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With football debut, ODU athletics head into big time

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ODU's decade of growth

1999

Virginia Beach resident Theodore F. "Ted" Constant, a retired beer distributor, 1929 Maury High School graduate, and longtime ODU supporter, donates \$5 million for the construction of a new basketball arena on Old Dominion University's campus. Sports Illustrated selects ODU as one of the 20 best colleges for women's intercollegiate sports.

2000

August | Construction starts on the site of Ted Constant Convocation Center. The site is fenced off and workers drive 20 test pilings.

2002

October | The Ted Constant Convocation Center opens. The 8,424-seat facility is home to the school's men's and women's basketball teams and a venue for concerts and other events.

Nov. 22 | The Lady Monarchs play the first official basketball game at the Ted Constant Convocation Center, against the University of Virginia on a Friday.

Nov. 24 | The ODU men play their first game two days later against the University of North Carolina.

2003

Old Dominion opens the University Village Apartments, its first new housing complex in 20 years - a cluster of furnished two- and four-bedroom apartments behind the Ted Constant Convocation Center.

2004

March | NCAA Women's Mid-east Regional tournament is played at the Constant Center. The Shops at University Village, a 75-acre mixed-use development behind the convocation center, announces its first tenants - three restaurants. Those will join a university fitness center and a public safety office already open at the site.

2005

June | Old Dominion's Board of Visitors votes in favor of the school beginning football starting in 2009.

November | Old Dominion breaks ground for the newest addition to its University Village Development - a five-story, 100,000-square-foot research building. It is the first in a series planned for Innovation Research Park @ ODU.

2006

May | ODU officially announces football will return to the university in 2009.

2007

Construction of the soccer complex and soccer practice field is completed, as well as a renovation of the athletic administration building.

February | Bobby Wilder is introduced as the first football coach at ODU in 67 years. He had been the University of Maine's associate head coach and offensive coordinator.

August | ODU breaks ground on the Powhatan Sports Complex, which will house the new football team's practice quarters and be home to the field hockey and women's lacrosse programs.

September | The new Folkes-Stevens Indoor Tennis Center opens.

October | Ricky Nichols, a Maury defensive back, is the first player to commit to sign with the football team.

2008

January | Springhill Suites by Marriott opens on Hampton Boulevard, across from the campus. The Powhatan Sports Complex is completed.

2009

July | Foreman Field is renamed Foreman Field at S.B. Ballard Stadium.

- compiled by Maureen Watts, news researcher

By [Bob Molinaro](#)
The Virginian-Pilot
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It all seems to have happened so fast.

The excitement being generated around here for Old Dominion football is unprecedented, but in many ways, the speed at which ODU has reshaped its entire athletic image - and that of the school - is equally breathtaking.

Usain Bolt would be impressed with how fast ODU started moving once it got out of the blocks.

In 10 years flat, the physical landscape on both sides of Hampton Boulevard has become virtually unrecognizable to people who remember ODU as a dreary commuter college. With more undergrads taking advantage of expanded on-campus housing and recreational facilities, student spirit is at an all-time high as the long-awaited first football game approaches.

"A synergy of timing, of people and of purpose" - that's the explanation offered by ODU basketball coach Blaine Taylor for the school's rapid resurgence.

When he arrived eight years ago, Taylor was met by "bad facilities, a bad following, a bad sport. We didn't have enough money to market us. We were scrambling when I first got here."

In 2001, the last season for ODU at Scope, the average crowd for men's basketball was 3,029. The performance of Taylor's teams has improved since then - in the past five years, the Monarchs have won more games than any school in Virginia - and last season, ODU games averaged 6,048 fans at the Ted Constant Convocation Center.

But that's only a snapshot of ODU's growth. Financially, the athletic program is going places that at one time didn't seem possible.

Whereas 10 years ago, ODU's athletic endowment was \$2.4 million, it rose to as high as \$17.8 million after the school announced plans for football in 2006, before falling to \$13 million during the recession.

Contributions to the Big Blue Club are another indicator of ODU's vitality. In 1999, donations amounted to \$650,000. With four months still to go in 2009, this year's total already has reached \$1.9 million.

Mark Benson, who runs the athletic fund-raising arm of the Big Blue Club, attributes the increases to "the growing sense of pride among our alumni. People want to be associated with things that are moving in the right direction."

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That includes the city of Norfolk.

Mayor Paul Fraim, whose brother Ed was ODU's first full-time athletic fund-raiser, said he expects to attend at least six of the Monarchs' seven home football games.

"On a strictly economic level, having seven 20,000 crowds on a Saturday night means that a lot of people will spend the night; they'll shop here," he said.

"It's like seven large conventions coming to your city at a slow time of year. We'll see a significant tax-revenue boost."

