re competing for the entertainment dollar. I see those people lined up outside “Grease” and I think that’s what they want. We’ll give the people what they want from us. You don’t have to be very bright to see that. We have a chance to build some strong rivalries here, to sell out our arenas and stadiums.79

Part of Potts’s plan was to take advantage of the fervor surrounding the new pro sports venue in Dallas—Reunion Arena—that would later become home to the NBA’s Dallas Mavericks. Less than two months after becoming athletic director, he struck a deal to pit SMU against North Texas State in basketball in each of the next four seasons at the high-profile location near downtown.80 When the deal was announced at the weekly Dallas sports press luncheon on July 24, it was seen as so dramatically different from SMU’s recent scheduling philosophy that the luncheon’s emcee, longtime Dallas radio and TV sports broadcaster Frank Glieber, jokingly called the event “the Dick Davis Memorial Lunch.”81

Football, though, was still the primary target of Potts’s and Thomas’s promotional onslaught. The athletic director had been fully aware of that fact, and he knew he needed
to make a splash with the season-opening game, a September 9 home contest against nearby rival Texas Christian University.

I was just getting ready to leave [Maryland for SMU] and I knew we had this home game coming up and I said, “We’ve got to do some dramatic things to get people in the stands.” And I was watching TV one night and came across the promos for the Jerry Lewis telethon and it hit me: We could make the game for charity and have him be there at the game.82

On August 8, SMU announced that the TCU game would be dubbed “The Jerry Lewis Bowl,” a fund-raising event from which all proceeds would be given to the comic’s Labor Day muscular dystrophy telethon. Lewis himself would be on hand to accept the check at halftime.83 The organizers of the event, led by Potts, estimated that a crowd of thirty thousand would raise about $125,000 for charity—not to mention beat the normal SMU football attendance by several thousand fans.84

For Potts, the Jerry Lewis Bowl was the culmination of months of planning, phone calls, business meetings, and sweet-talking just shy of pleading on his hands and knees. In promoting his first football game at SMU, he lived up to his earlier promise to rely on corporate sponsorships. Most importantly, he was able to secure big funding and ticket sales at all Dallas-area 7-Eleven stores thanks to a successful meeting with John Phillip Thompson, the CEO of the convenience store chain’s parent company, the Southland Corporation.85 It was an unlikely win, Potts later reckoned, as Thompson was an alumnus of the University of Texas and a prominent booster for Longhorns athletics.86 But at that point it was still just a gamble, and neither Thompson nor Potts could know whether the corporate sponsorship would be in vain.

And while the first home football game would be the most accurate measure of SMU’s new promotional capabilities, some signs seemed to indicate that Potts’s first
three months on the job had put Mustangs athletics on the right track. By August of that year, SMU’s football season ticket sales had doubled from the previous year. Still, that figure amounted to a modest 4,400 tickets, and as Sam Blair pointed out in the News on August 27:

   Indeed, Potts is in position where a 100 percent increase isn’t nearly enough. At SMU, 1,000 percent would be more like it. . . . Some progress has been made in Potts’ first three months as AD, but everyone realizes the first big test is just ahead. The Mustangs certainly must make some progress at the gate in their four home games, but how much can they reasonably expect?

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NOTES


2 Ibid.


4 Whitford, A Payroll to Meet, 4; and Pouncey, “Ron Meyer, That’s Spelled W-I-N-N-E-R.”

5 Whitford, A Payroll to Meet, 5.

6 Whitford, A Payroll to Meet, 5-6; and Pouncey, “Ron Meyer, That’s Spelled W-I-N-N-E-R.”

7 Whitford, A Payroll to Meet, 6.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 6-7.

10 Ibid., 7.

11 Ibid., 8.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 9.

15 Ibid., 10.

16 Brad Thomas, interview by Charles Thomas II, February 26, 2013; and Russell Potts, telephone interview by Charles Thomas II, April 18, 2013.

18 Pouncey, “Ron Meyer, That’s Spelled W-I-N-E-R.”

19 Ibid.

20 Pouncey, “Pony Search, Circa 1978 ‘AD.’”

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.


27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Sam Blair, “Potts, SMU’s Missing Link?” *The Dallas Morning News*, May 12, 1978; and Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.

30 Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.

31 Russell Potts, telephone interview by Charles Thomas II, April 24, 2013.


33 Ibid.

34 Potts telephone interview, April 24, 2013.

35 Kollatz Jr., “To the Finish: Potts.”

36 Potts telephone interview, April 24, 2013.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
48 Potts telephone interview, April 24, 2013.
49 Keech, “Wakeup Time at Maryland.”
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
53 Potts telephone interview, April 24, 2013.
54 Keech, “Wakeup Time at Maryland.”
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.
58 Ibid.
59 Blair, “Potts, SMU’s Missing Link?”; Mike Jones, “‘And Right Here in This Bottle, Folks…’” *The Dallas Morning News*, May 29, 1978; and Sam Blair, “Russ Potts, Alchemist or Dreamer?” *The Dallas Morning News*, August 27, 1978.
60 “SMU Tabs Potts as AD.”
61 Thomas interview.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 “SMU Tabs Potts as AD”; and Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.
65 “SMU Tabs Potts as AD.”
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.
Blair, “Potts, SMU’s Missing Link?”

Jones, “‘And Right Here in This Bottle, Folks…””

Ibid.

Potts telephone interview, April 24, 2013.

Ibid.

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

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Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.

“Ibid.

“Ibid.; and Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.

Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.

Blair, “Russ Potts, Alchemist or Dreamer?”

Ibid.
CHAPTER 4: MAINSTREAM MANIA

Progress seemed to take on an identity within a week of publication of Sam Blair’s article. On September 3, 1978, six days before the Mustangs’ season opener, a full-page ad appeared in The Dallas Morning News on page 14B with “SMU-TCU” sweeping across the top in block serif lettering. The most recognizable faces of the Mustangs’ football program—coach Ron Meyer and quarterback Mike Ford—graced the sides, along with a schedule of home games and a grouping of ten blocks at the bottom listing various corporate sponsors.¹

And while it was not the largest item on the full-page display, a logo appeared in three separate locations on the page bearing italicized text and one large signature M that served as the first letter of both words in the two-word logo: Mustang Mania.

The ad marked the first time the phrase “Mustang Mania” appeared in print in the News. For the previous two months, the two-word slogan had been seen only on the tens of thousands of bumper stickers that Sports Promotions Director Brad Thomas and his small squad of interns had given away by the handful at just about every grocery store, barbershop, and gas station in Dallas.² That was one of the first steps, former SMU Athletic Director Russ Potts said in 2013, to rekindle interest in Mustangs athletics and break out of the funk the program had slipped into in the 1970s.

“We had a self-esteem thing,” he said. “There was no excitement around the program. I told my staff, ‘What we’re gonna do is flood this town with Mustang Mania stickers.’”³

Mustang Mania originally was to be the moniker for the promotional efforts behind SMU’s 1978 football season. It was much like what Potts had done at Maryland.
“I would have a theme every year,” he said. “One year I had ‘Date with Destiny,’ and another year I created one called ‘Return to Glory.’ We used that consistently in all our advertising.”

Potts took full credit for the themed one-year campaigns at Maryland, but exactly who came up with the alliterative Mustang Mania slogan remains in question, thirty-five years after it was created. Potts claimed the name was his idea alone; Thomas did, as well.

While catchy, the slogan was not particularly original. Similar slogans already had been used by college and professional teams in the 1970s. Examples could be found in the National Basketball Association, where the Portland Trailblazers were the beneficiaries of “Blazermania.” In the National Football League, meanwhile, there was the Denver Broncos’ “Broncomania” and the Houston Oilers’ “Oilermania,” the latter of which morphed into “Earl-ermania” in celebration of the team’s standout running back, Earl Campbell.

Thomas admitted the use of the word “mania” was not groundbreaking, noting that in the years before Mustang Mania and ever since, he has kept a book full of clippings of similar mania-related slogans and paraphernalia he came across.

“It’s not a very creative slogan,” he said. “We thought of Mustang Mayhem and Mustang Mania; we went with Mania. It’s not that big a deal—the big M, going with both the mustang and the mania. But the fact that we were real consistent with that logo and only that logo, it just kind of took off.”

While the name was not groundbreaking and in and of itself likely had little to do with the success of the campaign overall, it was Potts’s and Thomas’s approach to sports
marketing that made Mustang Mania unique. Neither man possessed a marketing or business background. Neither had received formal training or education in the field. But both possessed a strong work ethic and a willingness to reach out to anyone—the media, the public, or the business elite—in order to further the athletic department’s goal of making SMU a household name in Dallas and beyond.

Potts said the intended message of the Mustang Mania campaign, much like its name, was simple: excitement. It was critical for his office to drum up enthusiasm for SMU athletics within the student body and, more importantly, a Dallas community that was not aware of or excited about the Mustangs, who had failed to captivate the North Texas sports market for about thirty years. The football and men’s basketball teams had not been successful for much of the 1960s and 1970s, and the NCAA had placed the football program on probation four times, most recently under athletic director and football coach Dave Smith. Potts reckoned SMU needed some positive PR.

His plan for Mustang Mania, though perhaps not as formally structured as a modern-day promotional campaign backed by stacks of market research, was to develop an ever-growing list of corporate sponsors, both nationally and locally, and identify ways in which SMU and the sponsoring corporation or company could mutually benefit. Most often, that would take the form of a promotional event possibly associated with an SMU football or basketball game; the production and mass distribution of marketing materials and giveaways; or co-op marketing in which SMU and a partnering manufacturer or retailer would split the cost of advertising in print and broadcast media.

The campaign initially was divided into two parts, each supported by corporate backers. Potts said the plan most importantly involved the bulk sale of discounted tickets
to corporate sponsors, who would be integral in distributing tickets to the community at little or no cost to the ticket holder. He explained:

Phase one was a preseason season-ticket sale plan, and phase two was a single-game ticket sale plan. The premise was we knew we could not sell sixty-four thousand full-price tickets, and there were going to be twenty-four thousand tickets that we knew we’d need to get out [in order] to get fannies in the seats. It’s no different than a guy in the grocery store saying, “Hey, we’ve got this new cola. You want to try our product?” and giving you a free sample.

To pay for that, we went and got sponsors to pay for all these reduced tickets, that way we’d be able to get people for the first time or for the first time in years in years to attend an SMU game.10

Thomas described the corporate sponsorship strategy as groundbreaking in college athletics and absolutely necessary at SMU at the time. In a February 2013 interview, he said:

We worked a lot of group sales type things and we obviously had a lot of companies giving us a thousand dollars and that would be a hundred ten-dollar tickets. We would give them to groups and we had a great network formed of how to distribute the tickets to the groups. And we always said in jest, totally in fun, we’d go to our graves and never say the number of tickets we gave out. You had to give away so many to get so much redemption. But it really was the right thing to do.

It did totally revolutionize in some ways the whole college athletic marketing scene. Schools were sending representatives from their schools to come see us for a day and see what we were doing. And it was such a head trip at the time, thinking “They’re coming to see us to learn? All we’re doing is making a lot of phone calls and working real hard.” I mean it wasn’t like we had some secret potion at all. It was a combination of the team starting to do better and then we were giving away tickets. I mean, we weren’t totally giving them away, but we were liberally making sure people had tickets in hand. We wanted to make sure people were there, that was the key thing.11

Potts felt the campaign would raise awareness of and enthusiasm for Mustang sports, leading to what he believed was the inevitable creation of a new larger, stronger fan base. To do so, he said he wanted the Dallas-area resident to receive the Mustang
Mania message an average of seven times a day. That began in his morning paper, where, working with the advertising agency The Richards Group, SMU placed hundreds of Mustang Mania ads for football and basketball games and other special events. Additionally, there would be multiple series of print ads for Dallas-area businesses that would also reference the campaign, such as Barry’s Cameras ads that repeatedly spouted the phrase, “Barry’s Got Mustang Mania!” Television and radio stations’ print ads would appear in the News and the Times Herald telling readers where to go to watch and listen to the next game in Mustang Mania. Grocery markets would run ads telling readers how their stores “proudly support” Mustang Mania—and that their produce and soda products were on sale. Then, of course, there were the writers who would go on to mention the campaign by name in News articles more than 150 times during the next four years.

The Dallas resident was supposed to receive the Mania message on the radio on the way to work, where, for example, he might hear John Facenda, the voice of NFL Films, narrating a series of short radio segments recalling the “Great Moments in Mustang History” brought to you by Mustang Mania. The Dallas resident would see the slogan on billboards, on the bumper of a passing car, and in the window of his corner barbershop or gas station. He would see it on the stickers, buttons, posters, and pocket calendars that were stacked at the reception desk of every business and doctor’s office in town. Before going to bed, he would hear it on the nightly local TV news and then repeat the process the next day.

It did not take long for the media to take notice of SMU’s flashy new campaign once marketing materials and ads sporting the name Mustang Mania started to roll out in
large numbers in the late summer and early fall of 1978. Just three days after it debuted in *The Dallas Morning News* with a full-page ad, the campaign name took root in the *News*’s sports agate and copy. As SMU beat writer Temple Pouncey later said, “I think our use of the phrase [Mustang Mania] was kind of inevitable because it had been pounded on us by Russ and Brad.”

It started with a playful acknowledgment of the kitschy song, *Mustang Mania*, that Thomas had commissioned for the campaign and released to Dallas-area record stores. Prefacing Pouncey’s September 6 article on SMU football were four bars of lyrics from the tune: Ford can throw, Tolbert can fly / Coach Meyer knows how and sometimes why / With our kind of line, look out for the backs / And Putt Choate’ll stop ‘em dead in their tracks. Pouncey followed with the comical lead: “That’s ‘Mustang Mania,’ folks, a little ditty penned by Howie Newman. There’s some suspicion that Mustang mania was born in Putt Choate’s garage down in Coahoma, Texas.”

The song, much like its namesake promotional campaign, spread like wildfire shortly after it was released on the first week of September 1978—so much so that *News* writer Mike Jones jokingly commented about the upbeat country-western number and its “semi-hot fiddle licks” in a column on September 7: “I mean you gotta like it. . . . I’ve got the dang thing running through my mind over and over.”

The way Jones described it, the song *Mustang Mania* was so bad it was good. He likened the tune and its overt shtick to less-than-glamorous songs such as *Chinese Bandits* and British pop artist Lonnie Donegan’s 1958 camp croon, *Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight?*
Jones also became the first News writer to unabashedly lampoon the Mustang Mania campaign by portraying it as a plague or disease that was affecting man and beast. Jones led his column by weaving a woeful tale of three men—Joey, Pete, and Jim—exchanging solemn news on the farm:

“Well, Jim, did the vet get the results of that test back?” Jim nods softly and Pete and Joey exchange fearful glances. “The test came back about an hour ago,” Jim says, putting a hand on Joey’s shoulder. It is a moment before he can go on. “Joey,” he begins again, “I’m afraid, uh, I’m afraid that Fury has got—Mustang Mania!”

Jones joked that three more city buses were stricken the day before with Mustang Mania. His joke was based in truth, however: As part of SMU’s promotional onslaught, Thomas had, in fact, struck a deal weeks earlier with Dallas city transit to plaster the campaign name and logo on the side of city buses. And in a way, Jones’s comical commentary also served as subtle evidence that members of the media were starting to take notice of the campaign.

As part of the plan to identify and partner with corporate sponsors, Thomas met and began a business relationship with Bob Bitford, the general manager of KAFM-FM Radio in Dallas, a station that had been bought by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Recognizing that the station was flush with private funding through the Mormon Church, Thomas was able to secure complete financial backing for 100,000 Mustang Mania bumper stickers, paid for by KAFM. The station’s lone condition was that the bumper stickers include the words “KAFM Radio” inside the SMU athletics logo, the red running mustang. Thomas took the deal in a heartbeat. He said:

We built this relationship where, when we went through a hundred thousand bumper stickers I’d call him up and go, “Bob, listen, we need some more. We need a couple hundred thousand.” And it was like [snaps fingers] clockwork. And it happened over and over and over and over, maybe ten or fifteen times. Of
course, at a hundred thousand bumper stickers at a time, that’s over a million bumper stickers. And every time we needed another hundred thousand, it was just a matter of ordering them. And that’s not easy because it costs money. Stuff like that costs money. And I think the key thing is, we were at the forefront—really at the forefront—of corporate sponsorship, you know just getting them to pay for things that we didn’t want to pay for because we didn’t have the budget to pay for. Archaic as though it may be now.  

Thomas also landed a sponsorship from Bonanza Oil to print five thousand Bonanza-SMU kids jerseys to be given to the first five thousand young fans who arrived at the SMU-TCU season-opening game. A quarter-page ad—co-sponsored by Bonanza, Dal-Mac, and North Dallas Bank—ran in the News on September 8 plugging the jersey giveaway, showcasing the Mustang Mania logo, and again tabbing the contest as the “Jerry Lewis Bowl Game.”

Even with the widespread marketing and promotions of SMU football, for the Mustangs to draw large, paying crowds they would need to field a winning team. It had not proven an easy task, as SMU had reached the seven-win plateau just once in the 1970s. As ESPN college football writer and columnist Ivan Maisel wrote of collegiate football programs competing for the ticket dollar in metropolitan settings: “Any marketing plan must start with winning.”

To that end, head football coach Ron Meyer was working to put a higher caliber athlete on the field and had helped in his own way to drum up enthusiasm for the 1978 season by hauling in a stellar recruiting class earlier that year. As Steve Pate wrote: “The Mustangs have had one of their most successful campaigns ever in signing talented linemen, which has been sorely lacking in recent years.”
Comparing SMU’s recruiting class to the Southwest Conference’s traditional power, the University of Texas, Pate reasoned: “SMU has been more impressive in convincing good players they can turn that program around.”28

Despite a less-than-impressive season in 1977, the Ponies returned sixteen starters in 1978 and a few important cogs in the machine. Among them were sophomore quarterback Mike Ford, who was the 1977 Southwest Conference Newcomer of the Year, and Emmanuel Tolbert, who was the top returning college receiver in the country in terms of passes caught.29

The News’s sports writers described the Mustangs as “on the upswing”30 and as a team that boasted a “widely heralded freshman class” that had “everybody talking about them. Up and comers.”31 Still, SMU was picked to finish just sixth in the nine-team conference.32 Columnist Mike Jones echoed some of the enthusiasm for the upcoming season but tempered it by looking at the list of opponents on the 1978 schedule:

There is little question that SMU will be an exciting, explosive team offensively, provided it can come up with a respectable running game to go with the touted Mike Ford-led passing attack. There is also little question that this is a pivotal year in Meyer’s scheme of things and that the non-conference schedule of Florida, Penn State and Ohio State is not readily conducive to putting many marks in the win column.33

Meyer confidently asserted that the 1978 squad was the best in his three-year tenure, though he set the bar only slightly higher than the previous year, prognosticating that his Mustangs would win half their games. Still, his prediction for the future showed he was not about to pull back on the reins of expectation. “If we win five games this year,” he said, “we’ll be in a bowl next year. Then in Ford’s senior year we’ll be in the Cotton Bowl or close to it. Those are some pretty grandiose things. But that’s the way I feel.”34
Meyer’s enthusiasm was contagious, and fans, alumni, and reporters alike shared a sense of optimism about the SMU football program despite the team’s lengthy mediocrity. Jones wrote: “Meyer has put a little fun back into SMU football and this guy Mike Ford could be one of the bigger college stars of the future.”35 Daryl Doggett, a three-position player for the Mustangs in the late 1960s, told the News’s Pouncey, “once Ron [Meyer] starts winning, the fans will follow. He’s on the right track.”36 Pouncey quoted the 1977-78 SMU student body president Ted Stone as saying, “[W]e believe in Ron Meyer. And as soon as we’re winning, you’ll see a dramatic turnaround.”37

In a column on the state of Mustang football, Jones opined: “If Meyer stays at SMU, I think he’ll accomplish a lot of things. And though I don’t agree with a few minor views he has, he’s the kind of guy I’d like to see succeed because of his brash, take it by the teeth and shake it attitude. A renegade.”38

Between Meyer’s recruiting class, Potts’s and Thomas’s promotional blast, and the optimism of the returning starlets on offense, the stage was set for a breakout 1978 season in the win column and the turnstile counts.

