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Beyond the burnt orange empire:

The struggles faced by Austin area professional sports teams

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**Beyond the burnt orange empire:
The struggles faced by Austin area professional sports teams**

by

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Report

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To the three guiding lights in my life:

my mother,

my father,

and my mentor

**Beyond the burnt orange empire:
The struggles faced by Austin area professional sports teams**

by

Richard C. White, M.A.

The University of Texas, 2010

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The University of Texas at Austin has the highest revenue producing college athletic department in the country and routinely contends for national championships in numerous sports. It brings in millions of fans and millions of dollars in profit from hundreds of sporting events each year. This has led the UT athletics program to dominate the Central Texas sports scene. However, there are several professional sports teams, including the Austin Aztex, Austin Toros, Austin Turfcats, Round Rock Express and Texas Stars, in the area. This report shows how these teams attempt to survive in a town where numerous professional sports teams have struggled and finally folded in the shadow of the University of Texas.

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Beyond the burnt orange empire:

The struggles faced by Austin area professional sports teams

The University of Texas athletic department might as well have been printing its own money. The crowd roared like never before. The sun set on another hot summer day and as far as the eye could see there was a rippling ocean of burnt orange-clad fans that boomed and bellowed the stands. It was early evening, Saturday, Sept. 5 and a then-record crowd of 101,096 filled Darrell K Royal – Texas Memorial Stadium to see the No. 2 nationally ranked Texas Longhorns kick off their 2009 football season.

Texas, the highest revenue producing college athletic department in the country, began what promised to be its most financially successful school year yet. In December 2009, Forbes magazine ranked UT football as the most valuable college athletic program in the nation with an estimated worth of \$119 million. The UT athletic department is one of only a few in college sports that routinely makes money as the Longhorns have generated around \$2 million in net profit each of the last several years.

Janice Todd, who holds a doctorate degree and teaches courses in sport management at the University of Texas, says that what the athletic department has done under the guidance of its athletics director, DeLoss Dodds, has put the Longhorns at the forefront of the collegiate sports scene.

“If you’re looking for a place where you wanted to take lessons on how to be successful in the business of college athletics you won’t find any place better suited to

learn those lessons than UT,” she said. “DeLoss Dodds has taken simple college sports and found ways to really turn them into an entrepreneurial masterpiece.”

The UT athletics program, unlike other parts of the university, does not depend on the administration for funding. The only role the administration has is to approve the athletic department’s budget. UT’s athletic budget for the 2009-10 school year is \$130 million, making it the largest such budget in the country.

Ed Goble, UT’s Associate Athletic Director for Business, handles the finances for the athletic department. Goble has been in his position for 13 years and has seen the department transform into the powerhouse it is today. He believes that those who question whether it makes sense for a college’s athletic department to spend that much on itself in just a year don’t understand that UT has no trouble turning that amount into a profit of around \$2 million each year.

“We’re really good at running our business,” Goble said. “I don’t mean to sound arrogant by saying that, but we’re an attractive property when it comes to sponsors, advertisers, marketing and vendor agreements. And it’s incredibly important for us to be a self-sustaining athletic department and not a drain or a burden on the administration and academics side.”

It is hard to imagine that any other sports team would even attempt to compete with the drawing power of UT athletics, but that’s exactly what several past and present professional teams have attempted in vain to do; carve out their own niche in this Longhorn-hungry market. Over time, nearly all have failed, but others have still tried.

On face value it seems absurd. A single college's athletic department has continually outdrawn, outsold and outdone the collective wits and power of nearly half a dozen current professional sports team in the Austin area.

If someone not familiar with college sports and the state of Texas were to visit Austin, they would likely be shocked to learn two things. Not only does Austin not have a single major league sports team, making it the largest city in the country without one, but the Austin Toros, a professional basketball team, the Austin Turfcats, a professional indoor football team, the Austin Aztex, a professional soccer team, and the Texas Stars, a professional hockey team, are here, as well, and yet they are all but forgotten or given little to no attention by the majority of the Austin area sports crowd.

"For these huge Division I powerhouse athletic programs, they are sort of their own entity," Todd said. "We don't have a professional sports team here in Austin, we have a little bit of minor league stuff, but really, here in Austin UT is the game."

Over the last several seasons, what cannot be denied is that the UT football team has produced the most revenue of any college football program in the nation. Just a few short years ago, the UT athletic department had a budget of \$93.1 million for the 2006-07 school year and generated \$105 million in revenue, \$63.8 million of which was earned by the football team. For the current 2009-10 school year with a \$130 million budget, Goble estimates the department made \$138 million, \$87 million of which came from football.

After taking into account the athletic department's costly expenses, which include constant facility maintenance and recent renovation processes in the hundreds of millions of dollars, the other hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue annually produced by the

department are reduced to around \$2 million a year in net profit for UT athletics. This is common for college athletics, especially the successful departments which make money, to have the departments' high level revenue nearly matched by their high level expenses.

UT athletics is already looking toward the future as Goble estimates the budget for the 2010-11 school year will be around \$136 million. Given UT's appearance in the football national championship game this season coupled with increased revenue in many areas including recent renovations to Royal – Memorial Stadium, the Longhorns' mantle as the nation's highest revenue grossing athletic department seems all but assured for years to come.