Though football will bring out the big crowds, ODU has been moving quickly to improve conditions for

all its athletes, not just football players. The football training center at the back of campus also features plenty of space for the field hockey and women's lacrosse teams.

A penalty kick away, the men's and women's soccer teams moved into new locker rooms and offices next door to the spectacular indoor tennis center that opened in 2007. Wrestling got a new home, too, and the swimming pool is undergoing a face lift.

Every sport but baseball is housed in new or renovated facilities, and baseball will soon enjoy \$3 million worth of upgrades to its stadium.

Helping ODU cover the cost of its jazzed-up facilities are student fees, private gifts and advertising and ticket revenues. Money for construction was freed up when ODU paid off its bonds. Good economic times and a larger student population helped, too.

"Maybe," Taylor said with a laugh, "the stars were aligned in our favor."

Few could have anticipated the breadth of expansion or envisioned the school's transformation. One who did was former president James V. Koch. He proposed the Constant Center and the student village on the east side of Hampton Boulevard, ambitious projects that were followed by president Roseanne Runte's decision to green-light football.

Spending half a billion dollars on construction in the past five years, ODU has dramatically renovated academic buildings, built research facilities, opened a new rec center and addressed its reputation as a lifeless commuter school by providing dormitory space for 80 percent of its growing freshman class.

Impressive improvements. But what has opened more hearts and checkbooks is football.

"Football is bringing life to the campus that's just never been here before," director of athletics Jim Jarrett said.

Another snapshot of ODU's growing athletic image: In 2002, the school changed its logo, redesigning the lion mascot that appears on licensed products such as cups, hats, sweatshirts and notebooks. The year before the change, ODU merchandise was making a little more than \$700,000 annually. Six years later, and after the introduction of football, total revenues rose to \$2,250,000.

Football's economic impact is prominently illustrated by the end-zone suites and other bells and whistles that have turned Foreman Field at S.B. Ballard Stadium into a shiny monument to ODU's growing pride.

One day, perhaps, the stadium will surpass the Constant Center as the centerpiece of a reinvigorated campus.

But not yet.

When the Constant Center opened in October 2002, it changed perceptions of the school, not just athletics.

"First and foremost," current president John Broderick said, "it starts with that building." It's a structure, he added, that is "as significant a building as any, maybe, in the commonwealth of Virginia."

Broderick noted that while thousands of cars a day drive past ODU, "unless you were taking a class at Old Dominion, you never saw the campus."

The Constant Center, he said, "really began to open people's eyes to how the campus has been transformed over the years."

Before the arena was built, Benson would phone potential contributors countless times and never get a return call.

"When we built The Ted," he said, "that's the first time we started getting unsolicited calls."

The 8,424-seat multi-use arena is perfectly sized for ODU's basketball needs, but of the 130 events held there each year, only about 40 are associated with the school.

According to Bob Fenning, ODU's vice president of administration and finance, in 2005 the Constant Center was the highest grossing entertainment venue between 6,000 and 10,000 seats - in the world. It generates \$4 million in revenue a year for the city of Norfolk, but the intangibles for ODU are

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incalculable.

When thousands of Hampton Roads residents who otherwise never would step foot on ODU's campus flock to concerts at The Ted and are blown away by the design and comfort of the building, it can't do anything but enhance the school's image.

The Constant Center "set the standard," Jarrett said. "It allowed the university to show people the level of quality that exists throughout the school."

Now football is expected to take ODU to the next frontier.

"It puts us in lots of papers and in the electronic media every Sunday morning from September to November," Broderick said. "It affords us visibility in places where we recruit students. It positions us in a way that didn't exist without a football program.

"Football isn't a better sport than basketball, but because of the time of year, people will travel farther to return to campus for a football game. There's no downside to having alumni on campus."

For many undergrads on campus, football has changed student life.

Not long ago, ODU's most persistent student problem was apathy. Now students are camping out overnight to get in line for football tickets.

Recently, when a group called the "Monarch Maniacs" demanded its own tailgating area outside Foreman Field, Fenning was only too happy to comply.

"It's fun to be tasked with doing what students want you to do," he said, "because they're engaged at their university."

Because of football, more people - on and off campus - are engaged with what's taking place at ODU.

The school's reshaped, more robust, athletic image is the culmination of a decade of progress. But in some ways, it seems like ODU is just getting started.

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FOOTBALL'S IMPACT ON BASKETBALL

Submitted by [mainiia](#) on Sat, 09/05/2009 at 8:01 am.

Because the new football program is giving ODU so much needed visibility around the state and region, I wonder how long it will be before it has a noticeable effect on men's basketball recruiting and attendance. Are basketball season tickets already sold out?

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