The moment of truth came on September 9, the season-opening game, when TCU rolled into the Cotton Bowl. Before the ball was kicked off the tee, the evening reportedly felt like a spectacle unknown to football fans in the area, if not the country. The kickoff was delayed by seven minutes in order to release 150,000 red, white, and blue balloons, setting a Guinness World Record.39

The Mustangs kept the momentum going, as running back D.K. Perry took the opening snap of the game and charged up the field for a ninety-four-yard touchdown to key the 45-14 SMU victory.40 Quarterback Mike Ford threw for 280 yards en route to
being named by both the Associated Press and United Press International as their national Back of the Week.\textsuperscript{41}

The Ponies’ dominant performance might have been a surprise, but the biggest shock to those who followed SMU, including News writer Sam Blair, was the official attendance—41,112—which was the largest turnout for an SMU-TCU matchup since 1958 when forty-nine thousand watched Don Meredith lead the Mustangs to a 20-13 win over the eventual Southwest Conference champion Horned Frogs. Blair called the first win in the Mustang Mania era “fun” and “zany.”\textsuperscript{42}

No one should have been bored. This was not your classic college football contest, but it certainly was entertaining. And the game, billed as the Jerry Lewis Bowl, also was profitable for Muscular Dystrophy. At halftime, the famous comedian accepted a check for $51,141 for his favorite charity. That amount represented the net proceeds after game expenses as the two schools and Seven-Eleven Stores combined efforts in a successful promotion for a worthy cause. And the night of pageantry and hullabaloo sure didn’t hurt the Mustangs’ new souped-up campaign to attract new fans.\textsuperscript{43}

As Jones worded it in a column several days later, the crowd of more than forty-one thousand represented “a breakthrough.”\textsuperscript{44} As he phrased it: “Even though a large number may have turned out to help out Jerry’s kids, they did a lot for Ron’s kids, especially those who remember the crowd of little more than 6,000 here for last year’s Rice game.”\textsuperscript{45}

Potts later described the season-opening game of the 1978 season as the point when SMU’s athletics promotions began to “take the town by storm,” adding, “I think once we pulled off the Jerry Lewis Bowl, it set the tempo. People knew that we were the real deal.”\textsuperscript{46} As for Meyer, the head coach was quoted after the TCU game as saying:

I think it really represents a breakthrough. I’m sure the MD thing was a part of it, too, but it was a great outpouring of community support and it’s really encouraging. What was exciting was our student support. Somebody told me that
we had somewhere around 6,500 students that turned out and that’s tremendous considering our enrollment is just over 8,000.\textsuperscript{47} 

In the same article, Meyer said he could only hope the students would continue to show up. But he would have to wait several weeks to see, as the Mustangs were scheduled for three consecutive away games. He probably could not have predicted the fervor that would await his team after the road trip.

The Ponies’ train kept rolling the next week, as they went into Orlando, Florida, as a four-point underdog and upset the Florida Gators, 35-25, at the Tangerine Bowl on September 16, 1978.\textsuperscript{48} Ford threw for 210 yards and two touchdowns in leading the Mustangs to back-to-back wins for the first time since 1974.\textsuperscript{49} As the headline for Pouncey’s story indicated on September 19, for the Mustangs to stretch their win streak to three, they would have to do it the “hard way” by traveling to State College, Pennsylvania, to face the Pennsylvania State University Nittany Lions.\textsuperscript{50}

Pouncey wrote: “Of course, Penn State is somewhat different from Florida. The Nittany Lions are sure to be ranked in the nation’s top four this week. All they did Saturday was shut out Ohio State in Columbus, stopping the Buckeye running game and intercepting five passes.”\textsuperscript{51}

The Ponies were optimistic, though. Meyer predicted Ford would play well against Penn State, while Ford said, “We have some talent, and with a complete performance we have a chance to win.”\textsuperscript{52} And for the first time since the Mustang Mania campaign hit the pages of the \textit{News} almost three weeks earlier, a staff writer mentioned it without a heavy dose of sarcasm. Pouncey responded to Ford’s suggestion the Ponies could win in Happy Valley, writing:
No, Mike Ford wasn’t high, folks. Completely sober. Clear-headed, actually. He can see this happening, and the crazy thing is that “Mustang mania” is spreading outside Ownby Stadium. A few folks who saw the win over Florida, especially the part when SMU zoomed to a 28-3 lead with consummate ease, also have that vision. . . . Ohio State wasn’t able to, but SMU reeks of optimism.

SMU’s optimism proved not to be unfounded. The Ponies stifled the fourth-ranked Nittany Lions for two and a half quarters, leading 21-12 late into the third period and effectively silencing a Penn State record crowd of 77,404. But two late Nittany Lion touchdowns and a stout second-half defensive effort gave Penn State the 26-21 win. Ford threw for 289 yards in a losing effort and dejectedly said after the game, “We’ll go back to school and people will say, ‘You played a heck of a game, really kept it close.’ Well, that’s not worth a darn. I’d rather lose 100-0 than 26-21 and have a chance and not do it.”

As Pouncey wrote in his recap of the game, the Mustangs left State College “mad at themselves for not having won,” and he wrapped his story looking ahead to the following week’s game: “Now they’ll expect to beat Ohio State, too.”

Pouncey, it seemed, also expected SMU to somehow best the Buckeyes, the team that had come to the Cotton Bowl a year earlier and destroyed the Mustangs by twenty-eight points and intercepted Mike Ford seven times. His faith was evidenced in an article he penned three days after what he described as a “most respectable” loss to Penn State. His lead served as a ringing endorsement of the surprising Mustangs: “SMU is on the verge of being one of the better football teams in the country.”

The SMU head coach, Meyer, was more reserved. “We’re not a great team yet by any stretch of the imagination,” he said, “but we’re not going up there with our hat in our hand. We’re going to play a tough football game.”
And play a tough game the Mustangs did. Despite coming in as fourteen-point underdogs and playing in front of 87,500 fans, the largest crowd ever to see the Mustangs play, SMU tied Ohio State, 35-35, and would have won had a forty-eight-yard field goal not missed by a foot to the left with two seconds remaining. The Mustangs gained 188 more yards and ran thirty-eight more plays than the Buckeyes while forcing six Ohio State turnovers. The 501 yards the Ponies racked up were the most ever surrendered by an Ohio State defense. Ford had the second best passing day in SMU history with 341 yards through the air to go with one passing touchdown, three rushing touchdowns, and a two-point conversion run.

Because of the lopsided statistics in the Mustangs’ favor, Meyer spoke with a sense of disillusionment after leaving Ohio with just a tie. “This is not a moral victory,” he said. “It’s a loss. We’re just not too happy. . . . We feel we should be 4-0.”

Dallas Times Herald reporter Joe Taylor connected the Ponies’ stunning performance against Ohio State with the athletic department’s promotional effort. In his story that ran above the fold on the front page the next day, his lead read: “It was the day Mustang Mania almost became more than an advertising campaign.”

The campaign title also appeared in the Times Herald agate on the jump for Taylor’s story. On page A-25, the headline read: “Tie with Ohio State spurs Mustang Mania to a higher plateau.”

Even though the Mustangs’ record of 2-1-1 was nothing spectacular, the fact that the longtime punching bag had competed so impressively against national powers did not go unnoticed at home. When SMU’s football players arrived in Dallas late that Saturday
night from Columbus, they disembarked to the sound of cheering at DFW Airport. Taylor captured the scene for the *Times Herald*:

Sporting a wide grin as he emerged from the plane, Meyer didn’t apologize for his team’s showing. He signed autographs and posed for pictures with fans and shook hands with a lot of people who wished him well.

About 50 members of the Mustang band, most of them wearing red nightshirts, sandals or no shoes at all, warmed up the fans waiting in Ozark Airlines lounge with “Happy Days Are Here Again.”

Fans applauded and screamed in union, “We’re No. 1” as the team quickly stepped into the terminal area and into a waiting Dallas Transit System charter.

The next Monday, the *News*’s Mike Jones summed up what the Mustangs’ surprising four-game stretch had done to change their public perception in Dallas.

I’ll tell you what they did. They dang near up and whipped their reputations like a nickel drum, that’s what they did. And that, boys and girls, is a long way from losing to North Texas State by 11, beating Tulane by 5 and losing to Ohio State by four touchdowns. Which is precisely what the lads in Red & Blue did one calendar year ago.

As for Meyer? Jones surmised: “If they voted a national Coach of the Year right now, Meyer should be elected by acclimation.”

It was too early to give him the Coach of the Year honor, but UPI named Meyer its national Coach of the Week after the tie with Ohio State. Ford, meanwhile, for the second time that season received the national Back of the Week award from the Associated Press and was named college football’s offensive Player of the Week by *Sports Illustrated*. He was also named to the UPI Backfield of the Week for his performance against the Buckeyes.

The Ponies’ airport welcoming party proved a precursor of future fan interest. On October 11, 1978, the image of an SMU Mustangs football helmet appeared in the skybox on the front page of the *News* alongside the teaser headline, “SMU’s success is
going to the ticket office.” The story it referenced, on page 1B, said it all in the headline:

“If ya wanna see SMU, get in line.” Pouncey led the story with:

SMU’s big offensive show and come-from-behind 35-35 tie at Ohio State paid dividends Monday and Tuesday. Intangible ones, such as national honors for quarterback Mike Ford and coach Ron Meyer, and the more tangible: Ticket sales. . . . Lines began forming at the Moody Coliseum ticket office at 8:30 a.m. Monday, and by nightfall the school had enjoyed what ticket manager Bob Ferrell called “the biggest ticket day we’ve had since 1968.” Some 7,000 single-game tickets were sold at Moody, another 1,000 at area outlets, and 500 through a new computer hookup at Foley’s department store in Houston.73

“It looks like rings are coming back out of the drawers and onto the fingers,” Meyer said after learning about the resurgent fan interest.74 What was particularly interesting, Pouncey noted, was that the next SMU home game—against Houston—was still two weeks away.75 Ferrell said that SMU had sold 1,500 tickets for the Ohio State game and he expected his office to sell its entire allotment of two thousand tickets for the Mustangs’ next road game. He also speculated that the SMU-Houston matchup would draw forty thousand to the Cotton Bowl.76

Whether it was the Mustangs’ recent on-field performance against nationally ranked opponents, the constant barrage of promotional materials hurled at the public as part of Mustang Mania, or both, attendance appeared to be on the rise. Based on the renewed interest, columnist Sam Blair went so far as to call the Mustangs “darlings” after a four-game stretch in which they won only half their games.77

But as he acknowledged in the same October 13 column, SMU football even in its less-than-impressive years had developed a reputation as an upstart that could spar with the best of them. The 1951 Mustangs pulled off a road upset of the University of Notre Dame only to fall to lowly Rice University the next week.78 The 1963 Ponies knocked off the U.S. Naval Academy and Heisman Trophy winning quarterback Roger Staubach only
to stumble against the same Rice Owls a week later. Could the 1978 iteration of SMU football, Blair questioned, somehow dash the school’s flash-in-the-pan image?

The Mustangs would have to try to avoid living up to that undesirable precedent the next week in Waco, Texas, against an 0-4 Baylor Bears squad that, like SMU, was racking up passing yards with ease. That Saturday, the Bears came within a touchdown of taking all the recently acquired air out of SMU’s sails. It took a monumental recovery act from Ford to pull the Ponies out of a 21-0 third-quarter deficit and escape with a 28-21 win.

The next day, when the game recap hit the pages of the News, more evidence came to light that SMU’s promotional campaign indeed was taking root. In the skybox on the front page of the paper, the teaser headline read “Mustang mania Bear-ly survives, 28-21.”

With the win, SMU moved to 3-1-1 and was tied for the Southwest Conference lead with a 2-0 record in the league. And possibly thanks to those numbers and Potts’s and Thomas’s continued promotional push, three days after SMU’s win over Baylor the News made its first correct mention of the campaign name, with both M’s capitalized, in its copy or agate. Again, in the skybox on the front page of the paper, this time above a photo of John Paul II—who had been elected pope the day before—the teaser headline read: “Mustang Mania at full gallop.”

The Mustangs’ ascension from Southwest Conference limbo was paying dividends at the ticket window. A photo on page 5B showed a backed-up line of would-be ticket purchasers standing impatiently, hands on hips, at the SMU ticket office.
Underneath, the caption read: “Hordes of Mustang fans have forced the ticket office to gladly stay open until 8 every night this week.”

Several column inches below that photo were two shots showcasing the marketing materials of the promotional campaign. In one, a young woman was seen jogging while sporting a blue T-shirt featuring the running pony image above the Mustang Mania logo in white lettering. The caption also mentioned the campaign slogan, reading: “Mustang Mania is on the run for the Cotton Bowl this season.” The other image captured a Mustang Mania bumper sticker, one of tens of thousand distributed that summer and early fall, affixed to a street sign, in effect forming the phrase “Stop Mustang Mania.” The caption read: “Perhaps a Cougar takes credit for this exclamation.”

Like Clint Grant, the photographer who captured the images, and the editor who captioned the photos and ran the Mania name on the front page of the paper that day, sportswriter Pouncey also used the campaign by name in his article, a six-hundred-word piece that wrapped with the following three paragraphs:

Mustang Mania was alive and well at the ticket office Monday. Lines were just as long if not longer than they were last Monday, ticket manager Bob Ferrell reported. A crowd of 45,000 was forecast for Saturday’s Cotton Bowl game against the Houston Cougars, and it may hit 50,000. The ticket office is under such siege that it will stay open until 8 every night this week. Though the Ponies have only four home games this season, they have a shot at averaging 45,000 a game, which would be the best average attendance here since 1951, when Ron Meyer was 9 years old.

A crowd of more than fifty thousand would represent the largest turnout for an SMU game since the Mustangs played perennial power Oklahoma in 1970, which drew 51,909 to the Cotton Bowl. To attract that many fans, the SMU athletic office planned its second mass giveaway of the season, this time seven thousand free Frito-Lay/SMU Coaching Caps, two thousand team posters, and one thousand miniature footballs for the
Houston game. As the News phrased it, the game was a “cornucopia of Mustang Mania promotions” that would feature thirty high school bands and a country and western band called Texas Moon. An ad appeared on page 8B of the News on October 17 to promote the matchup at the Cotton Bowl and the cap promotion, while dubbing the afternoon game “Methodist Youth Fellowship Day.” On each of the next three days, a similar ad appeared in the News, calling the game “Jack in the Box Kids’ Day” and announcing a ticket deal in which five youngsters would gain free admission with one paying adult.

Aside from anything Potts or Thomas could pull off on the promotional side, SMU expected to benefit from the fact that the Houston Cougars were even hotter than the Mustangs heading into the mid-October contest. Houston was 4-1 and was fresh off a 33-0 demolition of No. 6 Texas A&M. Houston entered the SMU game ranked No. 11 in the country, but Las Vegas odds makers determined the Ponies and Cougars were even, to which quarterback Mike Ford said, “I thought we’d be underdogs by seven or maybe 10 points. It’s good that people think we have a chance.”

The News called the game a “must see,” and the paper’s sports cartoonist Bill DeOre picked the Ponies in his weekly college football predictions comic panel, captioning the picture of a tap-dancing mustang with “It’ll be SMU’s show!”

But on a steamy Texas afternoon, SMU’s hopes to maintain the Southwest Conference lead melted quickly as Houston burned the Mustangs by two touchdowns. In the article headlined “Coogs cool amid Mania, 42-28,” Sam Blair led his game recap with: “Mustang Mania was put in a straightjacket at the Cotton Bowl Saturday.”

The lone bright spot of the day was the turnout, as Pouncey acknowledged in his sidebar: “Well, at least the crowd was a victory for SMU, whose officials earlier had
predicted it might be as large as 50,000-plus. But with all sorts of promotional gimmicks in play and a bunch of high school bands participating, the crowd just kept growing.”

The crowd peaked at 64,871, making it the largest home attendance for an SMU game since 1965. About six thousand students, almost two-thirds of SMU’s enrollment, attended the game. The State Fair of Texas, immediately adjacent to the Cotton Bowl in Fair Park, “had the biggest concession day it’s ever had for a football-game day,” Potts said.

As a result of the inspiring turnout, Potts and Thomas unsurprisingly kept working hard when it came to football game promotions. The day after the home loss, October 23, 1978, a football ad appeared in the News on page 15B taking up the bottom third of the page with the headline “Mustang Mania in 78.” The illustrated ad featured a pair of SMU fans cruising down the highway and passing by two large billboards, each promoting one of the Mustangs’ next two contests. “Mustang Mania travels to Austin” appeared under the information about the upcoming game against Texas.

“We’ll sell more than 7,000 tickets to the game in Austin,” Potts predicted that week. “We’ve already sold our first shipment of 3,500. It’s a road game, but we get 50 percent of each ticket.”

His prediction reportedly came true; SMU sold seven thousand tickets to the game in Austin (although no outlet ever reported whether it was SMU fans that purchased those tickets or Dallas-based UT alumni). Any SMU fan that purchased the ticket and made the three-hour drive to the Texas capital city likely wished he had spent his Saturday otherwise. The Longhorns blitzed Mike Ford relentlessly, sacking him eight times and limiting the country’s second-ranked passer to a 10-for-31 performance for a season-low
of 122 yards. Ford, star wide receiver Emanuel Tolbert, and six other Mustangs were injured and missed parts of the game in a 22-3 blowout.

After a promising 2-1-1 start to the season and all the enthusiasm of SMU’s promotions, the campaign and the football program seemed to hit a roadblock with the loss to Texas, which moved the Ponies’ record to 3-3-1. The Monday after the loss, the headline for Mike Jones’s column summed it up: “Mustang mania returns to Earth.”

Jones wrote:

Let me not cast the first stone at Mania, lest the office become inundated with thousands of crumb crushers wearing SMU T-shirts. But laying the rose-colored glasses aside, let’s look at this thing in perspective. Or hey, let’s let Ron Meyer look at this thing in perspective. “I have said all along,” he repeated Sunday afternoon, “it is totally ridiculous to compare us with a team like, say, Houston. For us to have been a 1-point underdog against them was ridiculous. . . . I don’t want to downplay our football team in any way, I just think we should be very realistic. We’ve got to go back and realize that we are a .500 football team right now. And looking at it at any point back down the road, not in our fondest dreams did we think we would be where we are at this point.”