Football is not UT's only money-maker. While the numbers are still being tallied, Goble estimates the men's basketball team will gross \$14 million this year, while the baseball team usually makes a slight profit or a slight loss as it typically breaks even. UT athletics loses money in all its other 17 men's and women's sports, which is common for nearly all athletic departments in the country as most lose money or at best break even.

For the 2008-09 academic year, UT athletics suffered a loss of \$14.5 million on its 17 other men's and women's sports. And every year the athletic department gives back a portion of its revenue to the university. Since the 2006-07 school year, Goble said UT athletics has contributed a total of \$12.9 million to academics and could donate as much as \$6 million by the end of this academic year.

The Sept. 5 season opener represented more than just the start of another UT football season. It spoke volumes about the athletic department as a whole. On this day alone a record attendance had been set, millions of dollars had been made and a new

championship-contending run had begun. The Longhorn money-making machine was in full force once again to start off another profitable school year.

For Dodds, the man who built the college sports empire the Longhorns athletic department is today, this was just another perfect day that fit effortlessly into the master plan of wealth and success.

“The people are here, the wealth is here, the interest is here and the passion is here,” Dodds said. “We’ve put ourselves in the tops of the nation with programs, coaches and facilities. We’ve done what we’re supposed to do. We’re here to build it and that’s what we’ve done.”

The picture of passion the state of Texas and many UT fans throughout the Southwest and the country have for Longhorns sports is clear. Hundreds of thousands of fans each autumn jockey and often overpay for the chance to be a part of the now lucky 100,000 that fill Royal – Memorial Stadium. During the 2009 season crowds of no fewer than 101,003 people happily and willingly packed tight into a concentrated area only a few hundred yards wide for several hours, often in blistering heats of 90 to close to 100 degrees, week in and week out, to be a part of something special: a Texas Longhorns home football game.

The Longhorns athletic department benefits not only itself and the university through the millions of dollars it gives back, but it also financially benefits the city of Austin. The Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau projected that \$142.3 million was injected into the Austin economy during the seven Saturdays in the fall the Longhorns hosted a home football game in 2008.

Kyle Dalton, a lifelong Longhorns fan and Austin resident of over 25 years, has a deep understanding of the Austin sports scene. In May 2005 he created the Capital City Sports Report to provide coverage of all professional sports in Austin. Dalton's magazine could be found in 140 locations throughout Austin from hotels to the lobbies of various businesses. He stopped writing the Report in 2009 as the largely one-man operation became too much work for him, but he is still championing the cause for the voices of all Austin sports teams to be heard, not just the Longhorns.

"There are so many stories to be told about these pro teams," Dalton said. "There's more to do in Austin than just what's [happening on the UT campus] on the Forty Acres."

These small professional sports teams came to Austin, Texas for a reason: the people are here. And the people are here because of what the city offers. A September 2009 story by the Wall Street Journal ranked Austin as the fifth most desirable city in the country for young professionals. A November 2009 study by the Milken Institute, a global independent economic think tank, ranked Austin as the nation's "Best Performing City" for its ability to both create and sustain jobs better than any other U.S. city.

Austin was also selected as the No. 2 Best Big City in "Best Places to Live" by Money magazine in 2006 and No. 3 in 2009. Austin also fared well during the harsh economic downturn that began in 2008. In March Forbes ranked the greater Austin area in a tie with the greater Washington D.C. area as the number one city in the U.S. where the recession is easing the quickest. Austin has its world renowned live music scene and

booming tech industry to go with the state's seat of government and flagship university of over 50,000 students.

Austin is the 15th largest city in the country with over 757,000 people living within the city limits and over 1 million total people living within the greater Austin area. And without a Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, National Hockey League or National Football League team calling Austin home, for decades the smaller pro sports teams swarmed to the capitol of Texas to capitalize on the ever-growing market, but over time a grim pattern emerged as failure became the norm with one small pro sports team after another forced to close up shop in Austin. Not having a franchise from one of the four major league sports in town has been crucial to the immense historical and current success of UT athletics.

"We're very fortunate to be in this market that doesn't have any top level pro competition," Goble said. "So, we're kind of the only game in town, if you will."

In terms of fan preference, UT's several yearly national contending teams often take precedent over other entertainment options the smaller professional teams represent, most of which have been young upstarts that could never stabilize well enough to cement a foothold in the city. When it comes to Austin and Central Texas, it's clear to many that everything stops for one sport. It's a sport that defines not only UT athletics, but also serves as the face of the university and the state as a whole: the football team.

Peter Ullman, a four-year football letterman who played tight end for the Longhorns from their 2005 national championship winning season through 2008, grew up

in the Austin area and understands from first-hand experience the undying devotion and endless thirst for Longhorn dominance that embodies the Central Texas sports fan.

“As a kid in Austin, UT is your team. Your pro organization *is* the Longhorns and everything that they do,” Ullman said. “You don’t hear about anybody else. All the other teams that come up in Austin are under this huge shadow that they have to work around.”

“We’ve spoiled the people of Austin.”

The University of Louisiana at Monroe kicked off its 2009 season with a paycheck game in Austin. For years it has been commonplace for top tier college football programs to schedule their home opener against an opponent from an inferior conference, with the weaker team receiving a payment of several hundred thousand dollars. Texas senior quarterback and Heisman Trophy contender Colt McCoy had a stellar game, going 21-of-29 passing for 317 yards and two touchdowns. The contest was even more one-sided for UT than the 59-20 final score let on.

