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ODU football | 'Never thought it would be like this'

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Virginian-Pilot sports columnist
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NORFOLK

Steve Ballard was at the stadium that now bears his name more than 12 hours before Saturday's 6:07 p.m. kickoff. Antsy, was he? Couldn't sleep, what with Old Dominion's big football debut looming?

Not quite. Ballard had forgotten the flags. The orange flags that hang or flap, depending on the winds, from the tips of the goal posts at Foreman Field at S.B. Ballard Stadium.

The old ones installed six weeks ago were faded, and new bright ones were supposed to have been attached. Except Ballard, whose company oversaw the construction and renovation at the old building, still had the orange strips in his truck.

So at 5:30 in the morning, Ballard and a few of his guys pulled up, folded down the goalposts and added the finishing touch to ODU's stage, the stage that awakened later to the clamor of unrestrained joy.

Ballard related his morning sojourn from a good place, a prime tailgating spot roughly a first-down run from Gate C at Foreman Field at... well, you

know. ODU rewarded Ballard for kick-starting its effort to resuscitate a football program with a \$2.5 million donation a few years ago.

But if Ballard ever claims to have pictured the scene that unfolded Saturday night, Sonny Stallings, another ODU football mover and shaker, would smile and call Ballard a fibber.

"Anybody who says, 'I told ya so,' they didn't tell ya so," said Stallings, standing in the tunnel outside ODU's locker room. "I just had a policeman tell me there are 100,000 people down here. They're all over, every field, every yard, every lot, everywhere."

Stallings stopped and gazed into the packed stadium. "Look at that, a half-hour before kickoff. I'm not gonna lie to you, I never thought it would be like this."

I don't know, what could have gone better? I mean, I spied a urinal that wouldn't stop flushing; I guess that could've been an issue. And the stadium had dead spots that the PA system had trouble reaching. But the big things came through:

The weather was clear and warm. The new marching band was crisp and brassy. The pre-game parachutist toting the game ball hit his mark. The precisely chosen foil, tiny Chowan University, was compliant in ODU's 36-21 victory.

Big Blue the mascot even led the Monarchs' sprint onto the field without tripping over his floppy feet. The roar that the charge raised confirmed, for now, the wisdom of pursuing football through a couple of decades of stopping and starting.

Then again, so did - and perhaps even to a greater degree - a stroll around Kaufman Mall, at the center of ODU's campus, two hours before the game. The lawn party that percolated there personified the football-as-social-magnet theory that anchors every campaign at every school that wants the sport.

Football comes in lean and healthy years, but the tangible role its presence plays in a school's psyche

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is real. Mike Papa and Todd Hartung, frat buddies from the Class of '89, had barely been back on campus in 20 years.

But there they were - Papa in from Colorado Springs, Colo., Hartung from Fairfax - chucking a football back and forth on the green a few minutes before the Monarchs filed through the m all on their way to play.

"This is by far the biggest group we've had together since college," said Papa, who added that their cadre of 175 also gathered for a Friday night boat cruise. "It took football to bring us all back."

It was the day's prevailing thought; excited alums are alums more eager to stroke checks. Papa and Hartung couldn't even get tickets to the game. Instead they planned to make their way- gladly, they said - to a Hampton Boulevard bar to watch on TV with other reacquainted friends.

That willingness to revel in what ODU has wrought, any way they could, was another flag of success on a day loaded with them.

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