Despite the setback in Austin, for Potts and Thomas all was not lost. There were still opportunities to draw big numbers to the Cotton Bowl for two more games, starting with a contest against Texas A&M. So, for the second time that season, Potts slapped a thematic name on a home game, labeling the matchup with the Aggies “The 1st Annual Dr Pepper Hall of Fame Game.” Matty Bell, coach of the 1935 national champion SMU football team, and Ray Morrison, who coached the Mustangs for a combined fifteen seasons between 1915 and 1934, were to be inducted into the school’s newly soda-sponsored hall of fame. Continuing the corporate sponsorship spree, Potts obtained financial backing from Dallas area Ford dealers and the Dr Pepper soda bottler to promote and assist in ticket sales for the game. Free KLIF Radio T-shirts also were listed as giveaways at the event.
The wave of advertising for the event was massive. Using Potts’s Mustang Mania logo design throughout, the SMU athletics office ran twenty-one ads in the News between October 23 and November 4, the date of the Mustangs’ home game versus Texas A&M in the Dr Pepper Hall of Fame Game. As additional sponsors came aboard, Potts and Thomas sweetened the deal in later ads, which touted a color poster giveaway with the redemption of a ticket at the game, sponsored by Adidas and Cullum & Boren, a local sporting goods store chain.

The game against Texas A&M also gave SMU an opportunity to reach viewers in their living rooms, as the Ponies—who were recovering from numerous injuries sustained in the loss to Texas—were picked for the regional afternoon broadcast. As Pouncey wrote: “SMU may be black and blue, but ABC likes those colors. So Mustang Mania will be on regional TV this Saturday.” And for the second time that season, the Mustangs were expecting to draw a crowd of more than sixty thousand fans to the Cotton Bowl.

That Saturday, a respectable turnout of 57,208 fans watched as SMU fell to Texas A&M, 20-17, on a last-minute field goal. Ford played almost the entire second half with a pulled hamstring and threw for 290 yards in the losing effort.

In order to reach Meyer’s preseason goal of five wins, the Mustangs would need to pull out at least two victories in their remaining three games. They got off on the right foot the next week in Houston, where SMU obliterated Rice in a record-setting 58-0 throttling. The Mustangs pitched their first shutout in seven years, scored the most points of any SMU team in fifty-one years (when the Ponies beat Texas A&I, 61-0), and racked up a school-record 624 yards of offense and thirty-two first downs.
The Mustangs were playing for at least five wins, but one more would mean a bowl invite—something that Pouncey intimated would have seemed unfathomable heading into the 1978 season after a three-year stretch that “a novelist would call an ordeal.”116 As safety D.K. Perry explained it after the win over Rice:

Some people think Mustang Mania is dead. It may be dead in the Metroplex [a nickname for the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area], but it isn’t dead on this team. There is a lot of pride in us 10 seniors. We’ve played some of the toughest teams in the country, and we’ve been in every game. Nobody’s blown us out. It’s a big accomplishment for us and the coaches. The attitude has changed so much. Nobody says, “I don’t want to go out there” when it’s time for practice.117

The fifth win never came that year for the Mustangs. They turned the ball over eight times against Texas Tech University in Lubbock (five of those were Ford-thrown interceptions) en route to a narrow 19-16 loss.118 Then, in the season finale, SMU fell to Arkansas, 27-14.119

As was the case against Houston, the lone bright spot in the home loss to Arkansas was the respectable Cotton Bowl crowd of 44,647, manufactured by Potts and Thomas. SMU’s promotional duo had struck a deal with the Dallas County Ford Dealers for a block purchase of forty thousand tickets at $2 apiece that Potts said was “the largest block ticket purchase for any sports event in history.”120 He was quoted as saying:

It’s like a consignment deal. They (the dealers) agreed to buy a minimum number of tickets, which is acceptable to both parties. We don’t expect to have 100-percent redemption on a deal like this. But if they get all those tickets out, they will total 40,000. That’s 30,000 in the end zone and 10,000 nearby.121

SMU had also advertised in Arkansas newspapers and radio stations using the tagline, “Bring 20,000 Razorbacks to Dallas.”122 It is unclear how many Arkansas fans made the interstate trek, but all who attended saw SMU come up short yet again as the Mustangs ended their season 4-6-1.
By Meyer’s expectations, and those of the fans and sportswriters who jumped on the Mustangs’ bandwagon after a promising start, the 1978 season was a failure from the standpoint of wins. But the renewed enthusiasm in SMU football, evidenced by a record-setting jump in attendance and a widespread promotional campaign that took the Dallas area by storm, proved that 1978 was far from a wash, as Steve Pate penned in an early November article titled “Mania ends first year, tired Ford glad it’s over.”

You can close the curtain on Chapter One of Mustang Mania. Mania took Dallas and the Southwest Conference by surprise this season and its momentum will certainly carry over into next season. . . .

Just for the record, Meyer, who might be pursued by colleges who lost their head coaches, assured he will be back for Chapter Two of Mustang Mania.

How successful was it really? Less so than one might expect. SMU dropped five of its final six games. And yet, Mania captivated far more fans statewide than SMU has in many years. The Mustangs averaged 51,960 at home games, third best in the school’s history. Five of the losses were to bowl teams. SMU tied another bowl team, Ohio State, 35-all. Mania was unique in the conference this year.¹²³

Though Pate concluded that Mustang Mania’s first chapter had come to a close, Potts and Thomas seemed to disagree. In the weeks after the football season wrapped, the campaign logo appeared in dozens of ads for SMU men’s basketball, albeit with one minor change. The word “continues . . .” appeared underneath the Mania logo in ads for men’s hoops.

Much like the football team, the Ponies basketball team showed promise early in the season only to fizzle. In front of a full house in Durham, North Carolina, they hung with the No. 1 Duke University Blue Devils until the very end in an 86-80 loss in the second game of the season.¹²⁴ But then they were trounced by sixteen by a woeful Tulane squad in New Orleans.¹²⁵ SMU was only 2-4 heading into a home meeting with
Vanderbilt University, a game in which Pouncey wrote: “At times, the crowd was the best show.” He added:

Prompted by the Mustang promotion department’s giveaway of a keg of beer to the group which is the zaniest each game, the SMU students cavorted as if they were replaying Animal House—listed as the favorite movie of four of the SMU cagers.

There were no elaborate banners, such as the one last week which read, “Die, Gravy Sucking Pigs!” But Boaz Hall brought a Wild Turkey sign, and with the Mustang Band on a break, one lone bandsman came and played the fight song—or rather, his particular part of the harmony, which bore little resemblance as a whole to “Peruna.”

Several days later SMU’s promotions gurus came out with a planned halftime showcase against the University of California at San Diego, a Division III opponent, in which the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders were scheduled to perform as part of a nationally televised filming of the TV show, the “NBC Sports Spectacular.” But like the Mustangs’ basketball team figuratively did for much of the 1978-79 season, despite being “advertised heavily,” as Pouncey wrote, the Cowboy Cheerleaders failed to show up at the game.

Although the Ponies were not filling Moody Coliseum to capacity each time they took to their home court, they did not draw particularly poorly compared with the previous year. In the home-opening battle of Methodist universities, SMU walloped tiny Southwestern University before a crowd of 4,826 on November 24. Then, after a monthlong stretch of road games, the Ponies attracted 6,867 fans in a December 2 loss to Kansas State University. In a win against area rival North Texas State University several days later, the Mustangs drew 5,722 spectators to Moody. The Vanderbilt game pulled in 4,853, while late December home games against San Diego State and Texas Wesleyan College saw crowds of 5,684 and 2,893, respectively.
When 1978 came to a close, the Mustang football team had finished with a losing record and no bowl appearance. The men’s basketball team was just 5-5 with wins over lower-division or historically bad teams. But SMU’s attendance and attention had reached heights not seen since the glory days of the 1930s thanks in large part to Mustang Mania, which Potts and Thomas relentlessly pushed and the media willingly perpetuated. After debuting in print on September 3, 1978, the phrase “Mustang Mania” appeared in the News ninety-three times and on forty-one of the remaining 120 days of that year. Of those ninety-three appearances, fifty-two were in ads, six were in headlines or decks, thirty-two were in articles, and two were in photos or cutlines. And Potts and Thomas were just getting warmed up.

NOTES


3 Russell Potts, telephone interview by Charles Thomas II, April 18, 2013.

4 Ibid.

5 Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013; and Thomas interview.


7 Thomas interview.

8 Ibid.

9 Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.

10 Russell Potts, telephone interview by Charles Thomas II, April 24, 2013.

11 Thomas interview.


13 See Appendix A for advertising samples, including one Barry’s Cameras co-op marketing ad.
Thomas interview. Facenda, who voiced documentaries for NFL Films, was working at a Philadelphia radio station at the time of Mustang Mania. Thomas contacted him and convinced him to record voiceovers for fifteen “Mustang Minutes” spots from his radio station studio for a small fee. Each of the Mustang Minutes was dedicated to a specific highlight in Mustangs’ athletics history.

Temple Pouncey, interview by Charles Thomas II, October 2, 2009.


Ibid. Pouncey and his editors did not capitalize the word “mania” in its first-ever usage in the News. This was the practice seen several times in the early days of the promotional campaign and one that quickly changed.


Ibid. Chinese Bandits is the name of a song played by the Louisiana State University marching band at football games, traditionally when the LSU defense forces a turnover or a punt. The name originated in the 1958 season when head coach Paul Dietzel dubbed his third-string defensive players the Chinese Bandits, a name he borrowed from the comic strip Terry and the Pirates, which once contained the line: “Chinese bandits,” a sinister-looking Oriental gentleman said one day, “are the most vicious people on earth.” (Roy Terrell, “The Bandits of Baton Rouge,” Sports Illustrated, November 17, 1958.) The lyrics to the song are: Chinese bandits on their way / Listen what Confucius say / Tiger bandits like to knock / Gonna stop a touchdown / Chop chop.

Ibid.

Thomas interview.


Thomas interview.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Blair, “Frogs, Mustangs to Duel.”


34 Ibid.


37 Ibid.

38 Jones, “Visibly Not Only Game in Town.”


42 Blair, “Ponies, Perry ‘Return’ Fun to SMU.”

43 Ibid.


45 Ibid.

46 Potts telephone interview, April 24, 2013.

47 Jones, “The Smell of the Crowd.”


49 Ibid.


51 Ibid.


53 Ibid. Pouncey did not capitalize the word “mania” in the campaign slogan, which was common in the early weeks of the campaign. He mentions Ownby Stadium, which had served as SMU’s home venue for football until games were moved to the Cotton Bowl in 1948. The athletic department and coaches’ offices remained in Ownby after the move.

Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.


62 Ibid.


64 Pouncey, “Ford, Mustangs Tie Up Traffic, 35-35.”


67 Ibid.


69 Ibid.


72 Ibid.

73 Pouncey, “If Ya Wanna See SMU, Get In Line.”

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.


78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.


84 Pouncey, “Ponies Put Whammy on Baylor Hex.”


88 Photo, The Dallas Morning News, October 17, 1978. The University of Houston Cougars were the Mustangs’ next opponent.


92 Ibid.

93 The same ad appeared on page 4B of the News on October 20, 1978, one day before the SMU-Houston game.


95 Ibid.

96 On October 17, 1978, in the Sports Spectrum, a tabloid supplement to the paper, a wild art photo headlined “Must See” called Mike Ford a quarterbacking prodigy, leading his team against the “vicious Houston Cougar squad.”


100 Blair, “Coogs Cool Amid Mania, 42-28.”


102 Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013; Pouncey, “Mania Buys Ticket to Ride.”

103 Pouncey, “Mania Buys Ticket to Ride.”


109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.


114 Ibid.


117 Ibid.


120 “Ford (Dealers) Snap Up Tickets.”

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid.


127 Ibid.


133 Pouncey, “Stingy Ponies Block Vandy Streak, 68-64.”

CHAPTER 5: MUSTANG MANIA, PHASE II

On November 26, 1978, after the SMU football team dropped its final game of the season, Steve Pate of The Dallas Morning News wrote that the first chapter of Mustang Mania had come to an end, insinuating there were chapters of the promotional campaign to come. Just four days into 1979, SMU athletics officials and agate writers for the News assured Pate was correct.

“Mustang Mania to make Texas Stadium move,” appeared in bold print at the top of the front page of the January 4, 1979, edition of the News. In the latest of Athletic Director Russ Potts’s maneuvers to drum up fan interest in SMU football, after thirty years at the renowned Cotton Bowl the Mustangs were relocating their home games twelve miles west to Irving, Texas, and the home of the Dallas Cowboys. In his lead, Pate connected the Mustangs’ relocation to the recent promotional campaign: “Mustang Mania, which this season took Dallas by storm, will pick up roots for the 1979 football season and move from the Cotton Bowl to Texas Stadium, hopefully without breaking a stride.”

The move to Texas Stadium appeared to be motivated by two factors, as reporter John Meyer summed up in the Dallas Times Herald: “SMU is moving uptown to make its show more attractive, both to ticket buyers and prospective recruits.”

In Dallas—a city with a booming population, professional sports teams, and a vibrant nightlife—Potts knew he needed a marquee attraction to put fans in the stands, saying:

In a metropolitan area, you must compete for the entertainment dollar. It’s up to us to put together the best package we can. We only have 58,000 SMU alums. If they all showed up for one football game, it wouldn’t fill either the Cotton Bowl or Texas Stadium, so we’ve got to convert the college football fans of the Dallas area.3
The athletic director also was quoted in the *News* with a similar explanation of the importance of the venue change, saying:

A Southwest Conference game has never been played in Texas Stadium, and rivalries attract the best crowds. . . . I think it will enhance our possibilities. It’s been proven that with solid marketing and promotions, SMU can attract fans. Wherever the team plays, we’re going to try to be more innovative and try to attract new interest. We have to be aware of who is the SMU fan of tomorrow. We cannot compare our situation to A&M or Texas or Arkansas. This has to be a Metropolitan experience.  

The prospect of selling Texas Stadium’s VIP suites to SMU’s deep-pocketed alumni and Dallas’ business elite, which were not few in number, fueled Potts’s optimism, he later admitted. He also was expecting much higher gate receipts and better concessions revenue at Texas Stadium than the team had seen at the Cotton Bowl. It certainly did not hurt that, as part of the new deal, SMU would be granted access to the Cowboys’ season ticket lists. As Potts told the *Times Herald*, “We can go to Cowboy ticket holders and say, ‘We’re reserving your seat. If you want to see the Texas game next year, you’d better get on board now because the train is pulling out.’”

Even though during Potts’s first year on the job he led the effort to improve attendance at SMU’s football home games to an average of 51,960, the team did not perform consistently well on the field. The poor record in 1978 led Rodger Meier, a member of the Fair Board that oversaw Fair Park and the Cotton Bowl, to cast doubt on the team’s move to Texas Stadium and its ability to foster fan interest. “The increase [in attendance] was with a 4-6-1 team,” he said, “and the average [of 51,960] is around 15,000 less than the Texas Stadium capacity. From a business point of view, you have to provide a quality product that will entertain people and provide them with the competitive output they seek in sports.”
Aside from the expectation that Texas Stadium would lure far more fans to the Mustangs’ home games, Pate wrote that the change in venue would “greatly boost SMU recruiting.” Former SMU Board of Governors member James Aston told Ish Haley of the *Times Herald*, “I understand Ron Meyer thinks he can recruit better football players to play in Texas Stadium and maybe occupy Roger Staubach’s locker.” Two of Meyer’s top recruits of the 1979 crop admitted that the coach had all but assured them the Mustangs would be playing in the Cowboys’ stadium and had used it as an effective recruiting tool in signing them at SMU.

Meyer made it no secret that he favored the move. He was quoted in both the *News* and the *Times Herald* as calling it “a cornerstone of Mustang Mania, Phase II” and reportedly for the previous two years had been privately making a push to SMU administration to relocate home games to Texas Stadium.

Potts noted that the move would help beef up season ticket sales, which had already seen marked improvement in his first year on the job. After his first month at SMU in June 1978, season ticket sales for the 1978 football campaign had stalled at about 2,200. By September, the number had climbed to 5,500. Potts called it a “reasonable projection” for 1979’s season ticket sales to skyrocket beyond ten thousand by the summer and that SMU would be able to sell an additional 1,500 luxury suites.

The always-enthusiastic athletic director’s projection certainly was not based on historical data. Although SMU had never called Texas Stadium home for a full season or an extended period of time, the Mustangs played five nonconference games there in 1972 and 1973, facing Wake Forest University, New Mexico State University, the University of California-Santa Clara, Virginia Polytechnic and State University (more commonly
known as Virginia Tech), and the University of Missouri. None of the games drew more than twenty-eight thousand fans, and even the SMU-Missouri matchup of Top 20 teams pulled in just 19,675.

In a *News* article titled “Moving mania,” on January 5, 1979, Wayne Gallagher, the general manager of the State Fair of Texas, said he was not particularly sad to see SMU move its home games from Fair Park and the Cotton Bowl. In terms of gate sales commissions and concessions, the Mustangs’ home games on average had generated about $20,000 per contest—less than half the amount generated by the annual Texas-Oklahoma football game in Dallas. “We hate to see them go,” Gallagher said, “but not for financial reasons.”

It would be a long eight-month wait to see whether the relocation would pay dividends, but Potts and Thomas in the meantime were trying their best to keep Mustang Mania alive through the comparative doldrums of men’s basketball season. It did not appear to be an easy task, as the Mustangs were as inconsistent as could be when they took the court. Taking their 5-5 record to Houston on January 8 to face the 3-8 Owls of Rice University, the Ponies fell behind by twenty-two points and were unable to complete a late rally, losing 78-76 to a team that *News* writer Randy Galloway called “permanent moss in the Southwest Conference basketball pond.”

One week later, the Ponies were preparing for a high-profile home matchup against No. 11-ranked Texas A&M, a 12-2 team that had beaten national powerhouses Indiana University and the University of Kentucky earlier that season. As SMU beat writer Temple Pouncey wrote in the *News*: “If you don’t have a ticket, be prepared to stand. All seats were sold out by Friday. . . . The crowd is expected to break the school
And on January 13, before a record crowd of 10,276, SMU miraculously upset the Aggies, 78-76, behind twenty-four points from guard Billy Allen, son of the Mustangs’ head basketball coach Sonny Allen.

Although SMU player Gordon Welch called the A&M game “the real turning point of the season for us,” and coach Sonny Allen said of the win, “It wasn’t like it was a fluke or anything,” the victory proved little more than a one-night anomaly. Injuries, bouts of the flu and pneumonia, and poor on-court performances hindered the Mustangs for the remainder of the 1978-79 season, the low point of which came on January 27, 1979, in Austin. That night, SMU fell to the Texas Longhorns in record fashion, 98-62. The next day, the headline in the News read, “It was never like this.”

Pouncey wrote:

For more than half a century, SMU and Texas have been playing basketball against each other. In all that time, the Longhorns never beat an SMU team any worse than they did in the Super Drum Saturday night, 98-62. Sonny Allen stood in a corridor, leaning against a wall, a weary expression on his face. “Boy, we were so bad for so long,” he sighed. [Texas coach] Abe Lemons took a drag on his cigar on the other side of the hallway and said of the Mustangs, “I don’t think they could play that bad again if they worked at it.”

When the Longhorns stretched their lead to 41-18 in the first half before a crowd of 15,381, Pouncey wrote, “Onlookers were yelling such insults as, ‘Is this Mustang Mania?’”