And the crowd loved it. The newest renovations to Royal - Memorial Stadium were in full affect. A major reason why the football team saw substantial spikes in revenue generated during the 2006 through 2009 seasons, from what had been \$63.8 million generated in 2006 grow to \$87 million in 2009, were direct results of more stadium seating. The 2009 season marked the completion of a massive multi-tier two-year renovation process to Royal – Memorial Stadium. The entire process, which particularly affected the north end zone, cost nearly \$200 million.

Originally constructed in 1924 to hold 27,000 fans steadily grew over time. What had been a capacity crowd of over 85,000 in 2007 became over 94,000 the next year before transforming to more than 100,000 for every home game in 2009 beginning with the Sept. 5 opener. That game set a then new record for the largest crowd ever to see a football game at any level, college or professional, in the state of Texas.

The seats were the key to the UT athletic department's continued success, because in the seats were dollars, millions and millions of dollars, ever-present every game day in the wallets and purses of every Longhorns fan that ventured through the gates of Royal – Memorial Stadium.

The athletic department's quest for power and wealth is something UT alum and Austin American-Statesman sports columnist Kirk Bohls has seen develop into a well-oiled machine since he first started covering UT athletics in 1975.

"I keep waiting for the day when they charge us admission to the press box, like a ticket price. It wouldn't surprise me," he said. "They want those money seats."

Just as the fans came out to fill the stadium and deliver their support for the Longhorns, so too did the football team deliver on its goal of reaching the national championship game, its first since winning it all in January 2006. The game would be in Pasadena, at the Rose Bowl, the site of UT's epic 2005 national championship victory over the USC Trojans.

The payout for simply reaching the 2010 BCS National Championship Game sat at \$18.3 million. That number, however, would be divided among the Big XII Conference with UT receiving the largest portion, nearly \$250,000. In the eyes of many,

UT's \$130 million athletic budget for the 2009-10 school year became easier to defend considering the Longhorns had now ascended to the national championship game.

This drive for department-wide perfection remained unspoken, but understood in the minds of every Longhorns coach and student-athlete as the end goal is always the same: win the national championship.

"It's a given. Nobody says it, nobody implies it, it's just there and it's an expectation that's not going to change," Dodds said. "We should always be fighting for championships in all our sports. We should be there towards the top all the time."

Shortly before the 2010 national championship game between the Texas Longhorns and Alabama Crimson Tide, Dodds and the UT System Board of Regents rewarded football coach Mack Brown for his steady hand by giving him a new contract. The new deal made Brown the richest college coach in the country and the highest paid public employee in the world with a pay raise that promised Brown would make at least \$5 million in each of the remaining years on his current contract, which lasts through 2016.

While Todd understands that UT athletics is merely approaching their business the same way many other premier athletic departments all around the country are, signing large checks to build new facilities, upgrade existing ones and retain multi-million dollar coaches, it's the big business environment itself that the academic in her would like to see change.

"It's an unfortunate reality that the way the entire American system has evolved at the Division I level that we have to have the kind of athletic program that we do if we're

going to be competitive,” she said. “As a philosopher, I might have wished for a different kind of program.”

Although Brown is now the highest paid college coach in the country, there are many who are not too far behind him. Brown is only one of half a dozen college coaches who is paid \$3.8 million or more a year. USC football coach Pete Carroll earns \$4.4 million a year while Florida football coach Urban Meyer earns \$4 million. Kentucky men’s basketball coach John Calipari is paid \$3.96 million annually while Alabama football coach Nick Saban and Oklahoma football coach Bob Stoops are currently receiving \$3.9 million and \$3.8 million a year, respectively.

Many would argue Brown has earned his new contract. In his 12 seasons at UT, Brown is 128-27 in 155 games, an 82.5 percent winning percentage.

“We’ve spoiled the people of Austin,” Ullman said. “People expect us to win every game. We’ve given all the UT fans these delicious treats and desserts every year for the last 10 years, and when they get a little scrap of an eggshell in it, they lose their minds about it.”

During the 2009 season Ullman sat in the stands for the first time since his playing days ended and what he witnessed in the ninth row from the field on the newly redesigned north end zone jolted him more than the handful of losses UT earned during his playing career.

“The culture in the stands is unbelievable. It’s something I’ve had to get used to,” he said. “It’s really shocking to hear fans talk about how they see the game and how one play that doesn’t go 50 yards is a major disappointment.”

Ullman believes the expectations that nearly all UT fans place on the football team are often unobtainable. Dodds, however, believes there's no middle ground. The pressure is either there or it isn't. And if it isn't, that means no one expects much of you. For the Longhorns, that's simply unacceptable.

“The worst possible scenario would be if there is no pressure,” Dodds said, believing that the football team in particular lives for and feeds off the pressure. “They love it, they love it.”

The fans care because of what UT athletics has created. The Longhorns have cultivated an atmosphere of success that appeals nationally to college sports fans everywhere, but most prevalently to the vast majority of Central Texas sports fans, who continuously show their support with their dollars. Todd knows that what ultimately determines UT's success is the fans, who have bought into what the Longhorns are selling, saying that the Austin area “bleeds orange.” UT athletics has reached the fans on a personal level as many people feel a sense of community to the athletic department.

“It [UT athletics] not only brings the campus together, but the community. That's another part of their impact,” Todd said. “If you look at the strength of their marketing and all the different ways they pitch tickets to people and interact with the community in various ways, it's very hard not to feel a connection to what goes on here.”

For the small professional sports teams that try to break in to the Longhorn-hungry Austin sports scene, Ullman knows they have their work cut out for them, because if passionate sports fans curse and scream for the teams that they care about, they

can show just as much territorial pride over anyone else who tries to move into their team's backyard.

"It is an uphill battle to take on the big dog in the Austin area," Ullman said.

"UT's got a pretty good corner on the market in Austin. What you feed people is what they want."

"Our goal is to break even."

For Alex Wolf, the Austin Aztex director of operations, the team's message to Central Texas is clear.

"If you want soccer, you come to us," he said.

And where they are exactly is not where most people would expect to find the headquarters for a professional sports team. Nestled between a Soccer USA store and an abandoned Albertsons in a quiet shopping district in North Austin is the small, unassuming front office headquarters for the Austin Aztex, the city's professional soccer team. Many would question how financially successful a small professional soccer team can be in Texas, where soccer is not the first, second or even third most popular spectator sport among the general public as it often trails behind football, baseball and basketball. Add in the behemoth that is the UT athletic department and Aztex owner Phil Rawlins understands that for many people the decision to bring a soccer team to Austin may sound odd.

"Is UT the 800-pound gorilla in the marketplace? Absolutely it is," he said. "But you don't have to change mindsets as much as you have to buy mindshare. Once we get

people out to a game and they see the excitement and the atmosphere in the stadium and the nonstop action of a professional soccer game, we win 90 percent of them over as fans.”

But the trouble is getting them there. The first-year Aztex, which play in the United Soccer League first division, would finish the 2009 season at 5-17-8, the second worst record among the division’s 11 teams.

Wolf admits this is not the way the team envisioned its inaugural season would play out, but given the wealth of inexperience on a team where there are 16 first-year professionals and the players’ average age is 23, many in the Aztex front office knew they had their work cut out for themselves.

“There’s a lot riding on these guys and most of them are unproven,” Wolf said. “It’s a learning curve of saying, ‘Hey, who’s got the talent and can use it on the field and who’s just a waste of time?’”

Rawlins, who lives in Austin and is one of the two directors of another soccer club in England, the Stoke City FC of the English Premier League, created the Aztex as an affiliate club for Stoke City. The Aztex primary objective is to recognize young talent and sign the players, often straight out of college, and then groom them and develop their skills for a few seasons in Austin before selling them off.

USL teams have a \$1.5 million minimum operating budget a year. The Aztex spent \$1.9 million in 2009, which the front office expected from the start likely wouldn’t yield a profit, but would serve as an investment in the Austin area.

“We anticipated a loss for the first few years,” Rawlins said. “It will take three or four years before we could get to a break-even position and then the idea is to run the club at break-even or as close to it as we can.”

If the Aztex budget remains steady at nearly \$2 million a season for the next four to five seasons, the team will have spent and lost roughly \$10 million before it anticipates breaking even and then eventually making a profit. For Rawlins, that’s quite all right.

“We most definitely made a loss this past year,” Rawlins said. “Anybody who thinks I and the other investors got into this to make a profit is sadly mistaken. This is a labor of love and I do it not to make money, but because it’s my passion.”

Rawlins’ philosophy is echoed by others in the organization because everyone in the front office fully understands that they’re in this for the long haul since things will continue to get harder for the Aztex in Austin before they can finally get better.

“Our goal is to break even,” Wolf said. “We really need to focus on just breaking even in these first few seasons. Overall I think we did the best we could in this first season.”

The team played its home games this first season at Reagan High School’s Nelson Field. Although Nelson Field has the capacity to hold 8,800 fans, the Aztex closed off an entire half side of the stands to make it more intimate for the few thousand Aztex fans who showed up. The Aztex averaged between 3,000 and 3,500 fans per home game, something many in the front office consider a success given the struggling nature of a first-year soccer franchise deep in the heart of football country.

Hugh Bender, one of several minority owners of the Aztex who also serves as the team's fan coordinator, admits it's been hard attracting fans this first year and is thankful for the few thousand that have already embraced the team.

"There are a lot of people who don't know about the Aztex," he said. "Part of it is there had been other teams in the past and some of them were pretty bad and then with a number of false starts in this town with other pro and semi-pro teams, there's a lot of fan skepticism."

One Aztex fan in particular is doing everything he can to lead the charge to spread awareness and interest in the Aztex. Matt Gray, who by day works for Dell, is the founder of Chantico's Army, the first and largest Aztex supporters group with a Web site and over 50 registered members. Gray named the group after Chantico, the goddess of fire in Aztec mythology. For each home game the group met at the top of the Nelson Field bleachers near Section A, known fondly within the group as La Villa Azteca.

"With soccer supporters you see a sort of tribal structure," Gray said.

The scene was on full display Monday, Sept. 7. It was two days after the Longhorns football team started its new season while the Aztex prepared for their final bow with one last home game of the 2009 season.

A cacophony of raucous sound erupts from dozens of slender plastic sports horns and drums of all types, colliding in a booming symphony of hometown pride. Flags are waved as big kettle drums, small hand drums and makeshift drums made out of Home Depot tubs are banged and clanged as the sparse crowd of a few thousand sounds like tens of thousands more.