Less than three weeks later, it became clear that Sonny Allen’s future as head coach of the Mustangs men’s hoops team was in doubt. Potts told the News, “I am very concerned about it (the basketball situation). I worried about it all weekend. Performance is so very important to our total, financial posture. We need more time to evaluate the situation.”
The situation only worsened for Potts, Allen, and the Mustangs. On the final day of January, Texas A&M avenged its upset loss to the Ponies earlier in the season by annihilating SMU in College Station, 92-56. It was the Mustangs’ lowest point total for the season, and the thirty-six-point defeat represented SMU’s worst loss to A&M in the sixty-year history of the rivalry.28

The Mustangs stumbled their way to a 6-10 Southwest Conference record and an overall mark of 11-16 in the 1978-79 season.29 It became the third consecutive losing campaign for Allen in his four years at SMU. And despite two of the most lopsided and embarrassing losses in school history, Potts opted to keep his basketball coach, Allen, on staff for at least one more season—albeit with a new agenda imposed by the athletic director that included a stronger focus on recruiting and the hiring of an additional assistant coach.30 According to News writer Steve Pate, Potts “seriously considered” firing Allen after the final game of the year.31 When so much seemed to be improving on the football side of the SMU house while basketball continued to trend downward, the choice to retain Allen was not an easy one, as News columnist Skip Bayless acknowledged:

It appears the SMU-Sonny Allen marriage, so blissful four years ago, may be destined for divorce. Word came Friday afternoon [SMU] will give him another chance next season. But all things considered, these two may not be made for each other. She is a school swooning over Mustang Mania—Ron Meyer, blue-chip recruits, public relations, conquer-the-world optimism.32

Indeed, aside from the sour taste of the Mustangs’ basketball season, optimism abounded in the SMU athletics office in 1979. The men’s swim team finished the regular season unbeaten for the first time since 1969 and went on to win its twenty-third consecutive Southwest Conference Swimming and Diving Championships.33 Payne
Stewart, who would later go on to win eleven PGA Tour tournaments, tied the University of Houston’s Fred Couples for the Southwest Conference singles golf title. The SMU men’s tennis team won its second straight Southwest Conference championship and finished with a No. 4 national ranking at the end of the year. Not to be outdone, the SMU women’s golf team won its first-ever national title that June.

But despite their successes, SMU’s non-revenue sports still relied on football to pay the bills. Luckily for them, 1979 was starting to become a banner year for the athletics office’s coffers. Just one week into SMU’s five-week-long scholarship-fund drive, the Mustang Club had collected about $353,000, which was $50,000 more than the fund drive generated in the entire 1978 campaign. Potts and company spent more than a month promoting the highest profile fundraising event of the year, a roast of former SMU quarterback and NFL great Don Meredith, which they dubbed “Meredith Mania.” A lineup of college and professional sports stars lightheartedly insulted Meredith at the $100-per-plate event that the News called “the latest product of Mustang Mania.” The evening of dinner and cocktails featured famous roasters including former University of Texas and NFL quarterback Bobby Layne, NFL quarterback Craig Morton, and former Cowboys running back and future NFL head coach Dan Reeves, among others.

As Sam Blair wrote, Meredith “flew in from California just figuring it would be nice to do his bit for Mustang Mania.” The event produced more than $100,000 in contributions to SMU athletics’ scholarship fund.

Still, despite the on-field successes of numerous teams that year and the massive amount of money raised for Mustangs athletics, arguably the most important advances for SMU took place on the football recruiting trail where Ron Meyer was a star. The head
football coach brought home letters of intent from blue chip players from across the state, including Dallas products Charles Wagoner and Michael Carter. But to the bewilderment of coaches and sports writers across the country, Meyer somehow was able to sign two of the nation’s top running back prospects: Eric Dickerson and Craig James.

While James was a star who led his Houston-Stratford team to the state championship game and rushed for a Division 4A record 2,411 yards as a senior, Dickerson was considered the top high school running back in America. As Steve Pate wrote in the News less than a month before Dickerson signed with SMU:

If you keep up with football and have not yet heard of Eric Dickerson, rest assured. You will. He is a muscular, 6-3, 207-pounder. He ran a 9.4 100-yard dash as a junior and is shooting for a 9.2 this year. He can stuff a basketball with two hands from a standing jump. And, he can do amazing things with a football. Most notably, he can run with one.

All Dickerson did as a high school running back in Sealy, Texas, a small town about forty-five miles west of Houston, was rush for 5,889 career yards in just two and a half seasons on the varsity team. He led the Sealy High School Tigers to a 1978 Division 2A state championship in a lopsided 42-20 victory in the title game over Wylie High. And as his prep coach Ralph Harris admitted, in most games Dickerson was benched in the second half in an act of mercy for the opponent—Sealy usually was so far ahead thanks to the numerous first-half touchdown runs of its star tailback.

Dickerson, at age eighteen, already was being compared to two previous Heisman Trophy winners in the University of Texas’ Earl Campbell and the University of Oklahoma’s Billy Sims. As Pate reckoned in a February article in the News, when Sports Illustrated mentioned Dickerson and the Heisman Trophy in the same breath in a
short blurb in its January 15 issue, it was “surely one of the earliest Heisman plugs in
history.”

So hyped was Dickerson that News columnist Skip Bayless spent the majority of
his column on August 30 poking fun at the rampant publicizing of the running back,
writing: “Eric Dickerson, the best football carrier ever to boogie at a high school prom.
The one who gained 425,984 yards, ran a 9-flat hundred on sand and bench-pressed
Sealy’s city hall. The one every Top 20 school offered a Trans Am and all major credit
cards. The one who would make Mike Ford and Emanuel Tolbert a 3-man team.”

As sports writers and likely most college football fans wondered: How did SMU,
a team coming off a 4-6-1 season and one that had not finished above .500 more than
once in the last decade, snag Dickerson? The question seemed particularly relevant when
looking at SMU’s competition in luring the star running back. Oklahoma, Texas, Texas
A&M, and the University of Southern California—all of which had produced Heisman
Trophy winners in the backfield—had feverishly pursued the young man from Sealy,
along with about seventy-five other schools that had showed serious interest.

SMU beat writer Temple Pouncey perhaps captured it best in his February 17
article in the News:

Two years, or maybe even two months ago, nobody except Ron Meyer would
have believed the top college football prospect in Texas—maybe even in the
whole country—would sign with Southern Methodist University. SMU? That’s
the school that hasn’t won a Southwest Conference championship since Jerry
LeVias’ days, the one that hasn’t packed its stadium since 1954, the one that still
talks about Doak Walker 30 years after he graduated, the one that hasn’t had a
winning season in the last four.

The recruitment process appeared fishy down to the wire. Less than a week before
Dickerson committed to the Mustangs, it was reported that the star running back suddenly
had acquired a new 1979 gold Pontiac Trans Am and had decided in short order to commit to Texas A&M. The popular rumor was that a prominent A&M booster had purchased the car for Dickerson to seal the commitment to the Aggies. But thanks to his relationships with SMU recruiters and the wishes of his grandmother and stepfather, just before the signing deadline Dickerson opted to go with the Mustangs.

*News* writer Pate deemed Dickerson, James, and the rest of SMU’s 1979 recruiting haul “perhaps the most talented group of prepsters in the country.” SMU’s signing class, he posited, signaled a monumental change for the school’s long-troubled football program. He wrote:

Only three years ago, the SMU program was suffering through a probation and was on rock bottom. Mustang alumni mostly talked of Doak Walker and bygone days, while others brought up talk of a different league for the private schools. The thought was the private schools could not compete with the state schools. But, SMU blitzed the field Wednesday. Mustang Mania has been built primarily on hope and hustle. Now, talent has been added. Time will tell, but already SMU has sounded a fair warning around the Southwest Conference, and perhaps even the country.

Bayless poked fun at SMU’s noteworthy signing class, labeling Meyer and his surprisingly successful bunch of recruiters “SMWho?” He quipped: “Oklahoma lost no less than eight of its most-wanteds to Ron Meyer and his merry band of salesmen. Two off-seasons ago, Oklahoma recruiters weren’t sure SMU even played football.” Having robbed Oklahoma and “mortally wounded A&M,” Bayless wrote: “Mustang Mania has reached epic proportions.”

The Mustangs’ recent move to Texas Stadium played no small part in their recruiting success, Bayless reasoned:

Don’t underestimate what Ron Meyer has to sell. When he says SMU should be able to recruit like [the University of Southern California], it’s no sales gimmick. Like USC, Ron Meyer can advertise a private school in a big city, bright lights
and headlines, a nationally known stadium. Hurry, hurry, step right up. Use the same locker Tony Dorsett uses. Star in the same stadium the Cowboys do. Play in the same backfield all-America quarterback Mike Ford does. Hurry, hurry, be part of history.62

If Russ Potts and Brad Thomas were masters of hype, the News’s writers were not far behind. Bayless, Pate, Jones, and Pouncey alike filed one lavishly adoring story about the Mustangs after the next from February to August 1979. Two weeks before the start of the season, the SMU beat writer, Pouncey, focused his attention on SMU’s stable of young running backs, writing:

The talent comes highly rated, as all Mustang Maniacs know. And after working with the big, young Colts for two weeks, [offensive line coach Rich] Olson delivered his endorsement. “I don’t know what words you’d use to describe them, but I don’t think there is any doubt they will live up to what people said about them.” . . .

Olson smiled and nodded when he considered he now is coaching the caliber of Texas backs who used to migrate out of the state to Oklahoma or Ohio State or Southern California. “They’ve got as much ability,” Olson affirmed, “as the backs at USC have had in the past.” And Olson believes they’ll prove it on the field.63

Meyer, too, was cheerleading with remarkable frequency. He shamelessly praised his new freshmen, specifically Dickerson. Meyer, whom Bayless referred to as “the Big Maniac,” called Dickerson not by name but by number, which reportedly was extremely rare for the head coach.64 “All we have to do is get 50,000 people out at Texas Stadium for that Rice game,” Meyer said. “As soon Nineteen touches the ball, the place will go still. We won’t have to worry; they’ll all be back.”65

Much as it was for Meyer, the anticipation for the season-opening game against Rice was palpable in Mike Jones’s preview story in the News on August 28, in which he wrote:

Though the question has oft been asked in a number of connotations, in this case, it seems uniquely appropriate—are indeed the Maniacs running the asylum at
SMU? Is Mustang Mania really a Russ Potts-Brad Thomas hype? Are Ron Meyer’s football players really a figment of Potts’ fertile and enigmatic imagination? Was last year’s showing merely a freak happening? Did Meyer in actuality recruit the most highly publicized players as opposed to the ones who can really jump into the pile? Is this a bumper sticker, billboard football team? Will Mania go the way of the Nehru suit, mock turtlenecks and the boogaloo? Tune in again beginning Sept. 8 for the answers to these and many other exciting questions. But for the moment, the answers appear to be no, no, no, no and no. Respectively.66

Having already referenced SMU’s promotional campaign by name three times in the story, Jones continued to address Mustang Mania and in his own way give a sense of legitimacy to the campaign, proving that it indeed had taken root in Dallas, in the local media, and across the state. He added:

Meyer is more than aware that the Mustang Mania campaign—which has produced more positive, quick results than perhaps any other in the history of college football—has done little to endear his team to many of the other teams around the Southwest Conference. But it is not only jealousy. What is beginning to worry the rest of the league is that SMU now has the team to back the gleam. “We definitely feel good about where the program is,” Meyer said confidently Monday. “Where Mania is concerned, we do not have that cocky approach that a lot of people think we have. I know Mania has hacked a lot of people off. It started off,” Meyer theorized, “where people around the conference figured, ‘Let ’em have their fun. Let ’em fill their stadium and we’ll get a bigger paycheck when we play ’em on the road.’ Then,” he continued, “it became, ‘Hey, this or that guy is going there. What happens if they become a force to be reckoned with?’”

By August 1979, the confluence of necessary factors seemed to be in place for SMU to be a successful draw for fans. The Mustang Mania promotional campaign had become a ubiquitous term around town, so much so that SMU’s co-associate director of admissions, Bill Brown, said the campaign was serving the unintended but beneficial purpose of generating interest from potential students.67 Freshman applications had increased by 15 percent over 1978.68 “How many applicants could be generated by [Mustang Mania], you just don’t know,” he said.” But that has to be positive.” As Lloyd
Grove wrote in the *News*: They say SMU is becoming increasingly competitive in admissions and point to the school’s reputation for good education, the attraction of life in the Sun Belt and Dallas (about 60 percent of SMU’s undergraduates hail from outside Texas), and even the athletic department’s fervent promotion of the football team in the form of Mustang Mania ("People wan to be identified with a winner," admissions officer Irma Cantu says).69

Potts and Thomas were steadily raising money and awareness by developing corporate sponsorships, selling tickets, and in many cases discounting or giving them away in huge numbers. Potts was able to back up his earlier projection that season ticket sales would eclipse ten thousand—they reached thirteen thousand by early September.70 Meyer, meanwhile, had recruited arguably the best class in SMU football history, if not the best class in the country in 1979.

Now, all that remained was to see how the Ponies would perform on the field and how many spectators would walk through the Texas Stadium turnstiles for the first game. SMU athletics officials could only hope that the 1979 iteration of the SMU-Rice matchup would draw about ten times as many spectators as the infamous Pony-Owl game in the Cotton Bowl in 1977 when just 6,918 showed up.

By all accounts, Potts and Thomas had done everything in their power to prevent such an attendance debacle. As they did for the 1978 home opener, they made the 1979 Rice game a charity event and brought back Jerry Lewis for another round of Mania. They scheduled a high school football game between local rival schools to precede the Mustangs’ contest that evening at Texas Stadium. A rock concert and six bands were set
to play between the two games. Attempts to discover the names of the bands were unsuccessful.

As Pouncey wrote in the September 6 article titled “SMU-Rice: selling Mania Potts-style”:

The SMU-Rice part, also known as the Jerry Lewis Bowl, alias the high school-college double-header, has papered the Metroglob with tickets. You can get an SMU-Rice ticket free at your neighborhood theater, by calling a radio sports talk show, by patronizing a drive-in grocery or by visiting your company’s employee relations office. It is not true you can get a free ticket in a Cracker Jack box. It is true, however, some 42,000 general admission tickets have been distributed through the area and the Texas Stadium end zones seat about 32,000. It is also true, contrary to the public impression, every ticket given away was bought by some company for at least $2.50. This is what SMU athletic director Russ Potts calls his “corporate partnership program.”

As part of said corporate partnership program, Potts convinced 7-Eleven to purchase five thousand tickets at full price to be distributed at the convenience store chain’s Dallas-area locations. SMU also sold thirty-two blocks of tickets at $1,000 apiece to area companies. And yet another of Potts’s predictions came true: SMU sold almost every single luxury suite in Texas Stadium for the Rice game. South Dallas and Oak Cliff merchants also reportedly bought another five thousand tickets to give to youngsters, while a Dallas minister, the Reverend Jimmy Draper, gave away thousands of tickets for the game, which—in addition to the Jerry Lewis Bowl moniker—was also labeled “Christian Family Night.” As Pouncey wrote:

If all this discount selling seems hucksterish to football purists, Potts has a ready answer. “I’m not going to sit here and tell you we could sell 64,000 tickets to SMU and Rice at $9 apiece. No way. Not this year. What we’re trying to do is get people out to see us play, to whet their appetites and turn them into full-price ticket buyers. And it’s working. We plan to have no general admission tickets to the Texas game (Oct. 27) and we’re already selling reserved seats in the end zones for that game.”
The rabid promotions of the SMU-Rice game, and the Mustangs’ football season in general, was not going unnoticed. And after more than a year of SMU’s almost nonstop broadcasting, printing, and distributing messages and products in the name of Mustang Mania, News columnist Skip Bayless devoted all 1,141 words of his September 8 opinion piece to describe just how pervasive the campaign had become, writing:

Mania is on our billboards, in our newspapers, under our skin. Mania is in our supermarkets, our banks, our hair. Mania quickens the pulse, blurs the memory, distorts the mind. . . . Russ Potts, SMU’s ringmaster, has directed a Mustang Mania campaign over which Barnum, or even Bailey, would have turned flips. If anyone ever has spent more to hype a college football team, Potts will doff his top hat and give him 100 free tickets. Though nearly all the Mania and advertising was donated or swapped for tickets, the athletic director estimates the price tag at conservatively $500,000. But have Potts and coach Ron Meyer done too good a job? “We just wanted to get their attention,” Potts says, referring to the some 70,000 fans who did not show for SMU-Rice here two years ago. Potts got their attention, all right.

Potts certainly captured the attention of 60,217 fans who packed into Texas Stadium and saw SMU set yet another Guinness World Record with the release of 175,000 balloons—and saw the Mustangs put together a late surge to breeze by Rice, 35-17. Dickerson shined in his college debut, rushing for 123 yards and three touchdowns. Mike Ford, who was reportedly in the best physical condition of his short SMU career, had an off night. He threw for just 127 yards and tossed three first-half interceptions.