“O-lay, olay olay olay, Au-stin Az-tex,” they shout.

La Villa Azteca drowns out the public address announcer, his booming voice merely a slight whisper barely audible through the crowd. Rolls of toilet paper flew everywhere throughout the game, mixing with handfuls of homemade confetti, gliding through the air. The confetti had been made from hundreds of shredded UT football pocket schedules, their pieces littering the ground after the game.

It speaks volumes about the underlying battle between UT athletics and every startup professional team trying to make it in Austin.

“I still have people that I wear an Aztex shirt around see it and are absolutely amazed to hear that Austin has a professional soccer team,” Gray said. “Anybody who says that UT athletics does not have, not just a dominant hold, but a stranglehold on athletics in Central Texas is delusional. The Aztex and the supporters group are realistic enough to know what we’re up against.”

While there’s no shortage of reasons why Austin is an appealing location, Wolf believes that startup teams need to realize what they’re getting themselves into before they drop anchor in Central Texas.

“UT is the professional team in town and it’s so ingrained into people’s psyche in society here that you have to work around it. To not do so would be bad business,” Wolf said. “I don’t think they [UT] are the final say on what succeeds and what doesn’t, but if they’re on your side that can definitely help you out.”

While the Aztex endured a rough first season, the team did catch some breaks in many areas. Wolf believes that because the Aztex are a soccer team, they are seen as

harmless and unthreatening to UT's overall goals as the Aztex have successfully had past partnerships with UT athletics. However, the Aztex presence in Austin has not been without some concessions to UT athletics. A professional team having to kowtow to a college team is something Wolf sees as absurd.

“That’s not really high on UT’s radar, to be the authority in soccer, so that really helps us out. When you start cutting more into their piece of the pie, that’s when they get more reserved,” he said. “The only thing we need to be cautious about is when UT puts on a sporting event like football and we just need to avoid those times because that can definitely affect our attendance. In reality, it’s ridiculous; we shouldn’t have to do that.”

The Aztex have had to accommodate not only UT football, but also high school football because the team had to schedule its home season around the days and times when the field was used by the incumbent home high school team. Many in the organization including Wolf and Rawlins believe the team will be seen as more of a pro team once they have a real home field and are not just using a high school field they have to section off half the stands for to meet their needs.

Towards the end of the season the team reached an agreement with the Austin Independent School District to use House Park, which will serve as the team’s new home beginning with the Aztex first home game of the 2010 season in April. With its central location to many restaurants, bars and other entertainment options downtown, House Park is seen by many, including Gray, Rawlins and Wolf, as a significant upgrade to Nelson Field. The team hopes this new venue will help solidify them as a legitimate entertainment option in the minds of local sports fans.

While the Aztex are losing money and struggling to put a competitive product on the field, an area the team has excelled the most in is the one area that's arguably the most important: its community relations.

The Austin area fans the Aztex have managed to reach have stuck with them because of the team's open door policy. Gray and his supporters group have a great relationship with Rawlins and others in the front office as Gray has gotten to know Rawlins personally. He even has Rawlins' cell phone number and often stops by the Aztex office to chat with him at length about the team. Rawlins cares deeply for not only his sport and his team, but also for all of his team's fans as he could often be seen this first season casually drinking with Gray and others at Cuatros near the UT campus, the supporters group's official postgame watering hole.

This open door policy that begins with Rawlins extends far beyond the owner's accessibility to the fans. Gray has enjoyed getting to know the players and their families on a personal level as fans are encouraged to meet and greet players on the field after every home game for autographs and small talk. While many would consider it unusual and surprising for a millionaire owner of a professional sports team to make himself as available to the fans as deeply as Rawlins has, he himself sees it as his duty to the loyal legions of soccer fans.

"Soccer is the sport of the people. It's the working man's ballet," he said. "It's a game that is owned by the people."

For the Aztex exemplary efforts, the organization won the Austin Chamber of Commerce Community Relations Award in the small business category in 2009. It's an

award Rawlins is humbled by because he believes it shows that even though the first-year soccer team is struggling on the field, there is indeed a place for the Aztex in Austin.

“It showed just the way the Austin public has taken to our club,” he said.

For Gray and many other international sports fans, the Aztex fill a void. Beyond the natural growing pains of a first-year franchise, Gray smiles as he realizes what the Aztex represent in the grand scheme of the Austin sports scene.

“It’s about pain and agony, it’s about seeing a team both crumble in front of your eyes, but also pull themselves up and pull off an impossible upset,” Gray said. “At the end of the day, is there professional soccer in Austin? Yes. Nothing else matters.”

“It’s a little more difficult than we thought.”

Arguably no team in the area has more to lose or more to gain from UT’s sports stranglehold than the Austin Turfcats. The Turfcats represent something of an eternal experiment in Austin as they are the fourth indoor football team to try and not just thrive, but merely survive in the capitol city of Texas. The previous three teams were the Indoor Professional Football League’s Texas Terminators in 1999, the National Indoor Football League’s Austin Knights and later renamed Austin Rockers from 2002–2003, and most recently the Arena Football League’s Austin Wranglers from 2004–2008. Like a few of the teams before them, the Turfcats play their home games in Luedecke Arena at the Travis County Exposition Center.

Chris Duliban, the Turfcats head coach who played football for UT from 1981-1985, has also been a part of the coaching staffs for all three of the previous Austin professional football teams that quickly sprouted and then dissolved.

“There were three other professional indoor football teams that have strived to do what we’re doing and have failed,” he said. “The Austin crowd is a very tough crowd in that we’re having to build back their trust and create quality entertainment for them. That’s been the real challenge.”

The graveyard list of Austin’s gone and forgotten professional indoor football teams presents an interesting case. It stands to reason that for a city where the majority of sports fans live and breathe Longhorns football, bringing a professional football team to town to play during the Longhorns’ offseason makes perfect sense, but for a number of reasons the formula failed time and again. Duliban though believes the formula is just fine and will prove beneficial for the Turfcats as they begin to solidify their fan base in the seasons to come.

“That’s the beauty of this sport. It fills a void,” Duliban said. “We feel like we’re the perfect complement to the rabid Austin fans who love football.”

While it remains to be seen if the team can break the cycle and survive in Austin, the Turfcats did, however, christen their 2009 inaugural season with a wealth of success. The Turfcats were a charter member of the also first-year Southern Indoor Football League, posting a 10-3 record in their team’s opening season on their way to losing to the Louisiana Swashbucklers in the league’s inaugural championship game. Looking for

more challenging fare, the Turfcats voluntarily left the SIFL during the 2009 offseason to join the more competitive Indoor Football League for the 2010 season.

While the success on the field came easy in their first season, the true test of the Turfcats' longevity rests with their ability to continue to win while also drawing fans and sponsors, something General Manager Joe Martinez is finding is not so easy in an Austin market that's been burned three previous times by indoor football teams.

"It [drawing fans and sponsors] is a little more difficult than we thought," Martinez said. "It's coming along very slowly."

While the team believes the fans will come in time through awareness and on-field success, the sponsors represent a different matter entirely. Martinez admits it has been tough attracting sponsors because many of them have taken a cautious wait-and-see approach with the Turfcats since they're not fully convinced yet that the Turfcats are here to stay. Martinez is confident it is merely a matter of time before the Turfcats win over not just the great masses of Austin area sports fans but also the sponsors as well. Specifically Martinez sees the team's hiring of Duliban as proof the organization knows what it is doing.

Duliban is more than just a seasoned indoor football coach of 11 years. When his college days playing football at UT were over, he was drafted by the Dallas Cowboys in 1986. After he played only one season in the NFL, for Dallas in 1987 under the legendary Cowboys coach Tom Landry, Duliban lived in Canada for a bit, but finally came back to Austin and began working for the various incarnations of indoor football that came and went from the city's sights.

Duliban gives the Turfcats a unique perspective many of the other startup sports teams lack: a local one. While many who are a part of the current crop of small professional teams trying to make it in the Austin sports scene see the Longhorns as the mighty incumbent of the market, Duliban looks upon the university, his alma mater, with love and reverence.

“It was the greatest opportunity of my life,” he said. “It really has formed my entire life; the coaching I got from UT and the education that I got from UT.”

Duliban remembers that only a few hundred fans attended the Turfcats first ever game in mid-April 2009. He believes that when it comes to attracting fans, most often it’s as simple as familiarizing a large region of Austin area football fans to the different but just as thrilling nature of indoor football.

Rather than the traditional 11 players for each team that play at a time in college football and in the NFL, indoor football uses fewer players. In the IFL, each team puts eight players out on the field, which is also drastically different as the field stretches only 50 yards long by 28 yards wide and is ringed with pads, making it impossible to step out of bounds. This lends each game to several moments of bone-crushing hits as the fans are right on top of the action. The immediate proximity of the stands to the field and the constant action and high scoring games are what draw most fans to the sport of indoor football.

“You’re basically in a football field coffin with no way of getting out,” Duliban said.

The Turfcats players themselves are an eclectic bunch, made up of individuals who played for prominent Division I college programs to players who never made it past high school football. Duliban said that unlike many indoor football teams that ship players in from all over the country, the Turfcats rely heavily on local talent. Given the size of the greater Austin area, the Turfcats have yet to have a problem fielding a team each year for their annual winter tryouts. During the offseason the team hosts several open tryouts, with usually 50 to 100 aspiring players attending each one.

The competition is fierce since the team only takes 45 guys to their late-winter training camp in mid-February. From there the coaching staff cuts down the team to a 30-man roster, only 21 of which can suit up in uniform and play in a game. In stark contrast to most of the small professional sports teams in the area, the nature of indoor football does not provide enough income for most of the players to live on. Nearly every Turfcats player has a regular 9 to 5 job in the Austin area. Playing for the Turfcats is their side job to which they set aside the time three evenings a week to practice with their teammates before they play on the weekends.

While they are professional athletes, the pay is not anywhere near on par with what most fans would imagine a professional football player would make. Each player on the roster receives \$200 a game as well as a \$25 bonus if the team wins. While the Turfcats dominated the SIFL in 2009, Duliban and the players knew things would not be as easy in the more competitive Indoor Football League, which boasts 24 teams compared to the eight total teams the SIFL had in 2009.

The Turfcats felt the effects of their league change immediately as they got exactly what they wanted in their second season: tougher competition.

Through their first six games of the 2010 season, the Turfcats are 2-4, which puts them last place in the four-team Lonestar East Division. The team's first two losses were by 15 and 51 points, while the team suffered tougher heartache by coming up short by 2 and 3 points in their last two losses. The Turfcats can still make the playoffs as six of their remaining eight games are against division opponents.