When the next Associated Press Top 20 football poll was released two days after the Mustangs’ win over Rice, SMU checked in at No. 20. It was the first time the team had been nationally ranked since the fourth week of the 1973 season. When asked years later how the Mustangs, coming off a 4-6-1 season and a modest win over a traditionally
weak Rice team, cracked the Top 20, the News’s former SMU beat writer Temple Pouncey shrugged and said:

Beats the hell outta me. There is a lot of marketing involved in that . . . a lot of image building going on during the summer and in the preseason. Everybody knew Dickerson and James were top-class national recruits that shouldn’t have been at SMU, and that definitely had a part in it. But then you also had Ford’s aerial circus which had been really entertaining to watch in ’78, and that was back. But yeah, I think there was a lot of salesmanship going on with that.83

The attendance, the fanfare, the inspiring performance of Meyer’s top recruit, and the national ranking likely had SMU’s fans and administrators flying high. But Mustang Mania seemed to come back to earth a week later with one fateful play. The Mustangs made the short trek west to Fort Worth, where they dispatched rival Texas Christian University in easy fashion, 27-7.84 But a Horned Frogs defender delivered a blow to the side of Mike Ford’s knee, bringing the big quarterback to the turf in agony. He required season-ending surgery immediately after the game.85

Ford had played no small part in the Mustangs’ promotional successes in the previous thirteen months and was one of the main reasons for optimism heading into the 1979 season. As Bayless wrote of him in October 1978, “Without him, there would be no Mustang Mania.”86 Ford’s name had been used in SMU radio ads and in promotional items throughout 1978, connecting Mustang Mania to a marketing slogan used by Ford, the automaker: “There’s a Ford in your future.”87 His image was used on billboards, pocket calendars, and posters; he was the interview that press members always wanted before and after practice; the slow-talking country boy gland-handed alumni at cocktail parties and booster banquets; and as his head coach said, he meant “to our program what Don Meredith did to the Cowboys.”88
So when Ford was lost in just the second game of what was supposed to be a breakout season for the Mustangs, there was some shred of truth to the satirical article Mike Jones filed for the News two days later, in which he wrote:

Had I been able to set the scene, the SMU athletic offices would have resembled the McGovern campaign headquarters the morning after Eagleton. Posters would have littered the floor. One end of a giant Mania banner has come untaped and flutters aimlessly in the breeze created by a small oscillating fan. Russ Potts, his eyes rimmed red from lack of sleep, paws halfheartedly through the stacks of stickers and T-shirts searching for his glasses. He has knocked over a half-cup of cold coffee, the riverlet running into a stack of 8x10 glossies of Mike Ford. Over in the corner, Brad Thomas has fallen asleep face down on a work table. His tie still is knotted and he is talking in his sleep. An APB still is out on Ron Meyer. He was last seen sitting in his car in the parking lot adjacent to Ownby Stadium, sometime around midnight. He was sitting, staring, just staring. Potts himself has been out most of the night, searching—both for Meyer and for another angle. He has been unsuccessful at both. He hasn’t noticed Meyer’s car still is in the lot, keys in the ignition. If the truth be known, Meyer was afraid to start the engine. He was afraid it would explode. With reason, Potts finally finds Meyer in his office, exhausted. There is the smell of chalk dust in the air. They see each other and begin to cry. The best laid plans of Mania and men were recuperating in Baylor Hospital Sunday afternoon in the room of quarterback Mike Ford.89

In Bayless’s words, “Mike Ford was Mustang Mania,” and the injury to his knee had ended the Mustangs’ Cinderella story.90 Bayless wrapped his September 20 column with: “Mania has turned back into a pumpkin.”91 Anyone who felt that Ford played an unimportant role in the Mania campaign received rather compelling evidence to the contrary just three days after the injury. ABC—which was set to air the SMU-North Texas State University football matchup as the regionally televised game the next Saturday—suddenly backed out, prompting Pouncey and Bayless to write that Ford’s injury was the primary reason for the programming change.92

With Ford out, Jim Bob Taylor took the quarterbacking reins. Taylor, a sophomore backup who had been on the field for only a few plays in his college career, did not possess the size, strength, or passing accuracy of Ford. Still, he was able to rely
on the Mustangs’ stable of running backs, particularly Charles Wagoner, who rushed for 184 yards in leading the Mustangs to a 20-9 win over North Texas.\textsuperscript{93}

SMU wasted little time in attempting to make Taylor the new poster child of Mustang Mania. Thomas commissioned a song for radio ad spots, \textit{An Ode to Jim Bob}, after Taylor’s first career start.\textsuperscript{94} Richard Justice of the \textit{Dallas Times Herald} took notice of SMU’s effort to push Taylor to the campaign forefront, writing: “One game and 24 minutes into the 1979 season, Jim Bob Taylor became SMU’s starting quarterback and went a long way toward being the most recognized student on campus. Today, he is the new face of Mustang Mania trading cards, has had a song written about him and may soon have buttons printed with his name on them.”\textsuperscript{95}

Despite having no Ford in their future, the Mustangs touted a No. 18 national ranking and a 3-0 record in early October.\textsuperscript{96} Potts and company knew there were three more home games on the schedule, including matchups against Texas and Texas Tech, teams that traditionally drew large crowds in Dallas. The same could not be said for Baylor, which was the next home opponent.

SMU stumbled the next week in New Orleans, falling to Tulane, 24-17.\textsuperscript{97} Taylor came nowhere close to matching Ford’s passing prowess. He was just six-of-eighteen passing for fifty-six yards, and the Pony ground game did not help pick up the slack—Mustang backs combined for just 181 yards rushing in what Ron Meyer called a “bitter loss.”\textsuperscript{98}

The setback did not seem to stifle fan enthusiasm for the Mustangs’ contest with Baylor at Texas Stadium the next week. It was a nonconference loss to Tulane, and the Ponies were still unbeaten in Southwest Conference play. Potts had made it a goal to fill
the stadium for the upcoming Baylor game, meaning he would need to pack more than sixty-five thousand fans into the Irving venue. To do so, SMU reportedly distributed or sold seventy-five thousand tickets. Potts themed the game “Methodists versus the Baptists” (Baylor is affiliated with the Baptist faith) and reached out to Dallas-area ministers to attract their large constituencies to the game. SMU hawked thirty thousand tickets to area Ford dealers at a discounted cost and sold an additional ten thousand tickets to Baylor at face value. Church groups bought 12,500 general admission tickets, and thirty-three thousand reserved seats were either sold to the general public or provided to SMU students and band members.

Less than a week before the game, SMU ticket manager Bob Ferrell estimated the attendance would be between fifty-five thousand and sixty thousand. Ferrell turned out to be wrong. Thousands more showed up than he or Potts expected—and more than Texas Stadium could handle—when an inaccurately reported crowd of 65,101 watched Baylor and SMU go down to the wire. A late field goal gave the Bears the win, 24-21.

It was the highest reported attendance in the history of the SMU-Baylor rivalry and the first capacity crowd for an SMU home game in twenty-five years. But when thousands more fans showed up to redeem free or discounted tickets than anyone expected, many of them left Texas Stadium in anger before the end of the first quarter, as Pouncey wrote in his recap in the News:

SMU’s athletic staff was all aglow Monday over the Mustangs’ first home football sellout in 25 years Saturday night, plus the thriller the Ponies and Baylor Bears gave the fans, decided in the last eight seconds. Less thrilled were fans who drove to the stadium, walked from the parking lots into the stands and had to turn around and go home because there were no places to sit.
Dejected and furious fans who had paid full price for reserved seats, only to find them occupied by squatters who refused to move, were quoted in the News the next day, including a Plano, Texas, resident who said, “all of a sudden Mustang Mania has gone to pot.” An early report claimed three thousand fans were turned away, a number that Potts vehemently denied. He did confess to a pair of planning errors, saying:

I will admit I made two mistakes. No. 1 was mixing the [United Methodist Youth Fellowship] and the Ford dealers’ giveaway at the same game. No. 2 was not having reserved seats for the UMYF people. But we did not treat people unfairly, and I’m angry that the implication is made that because a few people did not find the kind of group seating they wanted, SMU did a bad deal to its fans.

Inside, Potts was beaming about the turnout. “When you have 65,000 people, you’re gonna have problems,” he said. “But those are the kind of problems we want.” He told the Times Herald, “In 10 years in this business I’m prouder of my staff and their efforts than I’ve ever been. We were bucking Texas-Oklahoma and the World Series. To draw the crowd we did under the circumstances was amazing. I’m prouder than anything I’ve ever been involved in.”

Brad Thomas, SMU’s sports promotions director, later said the number of fans that showed up to Texas Stadium that night was actually closer to seventy-one thousand. He called the 1979 Baylor game “the real tipping point when everything came together” in the Mustang Mania campaign. SMU sports beat writer Temple Pouncey said the game represented the first time he truly appreciated the impact of the campaign. “SMU saying, ‘Okay, we’re gonna fill Texas Stadium for a game between SMU and Baylor—two small private schools who have no chance of winning anything in the Southwest Conference this year, and we’re gonna fill the place?’ And they did. It was just amazing,” he said.
Thomas went into public relations crisis mode after the over-capacity turnout for the Baylor game. Going on KRLD FM-Radio during Ron Meyer’s weekly call-in show with host Brad Sham, the twenty-three-year-old Thomas filled in for Potts—who had a doctor’s appointment—to field questions about fans being turned away. He said in a February 2013 interview:

It was hilarious. I was sitting there with Ron Meyer and it’s the first time I’ve ever been on a radio show, and I’m telling you the fans, all six thousand or seven thousand that got turned away, must have called. And there wasn’t one call about the game. They were all calls directed at me, and I’m still just twenty-three, and I’m not answering them very good. Brad’s just sitting there [shrugs], he’s taking questions just doing his job, and Ron’s just sitting there [shakes head] all the time laughing. You know it was kind of a good problem, and I had to hem and haw, saying, “I’m sorry. We’ll try to make amends to you. We’ll give you two tickets to the next game.” But it was just a funny moment because I was trying to explain this problem away and you couldn’t just say, “Well, we gave out X number of tickets and everybody came.” People would be like “What are you talking about?” It was crazy, and I just remember getting in the car with Ron that night and driving back to SMU and feeling like I’d just been beaten up.115

“Beaten up” accurately described the Mustangs’ football team for the remainder of 1979. Without Mike Ford, SMU’s season went down in flames. After falling to Tulane and Baylor, the team lost its next three games—against the University of Houston, the University of Texas, and Texas A&M University—as injuries sidelined almost the entire team. The Mustangs were able to salvage late-season wins against a weak nonconference opponent in Wichita State University and a down Texas Tech University squad, but the season ended with a blowout loss at home to the University of Arkansas. The Mustangs finished the year with a 5-6 record. Twenty-seven players on the 1979 SMU football team who were or would have been starters were injured and missed at least one game that season.116 Along with Ford, who missed nine of the team’s eleven games, the star freshman running back, Dickerson, was hobbled for more than half the season; all-
conference wideout Emanuel Tolbert missed two games with a sprained ankle; and the emerging tailback, Wagoner, saw his football career end after just ten games. He cracked a vertebra in his neck on the opening kickoff of the Texas Tech game and doctors ordered him to never play another snap of football. 117

Attendance proved the only highlight of the season. The opening victory over North Texas pulled in 57,923 to Texas Stadium. 118 In a 35-6 home loss to Texas—a team that Meyer had predicted the Mustangs would beat 10-7 119—SMU drew 53,327 fans. 120 And the five-loss Mustangs drew 42,226 at home in a 35-10 victory over Texas Tech. 121

Winning, it seemed, remained the only factor that Potts and Thomas could not control.

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NOTES

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7 Ibid.
8 Pate, “SMU to Make Move Official.”
9 Haley, “SMU to Leave Bowl for Texas Stadium.”
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64 Bayless, “His Act’s Together, but It’s More Than an Act.”

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104 Pouncey, “SMU Sellout: Big Business or Poor PR?”


106 Pouncey, “SMU Sellout: Big Business or Poor PR?”

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113 Brad Thomas, interview by Charles Thomas II, February 26, 2013.
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CHAPTER 6: MUSTANG MANIA FADING FAST

After a year and a half of Mustang Mania, SMU Athletic Director Russ Potts and his sports promotions director, Brad Thomas, had shown they could get tickets into the public’s hands and translate that to, as Potts liked to say, getting “fannies in the seats.” But football coach Ron Meyer and men’s basketball coach Sonny Allen had failed to own up to their end of the bargain. Neither coach had put a consistently winning product on the field or court. Heading into 1980, Meyer’s four seasons at SMU had produced eleven wins and twenty-seven defeats. In Allen’s first four years, he had compiled a record of 45-65.

Potts knew that he needed a winning product to promote, and without it he would be hard pressed to keep Mustang Mania going without becoming the laughingstock of Dallas. Injuries undoubtedly were the inhibiting factor in the much-hyped 1979 football season, when quarterback Mike Ford and twenty-six other players missed at least one game because of a sprain, break, bruise, or tear. But News reporters argued that the main thing holding back the men’s hoops team was Allen’s inability to recruit good players.

It was likely for that very reason that Potts increased Allen’s recruiting budget after the 1978-79 season and brought an additional assistant coach on staff. Though Potts never explicitly said so in print, it was reported in The Dallas Morning News that the athletic director had given Allen an ultimatum for the 1979-80 basketball season: seventeen wins or leave. The season started out well for Allen’s Mustangs, who won eight of their first nine games including victories over the No. 19-ranked University of Kansas and the University of California.
But the Ponies lost five of their next six contests—all in conference play—and, at 9-6, were faced with having to make a near-flawless run through the second half of the Southwest Conference schedule to reach Potts’s reported mandate of seventeen wins. As the News’ Mike Jones summed up near midseason: “In simple terms, this year’s team is not measuring up to Potts’s standards of a consistently contending program.”6 He added:

Potts simply can’t wait to bring Lefty Driesell down from Maryland, but if the truth be known, Potts would simply rather win with what he’s got. He currently has all the problems he can handle in the aftermath of what some considered to be overpromotion of a disappointing football season—the W-L over which neither Potts nor Ron Meyer had much control. . . .7

The prospect of Allen winning enough games to stay at SMU quickly worsened. The Mustangs lost to Texas Christian University, 92-89, snapping the Frogs’ forty-game road losing streak and a thirty-three-game skid in Southwest Conference play.8 As SMU beat writer Temple Pouncey wrote in the game recap story: “It re-emphasized the certainty of Allen’s departure from the SMU head coaching job at the end of this season.”9

On February 23, 1980, just before the conference tournament was set to begin, Allen delivered his resignation letter to SMU President James Zumberge.10 The Mustangs came up one win shy of Potts’s mandate, finishing the year 16-12. It was a bitter departure for Allen, and several of his players were quoted in the News expressing their disdain for the stiff expectations that Potts had placed on the coach in his final season at SMU, including Phil Hale, who said, “There were a lot of hurt and disgusted people, and we weren’t disgusted at [Allen], but at the pressure that’s been put on him.”11
It seemed clear Potts had wanted to go in a different direction and was poised to fire Allen had he not resigned. Pouncey reported that within an hour of the announcement of Allen’s resignation SMU had formed a search committee to find his replacement. Allen, a reserved type who had coached Old Dominion University to an NCAA Division II national championship before coming to SMU, was never a good fit for Potts’s athletics department. As News columnist Skip Bayless described him, Allen “hasn’t shown sustained brilliance in the big leagues. His teams have bred dissension instead of respect for him. . . . Sonny Allen is a nice man—maybe too nice, too vulnerable. Maybe Sonny rose to the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe Mustang Mania has demanded he be something other than himself.”13 Years after covering Allen’s teams for the News, Pouncey said Allen belonged in a lower NCAA division. “Sonny was out of his depth. He was at this level [at SMU],” Pouncey said, holding his hand out at eye level. “He belonged at this level,” he said, lowering his hand waist-high.14

What SMU needed was a basketball-savvy version of Ron Meyer. Jones wrote that Potts needed “an honest man—who can also recite from memory the top 200 high school players in the country as juniors, is an expert in dealing with all facets of the media, is an accomplished speech-maker and alumni charmer and can coach basketball as well.”15

Potts made it no secret he wanted a top-notch recruiter above all else, saying:

I want a guy who knows what presses the hot buttons in a recruit. Is it a great summer job? A campus existence? The weather? The free-enterprise career aspects of the area? My man has to be extremely organized. I want him to know the top players in the country as juniors. If I had my druthers, I’d have to take a recruiting-oriented person over someone who meets the other criteria.

I want a person who has the ability to communicate in a major metropolitan market. That’s quite different from a situation where he’s the only game in town.
We’re in direct competition for the sports dollar in this area with the Rangers, the Cowboys and soon, the NBA. Plus, there’s a dinner theater on every corner. We need someone who not only can relate from a media standpoint, but someone who can gain acceptance from the non-SMU graduates in this area. We want to win the guy who is a Chicago Loyola graduate who has come here to work, loves college basketball and wants to adopt a team. We want to be that team.16

Enter Dave Bliss. SMU named the thirty-six-year-old the Mustangs’ new coach on March 7, 1980.17 Bliss was hired away from the University of Oklahoma, where he was twice the Big Eight Conference’s coach of the year.18 He reportedly matched many of Potts’s necessary criteria: a youthful, good recruiter who was knowledgeable of the Southwest and the high school prospects in the region.19

With Bliss’s blue blood coaching experience—he was an assistant coach for future Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame inductee Bobby Knight at West Point and Indiana University—and his business pedigree—he received his master of business administration degree from Cornell University and worked in sales at Proctor and Gamble—it seemed that Potts could not have created a better man for the job had he tried.20 Bayless jokingly made that point in his March 18 column, writing:

Dave Bliss, of course, didn’t really coach basketball at the University of Oklahoma. That merely is what Russ Potts wants us to believe. Until recently, you see, there was no Dave Bliss. He began taking shape the night Sonny Allen resigned as SMU’s coach. When the night watchman dozed, Potts hustled his Mustang Mania staff into the biology lab. Racing the sun, they silently fell to work. Scalpel. . .scalpel. Ultrabrite. . .Ultrabrite. Brooks Brothers. . .Brooks Brothers. Friday morning, Dr. Potts unveiled his creation. At the podium he stood, a powerfully built, 5-11 glossy in gray 3-piece, white shirt, deep purple tie and black tassle [sic] loafers. He has hypnotic silver-blue eyes which can move an alum’s hand toward his wallet. A 7-foot recruit’s mother would be defenseless against his blond-tinted hair, quick-draw smile, Hollywood profile and I-believe personality.21

The name “Bliss” certainly did not hurt marketing, as Bayless alluded to in the same column: “Potts must have left the name to Brad Thomas, his hyperactive Houdini of
Hype. Madly skimming thesaurus, no doubt, Thomas seized upon bliss. Dave Bliss.

Rumor holds Thomas accountable for the bumper-sticker slogan, ‘Mustang Basketball is Pure Bliss.’" As Bayless reckoned, “Bliss is everything that Sonny Allen can’t be. He is convincing and charismatic. He is dynamic and game-time dynamite. He demands respect from players, writers, alums, even superiors.”

Bliss arrived at SMU when the athletics department was reaching a win-or-die mentality in terms of making fans and money. As Bayless described it: “Maybe Mustang Mania drove you crazy, but it drove 60,000 to last year’s football opener with Rice. Maybe many all but got in free, but at least they went. Ticket-buyers, of course, have been fooled long enough. It is time for Ron Meyer to win. Bliss won’t have many more hours.”

Compounding matters in 1980 was a struggling national economy plagued by rampant inflation that was driving up costs for businesses and higher education intuitions across the country. SMU Provost Dr. James E. Brooks told the News that the university was considering cutting programs that were offered at competing North Texas institutions such as education, urban studies, sociology, physical anthropology, health education, communication disorders, and perhaps most surprisingly for the business-oriented school, the executive master of business administration program in the Edwin L. Cox School of Business. “The fundamental problem,” Brooks said, “is one that every university is facing, whether they know it or not: the price of doing business is going up a lot faster than sources of revenue.” SMU was saddled with a $6 million deficit in 1980, almost half of which—$2.5 million to be exact—was attributed to spending in the athletics department. As the SMU president, Zumberge, explained:
What we have deduced is that we have a program of intercollegiate athletics that is too big for us to support. Our cost of maintaining it is going up faster than the revenue we can take in from it. That is caused mainly by inflation, by the cost of everything going bananas. . . .

The cost of equipment has gone bananas. I asked Dudley Parker, our assistant athletic director, how much it costs to outfit one football player with the proper equipment. The answer was $448. Last year, we spent $13,369 on football shoes alone. That’s two pair of game shoes and two pair of practice shoes for each player. These are fixed costs that you can’t do anything about without taking risks with your players. . . .

Inflation has added to the movement already under way in the last 20 to 25 years, namely that the revenue sports have had more pressure on them to generate the dollars to support the others. Before inflation went to double digit, if it cost us a couple of hundred thousand per year to maintain a sport, it was no big deal. We said the benefits of name recognition and alumni links with their alma mater made that a reasonable price to pay for excitement and interest in the school. Then, the number of students going on to higher education leveled off and began to drop, and we saw we’re in for a big decline. And inflation hit the academic programs, and we see that this athletic deficit we’ve been carrying is no longer a trivial matter.28

To reduce the deficit, Potts pulled out the red pen and went down the line of SMU’s ten nonrevenue sports, making significant cuts in 1980. By midyear, he had dropped men’s golf and baseball from the athletics program. SMU senior men’s golfer Payne Stewart, the Southwest Conference’s individual champion in 1979, said the move would not balance the athletics budget, “but it will help.”29 He added: “I don’t believe this is a permanent thing. When the moneymakers come around, when the football team fills Texas Stadium and the basketball team fills Moody Coliseum, I think we’ll be back in business.”30

Steve Adair, who coached the baseball team to a 21-22 record in 1980, echoed Stewart’s sentiment. “I do know this,” he said. “The football team has to win eight games right now. If they don’t win in football and basketball, there won’t be an athletic
Football coach Ron Meyer, as sportswriter Mike Jones put it, was “cautiously optimistic” about the 1980 football season. As Jones phrased it, “the time, however, is at hand. Barring a large number of short counts on the horizon, SMU must now begin to stand toe-to-toe with the contenders.” Meyer said his team finally had the talent to beat anyone on the schedule, but it would take some luck and the team remaining healthy to do it. He said the team should at least be 7-4 and go to a bowl game barring another unthinkable year of injuries.

While the recruiting class of 1980 was not as high profile as the year before, there were several gems of the class. Arguably the best of the bunch was local product Lance McIlhenny, a quarterback from Highland Park High School, just blocks from the SMU campus. There, McIlhenny had run the “Veer” offense, an offshoot of the “Wishbone” offense that University of Texas coach Darrell Royal invented and used in winning three national championships with the Longhorns. In both offenses, the quarterback is used as a hybrid runner and facilitator with the option of keeping the ball, handing it off, or pitching it to a running back. Steve Tracy wrote in the News after McIlhenny committed to the Mustangs and joined his older brother, Lott, who was going to be a sophomore running back in 1980: “With SMU’s cluttered quarterback situation, the conditions are right for a Veer specialist to step in and option off to brother Lott or blue-chip running backs Eric Dickerson or Craig James.”

Although Meyer and his offensive staff were out on recruiting trips Monday and unavailable for comment, if the Mustang mentor goes with Ford, it would probably mean a drop-back pro offense. But the SMU receiving corps has no
more Emanuel Tolbert. Meanwhile, McIlhenny and his running game Veer would have a stable of stud running backs to carry the ball on the ground.37

After just a few preseason practices, a sports brief in the News described McIlhenny—a dual running-throwing threat—as performing like “a potential Doak Staubach,” paying homage to two Dallas football greats, Doak Walker and Roger Staubach.38

McIlhenny’s main competition at the quarterback position presumably was Mike Ford, who excelled in his freshman season but played only six quarters of football in his injury-shortened sophomore campaign. But the knee injury reportedly haunted Ford heading into fall camp. As Bayless wrote: “Two years ago, Ford simply overthrew SMU’s many offensive and defensive weaknesses. This year, he must overcome just one: No depth at confidence.”39 Pointing to the team’s widespread injuries in 1979 and several horrific incidents the team suffered in the previous eighteen months—including one player drowning, another dying in a car accident, and another who was stabbed yet survived—SMU assistant coach Rich Olson said the problem was not limited to Ford. “The main thing this team needs is confidence,” he said. “We’ve got to believe we can overcome things and beat teams like Texas and Arkansas and A&M.”40

When the Ponies took the field on September 13 against North Texas State University, confidence did not appear to be in short supply. SMU ran over the Mean Green, 28-9, spurred by Dickerson’s 111 rushing yards and an additional 143 yards on the ground from Craig James, eighty of which came on the first play from scrimmage and put SMU up 6-0.41 The 52,781 fans at Texas Stadium saw Ford used sparingly as a passer, throwing fifteen times and completing seven passes for eighty-five yards.42
The Mustangs moved to 2-0 with another home win the next week, beating Texas Christian University in the third iteration of the Jerry Lewis Bowl, which on the field produced a 17-14 defensive battle. By SMU’s recent standards, the reported attendance of 39,622 was low. It remained low in the Ponies’ third consecutive home game to start the season, when just 26,611 spectators showed up to see SMU blow out the University of Texas-Arlington, 52-16.

For the second straight year SMU started the season 3-0. But unlike 1979, the Ponies did what they had not been able to accomplish since 1950. SMU moved to 4-0 with a 31-21 victory in New Orleans over Tulane University on October 4. For the fourth time that season, Mike Ford failed to pass for more than two-hundred yards, but eighty-eight yards from Dickerson and five Tulane turnovers proved enough to keep the Ponies perfect on the season.

At 4-0, the Mustangs earned a No. 20 national ranking just in time to face an undefeated Baylor squad in Waco. It was the first time the two private schools matched up as unbeaten teams since 1923. The crowd was expected to reach forty thousand, and SMU alumni planned a pep rally at the Waco Convention Center, which Pouncey called “the first Mustang pep rally at an away game within living memory.”

SMU bumbled away an opportunity to move to 5-0. Blowing leads of 21-0 and 28-14, the Mustangs fell to the eventual 1980 Southwest Conference champion, Baylor, 32-28. The rustiness and discomfort that Ford had demonstrated in games earlier that season took center stage during the loss in Waco. The quarterback threw three interceptions and fumbled away two snaps, including one at the Bears’ 8-yard line with twenty-one seconds left in the game. Ford had bungled the center-to-quarterback
exchange several times against Tulane and fumbled a snap on the second series of the opening game against North Texas. He left the field in tears after the Baylor loss and declined interviews.

So sloppy were Ford and his teammates on offense the next week in a 13-11 loss to the University of Houston that Mike Jones wrote of them in the News: “SMU ought to be indicted for indecent exposure.” Ford threw four interceptions and his receivers dropped five passes that Jones wrote should have been caught.

After two years of Mustang Mania hype and heightened expectations through successful recruiting, the back-to-back narrow yet disgraceful losses drew fire from the News in the “Hot Stuff” sports briefs section on October 19, which read:

Let’s put Mustang Mania in perspective. Seems since coach Ron Meyer has been range boss at SMU, there’s been more mania than Mustangs out on the field. In Meyer’s 4 ½ seasons, SMU never has beaten a team that finished better than 6-5 in that season. Twice the Mustangs defeated 6-5 squads, North Texas State in ’76 and Houston in ’77. And out of the six times SMU needed to score in the final five minutes to win a game, the team pulled it out only twice. The Ford Motor Co. should have used the Phoney Baloney Pony folks back when the Edsel hit the market.

Two days later, the teaser headline at the top of the News’s front page read: “SMU to re-evaluate quarterback job.” Ford, who had thrown eight interceptions through six games and completed only 46.7 percent of his passes, no longer was a surefire starter, Meyer announced. “Performance does speak in football,” he said. “If it’s not good enough, you may be forced to make some changes. Mike is not performing on the caliber good enough to ensure victory.”

Meyer’s two other choices at quarterback were inexperienced: sophomore Mike Fischer and freshman Lance McIlhenny. Starting either one must have been a scary prospect for Meyer, considering the No. 2-ranked Texas Longhorns were the next
opponent on the schedule and the Mustangs would face them in Austin as twelve-and-a-half-point underdogs.61

On Thursday of that week, Meyer made his decision public. Pouncey captured it for the News, writing:

SMU’s weeklong jock drama climaxed amid a media herd at Ownby Stadium Thursday, and the starting quarterback job for Saturday’s Texas game went to the only one of the three candidates who didn’t think it was that big a deal: freshman Lance McIlhenny. Coach Ron Meyer said he chose the 5-10 yearling from Highland Park “because his total execution of our offensive game plan was a little sharper, and because of his aggressiveness . . . his leadership capabilities were a little greater” than the other candidate, sophomore Mike Fisher.62

In his October 25 column in the News, David Casstevens penned a letter to McIlhenny, warning him of what was to come, writing:

Lance, I sat down today and searched the record books and couldn’t find a single time in recorded history where an SWC freshman ever had to make his first start against Texas in Austin. I think it’s against NCAA rules. If not, maybe it ought to be—this year, anyway. I know. You wouldn’t miss the opportunity for anything in the world. If you didn’t feel that way you don’t belong in college athletics. But I don’t know if you fully realize what you’re getting into. You think Freshman English is tough. . . .

You’ve got to admit this isn’t the best place to start a career, unless you’re a politician or in the Mexican food business. The unbeaten Longhorns are riding a 9-game home winning streak at Memorial Stadium. They’ve won 62 of their last 65 games played in Austin. The last time SMU beat Texas you were 5 years old.63

All trends went by the wayside that Saturday afternoon. Led by a freshman quarterback making his first appearance in a college football game, SMU upset Texas in grand fashion, beating the second-ranked Longhorns, 20-6, in Austin. It was the Mustangs’ first win over Texas since 1966 when SMU won its last Southwest Conference football championship.64 When the game recap hit the pages of the News on Sunday after the game, Texas coach Fred Akers was quoted just once in Casstevens’s story. He said: “They just lined up and whipped us.”65 Running the Veer offense, McIlhenny distributed
the ball to his standout crew of running backs led by Craig James, who rushed for 146
yards on nineteen carries. McIlhenny completed just one pass but did not throw an
interception or fumble the ball away to the Longhorns.

Meyer called the victory “the biggest game we’ve won since I’ve been here.” The game plan was simple: run the ball and avoid mistakes. Pouncey provided a
summary in the News:

“You’ve heard of KISS—Keep It Simple, Stupid,” Meyer said. “And we did. Before, we may have gotten too complex, relying too much on Mike Ford’s
capabilities, and when at times we were out of synch there it had really
devastating effects.” So McIlhenny ran the option, pitched out and handed off—and didn’t make mistakes. The results were bountiful: 283 yards rushing, 146 of it
by James and 85 by Dickerson.

As Pouncey wrote in one of three articles the next week: “An upset 20-6 win over
Texas at Austin has draped glitter over the long-suffering Ponies, who are more
accustomed to thorns.” The Associated Press rewarded SMU with a No. 19 ranking
while United Press International gave Meyer its Coach of the Week award after the
Ponies’ monumental upset of Texas. Supporting the claim that big wins produce big
crowds, SMU’s victory against the No. 2 Longhorns translated into ticket sales for the
upcoming home game against Texas A&M. Pouncey wrote:

Winning cures cancer, in the pungent phraseology of SMU football coach Ron
Meyer. He’s been rich, and he’s been poor, and believe him, rich is better. But
even beating Texas does not slow Meyer’s pulse rate—it hikes it. In the aftermath
of the big win at Austin, the Mustang ticket office had its biggest day Monday
since the tie with Ohio State in 1978.

The win against Texas also grabbed the attention of ABC, which elected to air the
SMU-Texas A&M game on its regional telecast. The odds makers must have noticed
the surprising upset, as SMU was picked as an eight-and-a-half-point favorite against the
Aggies, a team that had beaten the Mustangs in eight of the previous nine matchups.
While the win over Texas produced the longest lines at the SMU ticket office since the Mustangs tied Ohio State in 1978, any sportswriter or college football fan who followed the Ponies that year knew that the stunning draw with the Buckeyes was no microcosm of that season. The Mustangs could not maintain that level of play and stumbled on to a 4-6-1 campaign, in turn living up to their flash-in-the-pan image that News writers, including columnist Sam Blair, pointed out. Would 1980 be yet another year signified by a major upset and subsequent collapse?

That question evidently was on Ron Meyer’s mind. He said the Texas A&M game was even more important than the contest against the highly rated Longhorns, telling the News’s Pouncey:

The mark of a team emerging as a credible team, a legitimate top 15 or 20 team, is sustaining ability. Yes, we beat Texas, but we beat Houston (in 1977) and beat Florida and tied Ohio State (in 1978), yet the bottom fell out of us after that. If we go on and beat A&M, then maybe we can say we’ve avoided those valleys that come after the peaks.75

There were no valleys the next Saturday. SMU bowled over A&M, 27-0, in front of 41,289 fans at Texas Stadium.76 The victory assured the Mustangs a winning season for the first time since 1974.77 McIlhenny again was not sharp passing the ball, completing only three of his ten throws for just twenty-nine yards, but he did not throw an interception.78 The SMU defense pitched a shutout, while the special teams blocked a punt, returned a punt for a touchdown, blocked a field goal, and returned another punt fifty-six yards to set up a Mustang score.79

McIlhenny showed he could throw the ball the next week when the Mustangs beat up Rice, 34-14.80 He completed seven of nine throws for 131 yards and three touchdowns
in leading SMU to a 7-2 record, a second-place standing in the Southwest Conference, and a nearly guaranteed bid to a bowl game. Dickerson chipped in 147 yards rushing.

Pouncey, whose 1980 book *Mustang Mania* documented the history of SMU football from its origin in 1916 to the Rice victory in 1980, wrote in the last line of the book that when SMU became bowl eligible, “It was, at last, the real Mustang Mania.”

Despite losing to Texas Tech, 14-0, in Lubbock during a mid-November blizzard, the Mustangs accepted an invitation to the Holiday Bowl after the game. SMU demolished Arkansas at home in the season finale, 31-7, reaching eight wins for the first time in fourteen years. It was the first time the Ponies had beaten Texas and Arkansas in the same season since 1957, and the twenty-four point victory over the Razorbacks was the most lopsided win for SMU against Arkansas since 1951. The lone disappointment was the crowd, which topped out at 28,225 and was the second smallest in the Mustang Mania era.

Unlike some earlier games, though, there was no tsunami of free or discounted tickets washing over Dallas for the Arkansas game. Consequently, it appeared fewer folks were willing to pay full price to see the Mustangs. The trend continued into the bowl game, as the *News* pointed out in its “Hot Stuff” sports briefs section on December 14, which read:

Mustang Mania seems to be fading fast. The SMU Mustang Club has chartered two Southwest Airlines planes to transport fans to the Dec. 19 Holiday Bowl for an attractive package price of $385. Included are hotel accommodations, game ticket and ground transportation. However, only 220 to 250 have bought the package, and only about 2,000 tickets have been sold overall. “The problem we’ve got is that it’s the week before Christmas,” Mustang Club director Doug Smith explains. “So many people are so darn busy. A lot would like to go but can’t. I did not know what to expect. It’s very tough.” Uh, Doug, scheduling at Christmas time isn’t exactly new for bowl games.
A reported 50,214 fans attended the Holiday Bowl in San Diego to watch SMU battle Brigham Young University and its All-America quarterback Jim McMahon, but only about two thousand of those were SMU ticket buyers. Craig James rushed for 225 yards while Eric Dickerson added 110 more on the ground, but McMahon rallied BYU from deficits of 19-0, 38-19, and 45-25 to defeat the Mustangs, 46-45, on a Hail Mary heave to receiver Clay Brown that he caught in the end zone as time expired. An Associated Press photo that ran in the News two days after the game showed SMU safety Wes Hopkins coming down with both hands on the ball while Brown struggled to keep one palm on the pigskin. The referee gave Brown the possession call nonetheless. “We were robbed,” SMU defensive back Reg Phillips said. BYU coach LaVell Edwards said, “To me, it looked like a questionable call.”

There was no major fanfare for the Ponies after the bowl game, and in some ways the News’s claim that Mustang Mania “seems to be fading fast” was true. One month after the Holiday Bowl, Pouncey wrote: “They’ll have to put a new number on those promotional blue Mania jerseys. No. 10 will be vacant for a while.” Mike Ford—who struggled to regain pre-injury form and had been relegated to third-string quarterback for much of 1980—announced he would not return for his senior season. Pouncey wrote: “Ford, the passing quarterback who was Mustang Mania, has quit the SMU team and given up college football.” He finished his career ranked in the NCAA top ten in passing yardage with 5,071 yards.

Dave Bliss, the ballyhooed new coach of the SMU men’s basketball team, got off to a rocky start, to put it mildly. At 7-14 in early February 1981, he took the podium at the weekly Dallas-Fort Worth Sports Media Luncheon and said, “This feels like a weekly
autopsy.” The Mustangs had suffered home losses to lower-division schools including tiny Rollins College and Texas Wesleyan University, and they had also lost by forty-two points—their worst loss ever in Southwest Conference play—to Arkansas. They were so bad that News columnist Bayless called the “Maniacs” also known as Bliss’s squad, “the worst team in the conference, if not continent.”

A fiery Bliss knocked the WFAA Radio broadcast of the SMU-Baylor game off the air for ten minutes when, in a fit of rage over the extra-long press table pushing his bench too far into the corner of the court, he shoved one of the press tables back from courtside. Baylor then whipped his Mustangs, 80-52.

But the most significant setback to Mustang Mania, as both a promotional campaign and a buzzword to describe SMU athletics, came on February 11, 1981, when it was reported that Russ Potts, the SMU athletic director since June 1978, was resigning his post to become the vice president for marketing and advertising with the Chicago White Sox.

Sam Blair summed up all that Potts had meant for SMU athletics in his short term, writing:

Mustang Mania was born as Potts and his staff promoted relentlessly. Using a wide variety of bargain-ticket events, SMU boosted home attendance to 51,960 per game in ’78, an increase of more than 25,000 from the previous season. In ’79, SMU moved its home games from the Cotton Bowl to Texas Stadium and averaged 56,000 with a team that wound up with a 5-6 record after a 3-0 start. Last fall, attendance dropped to a disappointing 36,773 but SMU earned more national recognition on the field with a winning season and a bowl bid. Potts also made his mark elsewhere in the athletic department. He moved the Mustang Club into the department and that sparked an increase in fund raising from $190,000 in 1978 to more than $1 million in 1980. He hired highly respected coaches in three sports: Dave Bliss for basketball, Ted McLaughlin for track and field and Dennis Ralston for tennis.
Bayless wrote of Potts: “The little turkey just had a way of irritating people.”

But, he wrote, “Few, if any, did more for SMU athletics,” adding:

Like it or not, you’ll soon miss him. Nine of 12 sports he left in the Top 20. . . . He mopped up almost all the red ink. And like it or not, the mad scientist’s Mustang Mania worked. The promotion got so many people in Dallas, where the entertainment dollar is stretched in so many directions, thinking about SMU sports again. From some 7,000 for Rice in ’78 to nearly 60,000 for Rice in ’80. From deck shoes, Izods and “We’re too cool for football games” to 90 percent student-body turnout. Traffic jams, free tickets, oversold games—who cares? Russ Potts put ’em in the stands, just like he promised.

The same day Potts’s resignation went public, it was revealed that the NCAA had been investigating SMU for possible violations of player recruitment rules—and SMU had kept the investigation a secret for nine months. The press immediately speculated it was Ron Meyer’s stellar recruiting haul in 1979, headlined by Eric Dickerson and Craig James, that spurred the NCAA probe at SMU.

Potts vehemently denied that his departure for the White Sox was in any way connected to the NCAA investigation and was nothing more than an unfortunately timed coincidence. His voice reportedly cracking at the press conference the next day, he said, “I can look everyone in the eye and tell you the two are totally unrelated. . . . Uncanny. Just uncanny. I have no idea how [news of the probe] got out. This should be the happiest day of my life, and it rained on my parade.”

Thirty-three years later, Potts stood by his initial statement, saying in an April 2013 interview that he was still clueless as to how news leaked of the NCAA investigation. Bayless wrote in his March 1, 1981, column: “As best we could tell, an underling within Potts’s office tips the newspapers, innocently adding, ‘Oh, yeah, I think the NCAA is investigating SMU, too.’” Regardless, Potts said in 2013, his departure
was the result of Chicago White Sox Vice Chairman Eddie Einhorn making him an irresistible proposal.

He offered me the job three times on the phone and then he came to Dallas and said, “Can I meet you and your wife for breakfast at Brennan’s [Restaurant] on Sunday morning?” I met him there after church, after the early service. Brennan’s had these paper placemats on the tables and he flipped the paper placemat over and said, “Write down everything you would have to have to come to Chicago and be vice president for marketing.”