In a continued effort to win over the Austin sports fan, the Turfcats have also made it a point to be deeply involved in the Central Texas community. The team has created many community out-reach programs as well as involving themselves with several charity events and reading programs in local Austin schools. And just like the Aztex, the Turfcats are the only other professional team in the area that allows the fans onto the field after each home game to take photos and ask for autographs from the players and cheerleaders.

“We have a passion to make this thing work when people have said we're not going to make it in Austin,” Martinez said. “It's a matter of who's more personal to the fans. Who are the fans going to remember? That's going to tell the story of who lasts and who doesn't.”

Martinez and Duliban both cite the organization's business model as the major reason why the Turfcats will fare better than the three previous indoor teams that have failed in Austin. If the team succeeds it will be because they have gained the public's trust by implementing their two-point plan of involving themselves in the community and

putting a winning team on the field by attracting the best football players Austin has to offer. It's something Duliban knows won't be easy, but if achieved, will be worth the reward.

"There's always pressure. Nothing good happens easily. It takes sweat, it takes blood, it takes great effort," Duliban said. "After all, as [legendary Dallas Cowboys] Coach [Tom] Landry used to say, 'You can't soar with the eagles if you're sitting with the turkeys.'"

“Adult Censored Material”

The violence is everywhere. The wail of police sirens over the speakers, the flashes of red that streak across the video boards, the sudden collisions on the ice, the ensuing fights between the players, the rattling glass, the supportive cheers from the gallery of fans to the thunderous pounding of feet throughout the arena, it's all meant to overload the senses. The rush. That's what the Texas Stars are after.

For Austin area sports fans who feel they are missing out when UT football isn't in season and aren't getting their fix of adrenaline and sports related intensity, Stars General Manager Scott White says come to a hockey game at the Cedar Park Center.

"It's all about finding the right niche of people to fill the seats in your stadium," he said. "Physical play is just part of the culture of Texas and the fan. What a good mix for us, in my opinion."

In their inaugural season, the Stars have found ways to market the violence of their games to the fans long before they even step foot into the impressive new Cedar Park Center. From their commercials, the message is clear.

A voice speaks to the viewer.

“Experience the action, the emotion, the honor.”

When word “honor” is mentioned, several clips of hockey players fighting are shown. Their gloves are off as they’re hitting each other in the face with clenched fists. At the end of the advertisement, the sponsor is shown. It’s State Farm and the commercial is promoting the State Farm Family Four Pack.

The Stars’ plan to market the allure and promise of violence works. The Nov. 11, 2009 game against Manitoba represents the first Stars game for Round Rock residents Robyn Thorn and her husband Casey, who hoop and holler as loud as the rest of the crowd during the outbreak of fights that plague the opening period. There are three separate fights in the first two minutes and 13 seconds of the game. It proved indicative of the organization’s focus as there had rarely been a moment that went by where fans weren’t reminded of why they came to the Cedar Park Center.

“You know, it’s ridiculous that we cheer on violence,” Robyn said, “and the refs just stand back and watch, but I guess that’s what the game’s about.”

Casey, who loves watching Ultimate Fighting Championship matches on TV and has his digital video recorder at home recording a match he was missing by being at the game, was naturally attracted to the Stars and the violence they were promoting.

“This is one of the few opportunities to see a fight live,” he said. “It’s an integral part of the game. I don’t see it ever going away.”

The night started rough for Casey who missed the first several fights of the game while visiting the concession stands.

“I felt so bad,” Robyn said. “He had gone to get a drink and he missed all of them.”

Luckily for Robyn and her husband, the violence didn’t end there. The hockey term penalty kill was highlighted and shadowed in a bruising black and blood red color and flashed throughout the video ribbon that divided levels of seats and stretched around the Cedar Park Center stands whenever a penalty kill was in play, particularly emphasizing the word “kill.”

Later Casey got up for a moment to go to the restroom and when he returned his wife assured him, “You didn’t miss a fight.”

He smiled and replied, “Good.”

The Thorns were hooked. Before the first period had ended, they had already planned to come to more Stars games in the future.

What the Thorns enjoyed just as much as the atmosphere of the game was the arena itself. The dazzling new Cedar Park Center may have dozens of luxury suites, large video boards and other first class amenities, but it is not without a price. Much of the Center’s \$55 million price tag has yet to be paid off. Of the \$55 million, the Stars paid for \$12 million while the city of Cedar Park, which is just north of Austin and is part of the

greater Austin area, paid the remaining \$43 million and as a result officially owns the arena.

In their first season the Stars are averaging over 4,500 fans a game, which White said puts them middle of the pack for American Hockey League attendance, which he believes is respectable but not great. The arena, however, is used for far more than just Stars games as the city of Cedar Park hopes to use the facility for concerts, expos and conventions for many decades to come. The facility holds 6,800 fans for hockey games but can hold up to 8,500 people for concerts and other special events. For Central Texas citizens like Casey Thorn, the possibilities of what the new arena could bring are enticing, but in the end the allure of the Longhorns is still stronger.

“For other events, this is a nice convenience,” he said, “but you’re still going to see the Longhorns. You’re still going to go down there [to UT games].”