I wrote down some of the most outlandish things: a luxury suite, because we weren’t going to have a house right away; an automobile; a twenty-five percent commission on everything I sold. It was a quarter-of-a-million dollar deal, which was a huge deal at that time. There were pro ballplayers who weren’t making that much. And I thought to myself, “I’m gonna make this so outlandish he’ll never go for it.” He looked it over and checked off every box on the list and said, “Done.”

My wife’s eyes got as big as saucers. And I’m thinking, “Well damn, we gotta do it now.”

Potts said he was offered athletic director jobs at five schools between the onset of the investigation in April 1980 and the time of his resignation. His alma mater the University of Maryland showed interest, and former SMU President James Zumberge—who accepted the presidency at the University of Southern California in May 1980—had tried to lure Potts to Los Angeles. Though he was not named in the NCAA query, had he wanted to leave at any point in the investigation, he certainly had opportunities.

Because he repeatedly denied a connection between the two, clearly there were some who believed the timing of Potts’s resignation was conspicuously tied to the NCAA investigation. But it was also suggested that—if somehow a rival school was behind the leak—making the investigation public knowledge was intended to sabotage the 1981 recruiting efforts of Meyer, who was preparing to sign fifteen high-profile players later that month. Telling a standout eighteen-year-old prospect that SMU might be stuck with an NCAA-imposed probation easily could change his mind, several Mustangs
players suggested. Among them, Eric Dickerson, arguably the most sought-after recruit in college football history, told the News, “They (NCAA staffers) . . . have been around since we came to SMU, and they’ll be around longer, because there’s always that question of why we would want to go to SMU. That always lingers in people’s minds. [The investigation] could (hurt recruiting),” Dickerson added, “if they mention anything about probation. That has a bad effect. It gave me a second thought. Nobody wants to go to a school if it’s gonna be on probation.”

Exactly what triggered the investigation into SMU recruiting remains a mystery. United Press International reported that it was possible, although not confirmed, that the NCAA targeted SMU as part of its “Project Intercept” program, in which the NCAA selected the top one hundred recruits in the country each year and questioned each one about his recruiting process. But UPI also reported it was possible that staff at other Southwest Conference schools might have swayed the NCAA to take a look at the Mustangs’ athletic program.

The public revelation of the investigation seemed to have little impact on Meyer’s 1981 recruiting. He told the News’s Steve Tracy that fourteen of his fifteen recruits had signed letters of intent to play for the Mustangs, and only one recruit had told him that the NCAA investigation might change his commitment status. When signing day arrived a week later, thirteen of the fifteen players committed to SMU.

But the NCAA did not let SMU off the hook. Finding the university guilty of twenty-nine recruiting violations, in June 1981 the NCAA slapped SMU football with two years of probation and a one-year ban on bowl and television appearances. The ban on television appearances reportedly would result in the loss of $150,000 to $163,000
in revenue in the upcoming season. Because it was SMU’s fifth time to be on probation—the most of any institution—the NCAA’s penalties reportedly were stiffer than they might have been otherwise. The twenty-nine recruiting violations, by numerous accounts, were of the mild variety. As Sam Blair and David R. Holland wrote, “Most people familiar with the case said there is nothing spectacular about the violations.” Bayless referred to them as “a stack of misdemeanors.” Blair, in a later column, wrote, “A great many of the violations look pretty light. One of them, for gosh sakes, concerned a former assistant coach playing racquetball with a prospect on his paid visit to the campus. That ain’t exactly first-degree murder.” Ironically, the most egregious charge of all was one that Meyer flatly denied: that he had led prospects to believe they could sell their complementary football tickets substantially above face value. Had any recruit known about Mustang Mania and the overwhelming number of free and discounted tickets being distributed across Dallas, he likely never would have believed he could sell his tickets for a sizable profit.

For SMU, a longtime have-not in the world of high-class recruiting, 1979 might have been too much to stomach for big-name programs in the Southwest Conference. For that reason, Bayless wrote: “When SMU suddenly corners the market as it did two years ago, it will get blown right off the map. ‘Witch hunt,’ some are calling it. They used to answer the football-office phones, ‘Mustang Mania.’ These days, it ought to be, ‘Mustang Malaria.’” He added:

No matter what evidence Deep Throats provided investigators, they’re no doubt seeking revenge for that Dickerson-Craig James-Michael Carter haul, probably the nation’s most dazzling. Ever since, recruiters in and out of the conference have been screaming, “Meyer’s alumni have opened their checkbooks!” Maybe these grapes are sour. Maybe not. . . .

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Somebody doesn’t want Meyer to ever have it. Maybe someone, somewhere in the SMU program, some time ago, committed an unpardonable sin. Maybe not.  

Bayless’s words were even stronger in his June 12 column when, two days after the NCAA handed down its judgment, he wrote:

You can’t tell me Ron Meyer wasn’t strung up by a posse of those Southwest Conference and regional head coaches and assistants who don’t like him or his recruiters. I’ve heard too many side-of-the-mouth remarks. Too many don’t like the Super Bowl ring from his Cowboy scouting days or the way Meyer flashes the thing. Too many think the SMU football coach “big-dogs” it. Too many think he’s too cocky, too arrogant, too Las Vegas, too much a media favorite. And, under lie detection, too many would admit Meyer has risen too far too fast. . . . Meyer was an outsider who’d grown too big for his tailored slacks. He had to be stopped.  

Blair seemed to agree with his fellow News columnist, prophetically writing:

“Indeed, the West is full of schools with greater sins. Remember that next fall when the Mustangs can’t wind up playing in a bowl even if they’re 11-zip.”  

With Potts no longer in the picture and a cloud of probation hanging over SMU, indeed it did seem Mustang Mania was fading fast.

NOTES

1 Russell Potts, telephone interview by Charles Thomas II, April 18, 2013; and Russell Potts, telephone interview by Charles Thomas II, April 24, 2013.  


6 Jones, “Avoiding a Pottsful of Woe.” Jones did not follow Associated Press style when using the possessive, adding an extra S after the apostrophe.

9 Ibid.


12 Pouncey, “Allen Calls Time, Quits SMU Post.”

13 Bayless, “‘Stand By Your Man’ or ‘Divorce’?”

14 Temple Pouncey, interview by Charles Thomas II, October 2, 2009.


16 Ibid.


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.


26 Ibid.


28 Ibid.


30 Ibid.


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Temple Pouncey, “Ponies Suffered Mental Beating from Baylor, As Well,” *The Dallas Morning News*, October 14, 1980; and Pouncey, “SMU Ground Game Grinds NT, 28-9.”


56 Ibid.


60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.


66 Ibid.

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71 Ibid.


74 Pouncey, “Strange Bedfellows.”

75 Ibid.


77 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.


86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.


90 Ibid.


93 Ibid.


95 Ibid.

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98 Ibid.


101 Pouncey, “The Pony Horror Show.”

102 Ibid.

104 Ibid.


106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.


109 Blair, “Potts Takes Job With White Sox; SMU Faces Probe.”

110 Bayless, “The Trials and Tribulations of Russ Potts.”

111 Potts telephone interview, April 18, 2013.


113 Ibid.


116 Pouncey, “Meyer Confident ’Inquiry’ Won’t Hurt Recruiting.”

117 Ibid.


119 Ibid.


121 Blair, Holland, “NCAA Penalizes SMU.”

122 Ibid.

123 Holland, “Meyer’s Job Safe, Shields Says.”

124 Blair, Holland, “NCAA Penalizes SMU.”

125 Ibid.

127 Sam Blair, “Now, for SMU’s Faithful, Here’s the Good News,” *The Dallas Morning News*, June 11, 1981.


129 Bayless, “Guilty ’Til Proven Innocent in NCAA.”

130 Ibid.

131 Bayless, “Meyer Marked Man from the Beginning.”

132 Blair, “Now, for SMU’s Faithful, Here’s the Good News.”
CHAPTER 7: THE BEST TEAM NOBODY EVER SAW

With Russ Potts leaving the athletic director’s chair at Southern Methodist University in February 1981, it seemed only logical to assume Mustang Mania was a dying if not already dead campaign the minute he walked out the door. “You might expect any day now to see a classified ad for a gigantic garage sale: ‘Cases of Mustang Mania pennants, balloons, hats, key rings, bumper stickers, shirts—priced to sell,’” a sports brief read in The Dallas Morning News on March 1.¹

But Brad Thomas, SMU’s sports promotions director, said otherwise. “There’s no question we’ll keep it if I have anything to do about it. We’ve got 200,000 bumper stickers we’re working on now.”² Thomas’s future and that of the Mustang Mania campaign were not entirely under his control, though. “I wouldn’t leave Dallas for nothing,” he said. “But I know the new athletic director may not care about promotions, and I could be out on the street in a New York minute. I don’t worry though. That’s a sin to me.”³

Three months and one day after Potts left SMU for the greener pastures of Chicago—where, as the White Sox vice president for marketing and advertising, he reportedly was making three times his SMU athletic director salary⁴—the university named Robert “Bob” Hitch as its next A.D. on June 12, 1981.⁵

Hitch had served most recently as the athletic director at the University of Wyoming, where most notably he had put the football team’s radio broadcasts up for bid among competing stations, which, after a bidding war, led to a net profit of $75,000 for the athletic department via the radio contract compared with only $10,000 the year before.⁶ He also had tried to promote football and men’s basketball games across the state
by scheduling practices and scrimmages at towns throughout Wyoming. At his first press conference, he quickly tried to distance himself from his predecessor. “I don’t want to step on any toes,” he said, “but I’m not going the same path SMU has in the past. I think it cheapens a product when you give things away. I’d rather have 40,000 paid fans in the stands rather than 65,000 with only 20,000 paid. Quality will sell a program. . . . You don’t see the Dallas Cowboys doing a lot of promotion.” Hitch went on to say, “I’m not Russ Potts, so give me an opportunity to be myself. I’m an inside type of guy—not the flashy type. . . .” As former SMU beat writer Temple Pouncey described the shift in leadership:

What a change. You couldn’t have more of a change in personalities between Potts and Hitch. Hitch was gruff and kind of grumpy, not very creative at things. I think he was a little along the [University of Texas Athletic Director DeLoss] Dodds line. “I’m gonna be here working my ass off but we’re not gonna promote in the glad-hand, back-slap way. We’ll promote by winning on the field.”

Under Hitch, Potts’s and Thomas’s flashy Mustang Mania campaign, indeed, slowly met its demise. Production and distribution of promotional materials bearing the campaign’s alliterative name dwindled. And despite the claim in a series of ads that appeared in the News and the Dallas Times Herald in the summer of 1981, Mustang Mania was not “stronger than ever.” The tactics that Potts and Thomas had used religiously throughout the campaign would not be continued under Hitch, as Mike Jones wrote in the News on September 4:

Look for a major change in the promotion policy under new SMU athletic director Bob Hitch. Sports promotions director Brad Thomas indicates there will be no mass, or mini, ticket giveaways, and his promotional budget has been cut—a major departure from Russ Potts’ aversion to empty seats. “I agree with Russ,” Thomas said. “What good does an empty seat do? Russ thought an empty seat was no more than an echo. Hitch says fans have to pay for the seats because we have a good program.”
And without a doubt, in 1981 the Mustangs had an outstanding football program. But as was the case before Mustang Mania, few fans showed up to watch SMU play when the Mustangs took the field at Texas Stadium that fall. Only 20,130 spectators paid ten dollars for a ticket to the home opener against the University of Texas-Arlington, which SMU blew out, 48-0. A crowd of 20,400 watched SMU beat North Texas State University, 34-7, the next week. A respectable showing of 45,700 fans turned out to watch the much-hyped Grambling State University Marching Band at halftime, and to see the Mustangs beat the Grambling Tigers, 59-27, to move to 3-0. With a 20-9 win over Texas Christian University on September 26, SMU started the season with a record of 4-0 for the second consecutive year. Eric Dickerson, the most sought-after running back recruit in 1979, was finally coming into his own. He rushed for 113 yards against TCU, making it his sixth straight game to eclipse one hundred yards on the ground.

SMU slowly climbed the rankings in the Associated Press poll, moving to No. 14 by the first week of October. The Mustangs topped the Baylor University Bears, 37-20, to move to 5-0 for the first time in thirty-one years, but only 33,110 showed up at Texas Stadium that Saturday to see Dickerson lead the Ponies with 158 rushing yards.

Football coach Ron Meyer was not bashful in expressing his discontent with the uninspiring attendance for his promising team that was coming off an eight-win season and a bowl appearance. “We have a quality product,” he said in an article that the News ironically buried on page 4 of the sports section. “I’d like to see it appreciated a little better. . . . We talk about winning conference championships and having good football teams and we are 5-0 and it is not reflected in the attendance.”
SMU was experiencing its best season in decades in 1981, but the response was tepid. The Mustang athletic director, Hitch, even commented to the News that he was stunned at how much coverage the matchup between the University of Texas and the University of Oklahoma—played each fall in Dallas at the Cotton Bowl—had received in the Times Herald compared with the Mustangs’ contest with Baylor, which was played on the same weekend. “It really shocked me to see the publicity that [the Texas-Oklahoma] game gets,” he said. “[The Times Herald] didn’t have any story about our game that week until Wednesday and it didn’t have anything else until Saturday.”

The lack of enthusiasm for the Mustangs in coverage and attendance was not justified based on their on-field performance, as Mike Jones wrote in the News on October 13:

Boy, what a flop these guys have been. They’re only leading the league in rushing at better than 320 yards a game and in total offense at 419.6 yards a game. The defense is surrendering ground-level acreage at the appalling rate of 86 yards a game. Eric-Craig Dickerson-James is averaging roughly 250 yards rushing, which is some 30 yards better than USC’s Marcus Allen. And he’s getting all the attention.

Dickerson rushed for more than one hundred yards for the eighth consecutive game in a 38-22 win over the University of Houston to move the Ponies into first place in the conference and earn a 6-0 record for the first time since the Doak Walker glory days of 1947.

The lone attendance gem of the 1981 season was the Texas game, which was a matchup of teams that had been ranked in the Associated Press Top 10 in the first half of the season. SMU fell to the Longhorns at Texas Stadium, 9-7, with 60,777 on hand. The Mustangs bounced back in style, trouncing Texas A&M University, 27-7; marching over Rice University, 33-12, with 28,750 on hand at Texas Stadium; whipping Texas
Tech University, 30-6, before 24,410 at home; and topping the University of Arkansas by two touchdowns in the season finale, 32-18.

Finishing 10-1 on the season, SMU won its first Southwest Conference championship since 1966 and tallied the most victories since the Mustangs won their lone national title in 1935. But because of the NCAA probation handed down earlier that year after finding the Ponies’ football program guilty of numerous albeit minor recruiting infractions, SMU was prohibited from playing in a bowl game.

Eric Dickerson and Craig James became the first pair of running backs on the same team in Southwest Conference history to rush for an average of at least one hundred yards per game. Dickerson finished the season with 1,428 yards, while James racked up 1,147. The tailbacks were one of many compelling storylines of the season. As Barry Horn wrote in the News after the season finale against Arkansas: “It was a record-setting year for a Mustang offense that seemed to set at least one school mark on every offensive series of its last two games. There are no statistics to confirm it, but the Mustangs may have set a school, conference, or NCAA record for setting records.”

But save for the home game against Texas, which drew a nearly sellout crowd most likely thanks to the Longhorns’ massive alumni base in Dallas, the Metroplex’s reception to SMU was appalling based on the excellence demonstrated on the football field. News columnist Skip Bayless argued that the poor response to SMU’s promising season was, in part, the result of a lack of promotions from SMU’s athletics office, writing: “These are the days we were to be reading, ‘Heisman candidate Eric Dickerson. . .’ Heismans are won with season-before buildup. SMU is No. 8 in the country. Dickerson is a junior with 18 touchdowns and a 5.5-yard average.” In the same
column, he called out Hitch for his failure to build up the Mustangs and Dickerson, writing: “Let’s talk spotlight. Before he left, athletic director Russ (Mania) Potts forced it on SMU. New AD Bob Hitch seems to prefer letting No. 8 sell itself. An announced 28,000 underflowed SMU-Rice last Saturday.”

In 1981, the Mustangs were the only team ranked in the Associated Press Top 10 that, on consecutive fall Saturdays, failed to draw a crowd of at least thirty thousand, leading SMU’s ticket director Tom Phillips to say, “When you have the product you hope folks will come out and see it. I don’t know what’s wrong.” The University of Pittsburgh was the only other Top 10 team on Saturday, November 7, to draw fewer than forty thousand fans, but the Panthers still hauled in about six thousand more guests than the Ponies did for Rice.

The headline for Bayless’s November 22 column captured the 1981 SMU squad concisely and accurately: “Meyer’s Mustangs: The best team nobody ever saw.” Bayless wrote:

The Mustangs played their final two home games before average Texas Stadium crowds of 26,000. They represent a school that’s generally too busy planning post-game parties in a city that plans its weekends around Sunday’s event at Texas Stadium. SMU is too cool for hog hats [headgear worn by Arkansas Razorbacks fans] and away games in Fayetteville, unless maybe Daddy’s taking the Lear. Dallas is too sophisticated for college rah-rah. . . .

The Mustangs are indeed Dallas’ midnight Cowboys—the sixth-ranked team that plays in the dark. . . .

Meyer, whose coaching prowess has been doubted by others in the SWC . . . can do far more than recruit and smoke cigars. He can coach. Hey, is anybody listening?37

Putting a high-quality product on the field and racking up wins did not allow SMU to turn the corner in its quest to become a main attraction in the Dallas sports and
entertainment market. And by the estimation of some Dallas sports writers and SMU insiders, when the grandiosity of Mustang Mania failed to make the Ponies a big-time draw and a record-setting 10-1 team could not fill Texas Stadium, it appeared nothing ever could.

NOTES


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.


7 Ibid.

8 Holland, “Hitch Has Own Ideas About Promoting Mustang Sports.”

9 Ibid.

10 Temple Pouncey, interview by Charles Thomas II, October 2, 2009.

11 Advertisements appeared in The Dallas Morning News in 1981 on June 7, June 8, June 14, June 21, June 28, July 5, July 12, and July 26.


17 Ibid.


20 “Snub Job Handed 10th-ranked SMU.”


28 “SMU Wins Title; Texas Gets Berth,” The Dallas Morning News, November 22, 1981.


30 Barry Horn, “SMU Turns Make-Believe ‘Bowl’ into Genuine Title,” The Dallas Morning News, November 22, 1981.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Skip Bayless, “Fate Haunts Dickerson,” The Dallas Morning News, November 12, 1981.

34 Ibid.


36 Ibid.

37 Bayless, “Meyer’s Mustangs: The Best Team Nobody Ever Saw.”
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

The day after 6,918 spectators trickled into the cavernous Cotton Bowl to see Southern Methodist University play Rice University in the fall of 1977, SMU President James Zumberge was one of many university officials asked to comment on the unbelievably low turnout.

“The day is coming when the Mustangs will perform in such a way as to make people want to come out,” he said. “That is the name of the game. There is no way to get on the best-seller list without a good book, no way to have a box-office smash without a good movie. There is no way to force people to come out and see what they don’t want to see.”

SMU faculty member Mike Harvey said plainly, “We need a winning team and an excellent program.” Later that season, the great Doak Walker, SMU’s only Heisman Trophy winner who had been the sports sensation of Dallas and the Southwest in the late 1940s, offered a pithy solution the Mustangs’ attendance woes. “A winner always will cure all,” he said after Texas Tech University drilled his alma mater in 1977 before a sparse Cotton Bowl crowd.

The 1981 SMU football team in many ways proved each of those men wrong. Setting school, conference, and national records alike, the 10-1 Mustangs arguably were the best team the university had fielded in forty-five years, if not the best in the history of the program. But despite its roster of big-name athletes, a superior venue compared with most college stadiums, a Top 20 ranking for almost the entire season, and one big victory after another in a season that followed an eight-win campaign and the team’s first bowl
appearance in more than a decade, SMU could not attract sellout crowds to Texas Stadium. A winner did not, in fact, cure all at SMU.

Despite fielding a stellar team that won ten games with an average margin of victory of twenty-two points, SMU’s average attendance in seven home games in 1981 was only about thirty-three thousand. Athletic Director Bob Hitch’s philosophy of limited marketing and of letting a winning program sell itself to fans had failed.

And it continued to fail for three more years as the Mustangs, for the first time in decades, showed they could win consistently. They went on to win eleven games and defeat the University of Pittsburgh and its future NFL Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Marino in the Cotton Bowl Classic the next year. In 1983, they won ten games and went to their third bowl game in four years. In 1984, they won ten games yet again and captured the Southwest Conference title for the third time in four years. But as Bill Campbell of The Dallas Morning News wrote in a 2003 retrospective of Mustang Mania, “Even the co-SWC championship of ’84 was unspectacular in the stands after 58,206 came to the September TCU game.” SMU clearly needed more than a winning team to attract fans.

During the Russ Potts regime, SMU’s home attendance averaged in the fifty thousands. And while admittedly many of the spectators did not pay full price for their tickets, and some paid nothing at all, Potts was able to demonstrate that with relentless publicity and promotion and an unwavering message of excitement and enthusiasm, Dallas-area residents at least would make the effort to drive to the Cotton Bowl or Texas Stadium to watch the Mustangs, win or lose, and see some form of additional pregame or halftime entertainment.
In that sense, Mustang Mania worked. As Brad Sham, the radio voice of the
Dallas Cowboys and former radio play-by-play man for SMU football and men’s
basketball, said of the campaign in an interview:

If you define success as making SMU the relevant entity that once was and had
ceased to be, I’d say they were a success. They became relevant and became an
important part of the [athletic] program’s success, and people were talking about
them because of Mustang Mania. Most people who have been around a while will
still register Mustang Mania. They may not be able to name dates and places, but
they’ll still know what it was. 6

The Dallas Morning News certainly did its part to bring the Mustang Mania
campaign into the public consciousness and make SMU a household name. After
debuting in print on September 3, 1978, the campaign name or a close variation (such as
“Mania” or “Mustang Maniacs”) appeared in the News ninety-three times and on forty-
one of the remaining 120 days of that year. Of those ninety-three appearances, fifty-two
were in ads, six were in headlines or decks, thirty-two were in articles, and two were in
photos or cutlines. In 1979 the “Mustang Mania” moniker appeared in the News 172
times on eighty-seven days. Seventy-two of the 172 appearances were in ads. The
remainder, which accounted for 58 percent of the slogan’s appearances in the News that
year, were in editorial content: eighty-one in articles, twelve in headlines, and seven in
photos or cutlines.

In 1980 “Mustang Mania” appeared in the News ninety-eight times on sixty days.
Unlike the previous year, advertising carried the load with sixty-six references to the
campaign. Articles accounted for the remaining thirty-two references. Not surprisingly,
1981 effectively marked the end of the campaign, both in promotional efforts and in the
media’s usage. Potts’s departure from SMU in February of that year sapped the
momentum of the campaign, and Hitch’s arrival ushered in a new mentality of
promotions. As such, “Mustang Mania” appeared just sixty-four times on forty-one days in 1981, with ads accounting for exactly half of the references. Still, the campaign slogan received perhaps its best placement in the paper, appearing above the fold of the front page of the *News* on two separate occasions—January 24 and November 24.

In addition to its prevalence in print, Mustang Mania had a positive influence on recruiting for SMU’s athletics teams and the student body in general, the extent to which cannot be described entirely in this study, as several prominent university figures were not able to be sourced. The former SMU president, Zumberge, died in 1992; his successor, L. Donald Shields, did not respond to an interview request; and Hitch, who resigned from SMU in December 1986 in the wake of a major NCAA investigation of SMU football, could not be reached for comment via the SMU athletics office.

The relentless marketing and promotions done during the Mustang Mania era never drove SMU athletics into the poor house, Thomas said, although the athletic department spent every cent within its means and relied on far, far more corporate sponsorship dollars to spread the word about SMU football and basketball. He said:

> Maybe that’s the best way to say it—[I had] a long leash. When I found Howie Newman to write [the song *Mustang Mania*], it’s not like I really had to be careful about “OK, you can get this guy to do this record, but you only have this much to work with.” It was just “Get it done.” With Russ it was like “Get it done.” And I don’t mean that in any way like “Wait, to what extent?” Not that at all. Not that at all. But just “Don’t take no for an answer. Get it done. It’ll come back if we do what we’re supposed to do.”

Despite the “get it done” mentality and the push to make SMU a household name again, in its short existence Mustang Mania failed to make SMU a hot commodity in the Dallas sports and entertainment market when measured by full-price ticket sales and sustained attendance. Unfortunately the Mustangs had not yet hit their winning stride.
during the height of the Mustang Mania campaign, making it impossible to determine whether the confluence of factors—the mass promotions and marketing of Mustang Mania, along with a winning team—would have made SMU successful in terms of ticket sales and turnout.

But several factors have worked against SMU and likely will continue to prevent the school from ever being the area’s main attraction, no matter whether SMU finishes with a winning record every year, gives half of its tickets away for free, and blankets Dallas with promotional materials 365 days a year. SMU almost surely will never conquer Dallas or compete with the kingpin Cowboys. As Temple Pouncey, the SMU beat writer for the News from 1977 to 1979, said:

[19]65 was the first year the Cowboys became the darlings of the town. From then on, all the way through the [coach Tom] Landry years, that’s what they were. They were the king of Dallas sports, it didn’t matter what anybody else was doing.

In the late ’40s, when [the Mustangs] were one of the top teams in the country, that was the biggest thing in town. There was no pro football. It was the time of post-war boom when they were the biggest thing. But after Doak [Walker] and Kyle [Rote] left, they went back to being just SMU football drawing ordinary crowds. Then, they went even worse than that. When [Don] Meredith graduated, the next year they were winless. They had nothing. They hadn’t been recruiting when Meredith was there. Then once the Cowboys, the Rangers, all the other pro sports . . . once the whole face of sports in Dallas changed, nobody in Dallas had any identification with SMU, just a few people that had gone to school there. 8

News columnist Sam Blair argued the same point in the fall of 1977: “In 1960 pro football came to Dallas and you surely know the story from there. The bottom dropped out and the Mustangs have been struggling ever since.”9 News writer Mike Jones only further drove home the point in 1977 during SMU’s poorest attendance days, writing:

We must all concede that Dallas is a Dallas Cowboy town. That happened not only because Tom Landry began to field winning teams 11 years ago and not only because the nation was experiencing an unbridled professional football boom in
the ’60s, but because the Dallas Cowboys became an in thing. People began to go to Cowboy games not to watch, but to be seen.10

Sham, who hosted SMU football coach Ron Meyer’s weekly radio call-in show in the late 1970s and has hosted numerous sports radio shows in Dallas for about forty years, said that from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, progressively fewer and fewer fans called in with questions about comments about SMU and about college football.11 Professional sports dominated the airwaves starting with the Cowboys’ 1971 Super Bowl victory, followed by the arrival of the Texas Rangers in 1973 and the Dallas Mavericks in 1980.12 He said of the Mustangs, “They weren’t the top story in town [in the Mustang Mania era] and they were never gonna be. And once the Rangers came to town [the Mustangs] were never gonna be better than the third story in town.”13

Potts conceded that Dallas was a difficult area to market a college sports team. At the University of Maryland, just outside the District of Columbia, he competed with the Washington Redskins who “owned the town, and still do,” he said, “and you had the same problems there as you did in Dallas. They were remarkable parallels.”14

While the Cowboys nearly monopolized the Dallas sports market during the Mustang Mania era, compounding the problem for Potts was that many of the area’s college football fans were not Mustang Maniacs. They were graduates of much larger state schools such as the University of Texas, Texas A&M University, and Texas Tech University. It was those schools and their large North Texas fan bases that regularly accounted for SMU’s best attended home games in football and men’s basketball.

Other college sports followers in the area were transplants from the Northeast and Midwest who had relocated to Dallas, a city that was rapidly becoming the new
headquarters for multinational corporations and employers of all kinds from across the
country as part of the Sunbelt Phenomenon. As Sham explained:

One of the biggest obstacles [Potts and Thomas] had to overcome once they got
Mustang Mania up and running was that they were fighting every other school.
Their audience in their hometown was dwarfed by collegiate competition from
other schools in the league that they were competing against. There were more
Texas and A&M and Tech alums in town than even SMU. And that had changed
so much since even the ’50s.¹⁵

Potts had acknowledged in the early days of his athletic director tenure at SMU
that the private school’s alumni base was no larger than about fifty-eight thousand.¹⁶
Taking that figure into account, along with the school’s average enrollment of about ten
thousand students, Thomas admitted that a campaign such as Mustang Mania, regardless
of its era, cannot make SMU a consistently big-time draw in Dallas’s entertainment and
professional sports glut. He said:

The fact is SMU is a very difficult place because of the private nature of the
school, the major metropolitan area, and the small alumni base. The numbers just
aren’t there like a big state university, so the resources are not there. So in that
day and age, competing week in and week out with Texas, Texas A&M, and
Arkansas, I used to always say it was like the Parkit Market over on Greenville
[Avenue] and University [Boulevard near the SMU campus]. It’s this small little
grocery store going against Tom Thumb or Kroger. They still have the things you
need and it’s good, but they can’t compete with the big box grocery stores. But
we did for a while.¹⁷

Whether it was his unbridled optimism or his unlimited confidence from more
than four decades of experience in the sports promotions industry, in 2013 Potts remained
a voice of dissension when it comes to the potential of SMU.

I’m telling you right now, I could go in to Dallas and SMU and I could fill that
place every Saturday afternoon. I guarantee it. Initially, every ticket wouldn’t be
full price. But I’d create all these different programs to get people in the stands.
Fannies in the seats. Fannies in the seats. That’s the deal. I could definitely do it.
I’d bet my life on it that’s how sure I am of it.¹⁸
Potts’s philosophy at SMU in 1978 was the same philosophy he preached thirty-five years later, and it is likely the most realistic course of action if SMU ever were to become a consistent draw. But as Brad Thomas said in a 2013 interview, “In a lot of ways it’s almost like there has to be a happy medium between Russ’s [philosophy] and Bob’s . . . . Probably what’s best is a combination of Bob’s and Russ’s as opposed to all Russ’s or all Bob’s.”

While Mustang Mania fostered excitement and fan interest through high-energy promotions and the athletic department’s innovative connection to the Dallas area’s business and media communities, the campaign never overlapped with the football team’s consistent on-field successes in the early 1980s, when Hitch’s win-to-sell approach did not prove effective. By utilizing the same promotional and marketing techniques of Potts’s and Thomas’s earlier campaign at the same time the athletic department has a winning team to promote, SMU might have been able to bridge the gap and create a new, stronger Mustang fan base and a lasting sense of Mustang Mania.

Jim Kahler, who served as senior vice president of sales and marketing with the Cleveland Cavaliers from 1991 to 2002 and has been the executive director of Ohio University’s Center for Sports Administration since 2005, said that SMU, like any collegiate or professional sports team, should focus on promoting its best matchups of the season. The organization must strike while the iron is hot and promote intensively the team is winning, while also taking advantage of star power, as he did in Cleveland in the 1990s when Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls came to town twice a year and drew sellout crowds.
When the team is not performing at a high level, marketing and promotions do not necessarily need to cease, but the message must change. The news media in Dallas in 1979 lambasted SMU for what the News’s Jones wrote was excessive promotion of a losing football team, making the athletic department an easy target for public embarrassment. A central message of excitement and enthusiasm about the team must be tempered in such times, and a focus on promotional events and activities that involve fan interaction and entertainment must replace the emphasis on the team’s performance. Kahler said such an approach might mean heavily promoting only four or five games per year in a college basketball season.

And while Potts’s insistence that putting “fannies in the seats” by any means possible would create a community of new SMU fans, Kahler advised caution when giving away or discounting tickets in bulk as Potts and Thomas did during the Mustang Mania era. “You take a model like SMU,” he said, “and you ask ‘What’s the size of my stadium?’ Once you go over half [the sixty-five thousand tickets, in SMU’s case at Texas Stadium] that are discounted or giveaways, you’re in dangerous territory.” Ideally, he said, about 60 percent of ticket sales should be full or partial season ticket packages while only about 10 percent should be group sales or special promotions. Skewing those percentages can cheapen the product and create a perception among the consumer base that tickets should be free or incredibly inexpensive, such that the consumer is highly unlikely to purchase a ticket in the future at face value.

In some regard, from the 1950s to the 1990s SMU was fighting an attendance battle it could never win thanks in part to its home venues: the Cotton Bowl and Texas Stadium. “In SMU’s case their football capacity [was] unrealistic,” Kahler said. As
Potts explained, SMU almost was obligated to play in a large venue to satisfy the ticket demand for peak games such as those against Texas and Texas A&M, which proved to be the biggest money makers for the athletic department. But when small private schools came to play in Dallas against SMU, such as Baylor, Rice, or TCU, it often was difficult to draw a decent crowd without massive ticket giveaways.

SMU now calls the thirty-two-thousand-seat Gerald J. Ford Stadium home, which Kahler said is a more appropriately sized venue. In that setting, it would be much easier to achieve a true sellout crowd and reduce if not altogether eliminate the use of discounted or free tickets. Nowadays, SMU’s ticket sales goals should start with the die-hard fans. Kahler said:

You’re going to build your market with the competitive sports. So with SMU, that’s football and basketball. You’ve got to build your attendance with a core base of season ticket holders and then fill out the rest with casual fans. So the question is: Who can you get who will invest in all your games and what can you do to supplement the rest with casual fans?

I think what you’re looking at doing is growing the season ticket base. If [the team is] winning and you get 20 percent growth, that’s a bonus. If they’re winning big then maybe it’s even better than that. But in terms of a realistic goal I’d say, “We’re gonna win, and if we get ten thousand we’re gonna grow our season ticket base by 10 percent a year.”

While Hitch’s win-to-promote philosophy did not yield remarkable results at SMU, winning certainly cannot be understated as the most important factor in the attendance equation as exemplified perhaps best by the University of Southern California, which mirrors SMU in many ways. Both are private institutions with small enrollments, and both schools are nestled in large metropolitan areas—Dallas and Los Angeles—where the battle for the entertainment dollar is extremely competitive. Yet USC, which has played its home football games in the massive Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum since
1923, has consistently drawn more than sixty thousand fans to its home games since the 1940s. And unlike SMU, which had only fleeting winning stints in the 1940s and early 1980s amid decades of woeful football campaigns, USC has won eleven national championships, won thirty-one bowl games, and fielded six Heisman Trophy winners in its history. Winning consistently clearly is the major difference between the two programs.

For SMU to draw large, paying crowds it likely would take a combination of consistent winning over the span of several years if not decades, in turn creating the culture and image of a winner, and coupling an attractive on-field product with high-energy, widespread marketing. But with only four winning seasons to show since 1986, SMU has a long way to go to create a new sense of Mustang Mania.

NOTES

2 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Brad Sham, telephone interview by Charles Thomas II, March 11, 2013.
7 Brad Thomas, interview by Charles Thomas II, February 26, 2013.
8 Temple Pouncey, interview by Charles Thomas II, October 2, 2009.
9 Blair, “Doaker Returns, but Crowd Doesn’t.”
11 Sham telephone interview.
12 Ibid.
14 Russell Potts, telephone interview by Charles Thomas II, April 24, 2013.
15 Sham telephone interview.
17 Thomas interview.
18 Potts telephone interview.
19 Thomas interview.
22 Ibid.
23 Kahler telephone interview.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Potts telephone interview.
27 Kahler telephone interview.
APPENDIX A: MUSTANG MANIA ADVERTISEMENTS

The Dallas Morning News, September 3, 1978
The Dallas Morning News, October 17, 1979
Mustang ’79

SMU vs TEXAS
SELLOUT EXPECTED

ALL TICKETS RESERVED ($9)

Saturday
October 17th 1:30 p.m.
Texas Stadium

GOOD TICKETS STILL AVAILABLE IDR
• TEXAS TECH
  NOV. 17 - 12:00 p.m.
  HOMECOMING
  OLYMPIC TRIBUTE GAME

The nationally ranked Longhorns with their celebrated rock defense take on the explosive offense of SMU... and anything can happen.

A limited number of Blue Coupon Parking available for remaining home games.

All-America
Emanuel Tobert

TICKET LOCATIONS
• SMU Athletic Ticket Office
  Moody Coliseum
• All Seat Stores in the Metroplex
• Cullum & Sons Sporting Goods Stores
• Patron Ticket Agency
• Sun-Retail Drugs — Richardson
  Please Call (214) 692-2901
  Or Write:
  Southern Methodist University
  Ticket Office
  Box 216
  Moody Coliseum
  Dallas, Texas 75275

Hall of Fame Game

The Dallas Morning News, October 24, 1979
EYE OPENER

SMU

VS

NORTH TEXAS

Saturday, September 13th, 7:30 PM
Texas Stadium

$10,000 Money Mania Scramble
Register at all locations

HOME GAMES ‘90
SMU vs. TCU
• 50 Annual Jerry Lewis 7-11 Bowl
• 1984 Mustang Mania Theme Shirts

SMU-MUFA
• Cougar/SMU Band & Dwell Team Day
• Proper Hall of Fame Game

SOUTH FLORIDA
• Mustangs—1000 Priced @ $3

10,000 Mustang Mania
Pennants to give away

GIBRALTAR SAVINGS
LARGEST IN TEXAS

FOR INFORMATION
CALL (214) 692-2901

The Dallas Morning News, September 7, 1980
Don’t Miss The Action Shots Get The Olympus OM-1 for the game, September 13.

SMU
VS
North Texas State

For ticket information:
Please call (214) 692-2901

Ticket Locations:
SMU Athletic Ticket Office
All Metroplex Sears Stores
Preston Ticket Agency
Rainbow Ticket Center

All Metroplex Sanger Harris
and
All Metroplex Dillard's
Sun Rexall-Richardson

Game time: 7:30
Texas Stadium

SMU Mustangs

The OM-1 is so small and light you can just slip it right in your jacket pocket and the bright viewfinder makes it easy to focus on a Mike Ford touchdown play.

The Dallas Morning News, August 28, 1980
A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2 - research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.

Project Title: Journalism Historical Research

Primary Investigator: Charles Daniel Thomas II

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Michael Sweeney

Department: Journalism

Jo Ellen Sherow, MPA
Office of Research Compliance

Date 4-29-13

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.