To the delight of the fans, the Stars made sure the thrills continued. More violence-related fare included a “Get Loud” sign on the main video board with a police siren shown, accompanied by the flashing lights and the sound of the siren wailing. The intense nature of the Stars marketing continued into even traditionally harmless sports promotions such as the kiss cam, which gratuitously flashed a black bar that read “Adult Censored Material” that quickly covered up the fans’ kissing, insinuating that more personal and adult-oriented situations were about to take place among the two fans kissing in the stands.

Just in case there were any children that felt left out of the adult-themed violence fest of sights and sounds, the Stars video board even promoted the in-movie fight

between the endearing space ranger Buzz Lightyear and the cowboy pull-string doll Woody from the popular children's movie Toy Story.

During the second intermission, chosen fans from the stands came down to the ice and suited up in inflatable sumo wrestler suits as the announcer bellowed to the crowd.

“All right, fans, it's time for some fun. Time to laugh at someone else's paaaaaaiiiiiin!”

The fans then commenced to knock each other around before one fan was eventually dubbed the victor. In between all this, a hockey game was played, with the Stars beating the Moose 3-1 in a two and a half hour game. The Stars stance, however, is that the atmosphere in the Cedar Park Center is perfectly normal for what they're trying to promote.

“People need to come in and have a good experience,” said Stars President Rick McLaughlin. “People are looking for good quality family entertainment.”

Despite Texas having two NFL teams, three NBA teams and two MLB teams to only one NHL team, McLaughlin, who only recently moved to Central Texas in 2008, disagrees with the long-held popular opinion that Texas is dominated with football loving fans followed by baseball and basketball fans with hockey traditionally seen as the fourth or even fifth most popular sport in the state.

McLaughlin believes Central Texas is overflowing with hockey fans and even went so far as to say that as a whole the entire state of Texas is extremely receptive to hockey. McLaughlin supports this belief by reminding people that there are AHL minor league hockey teams in not just the Austin area, but also Houston and San Antonio. What

McLaughlin didn't mention is that Texas also has over half a dozen minor league baseball and basketball teams of its own to go with its seven MLB, NFL and NBA teams for a total of over a dozen professional non-hockey teams compared to the NHL's one team in Texas and just three AHL teams.

McLaughlin also took a critical view of the Longhorns and anyone who doubts their drawing power.

"I don't think there's some magic wand you can wave whether it's money or effort to just say, 'Ok, everybody, stop thinking about Longhorn sports, because we're here, too,'" he said. "It's naïve for people to think that UT is not a professional program. The only difference between them and an NFL team is that UT doesn't pay its players."

Even though he believes Central Texas has been incredibly receptive to hockey, and believes the state as a whole has a deep love for hockey, McLaughlin does concede that the Stars purposely plan their home games around the Longhorns home football schedule. He freely admits that the Stars can't compete for the Austin fans on Saturdays in the fall.

"That's not a fight we're ever going to win," he said, "and we know that."

McLaughlin also took an unusual position in stating that he did not believe the safety net of having a parent NHL team watch over and support the club was a necessity for the Texas Stars. While he did say he believed the Texas Stars' affiliation with the Dallas Stars serves a purpose and is important from the angle of the Texas Stars operating as a feeder team to the Dallas Stars, McLaughlin didn't believe that a connection with an

NHL team could make or break a minor league hockey team. And even though he is the Stars president, he admitted he didn't know the team's payroll.

There is a significant amount of confusion within the organization as to not only which fans the Stars are going after, be it the family type they say they want or the violence-loving fans they are actually going after and do attract, but the Stars front office also openly disagrees with how receptive the Austin market is to hockey. White disagrees with McLaughlin's belief that Texas is hockey crazy and calls Austin a "nontraditional market" for hockey so much so that the way to get people to come to games is that "you have to drag those fans in."

White's belief, unlike McLaughlin's, is supported by recent historical facts. The Austin market has been tough on hockey in the past as another professional hockey team, the now-defunct Austin Ice Bats, folded in 2008 largely due to a lack of fan support.

The difference in operational approach between two of the most powerful members of the Texas Stars front office continues to deepen. White also disagrees with McLaughlin in other areas, citing the Texas Stars' ties to their parent company, the Dallas Stars, as a "huge" key to them surviving in the Austin area.

"There's no doubt we have to use that Dallas Stars brand to piggyback on," White said. "We're very blessed to be connected to the Dallas Stars."

Unlike other smaller startup Austin area teams like the Aztex, Turfcats and others, White admits that the Stars aren't very involved in their local community and don't have a lot of community outreach programs going on, but does plan to include some in the future.

“We’re a little slow in my opinion on getting going in that area,” he said.

As for the violence, White says it’s seen in all major sports, not just hockey. For hockey fans in Texas, White says they know what they want, so the Stars give them just that.

“Texas hockey fans love physical play,” he said. “Fans are just as excited with a huge hit as they are with a fight that occurs, which are allowed in hockey.”

White believes the fights regulate the game and actually keep it safer in the bigger picture as the element of fighting policies the game and is “a tool that is needed and shouldn’t go anywhere.”

White draws the line at the word “violence.” He believes the Texas Stars are marketing not the violence but “the intensity of the game” to the fans.

For people who say the sport of hockey is too violent and that the Stars market the violence through a number of ways, most egregiously perhaps through a sponsored clip each night called “The Jani-King Hit of the Game” in which the most brutal collision is replayed several times to the encouragement of the cheering fans, White has only one thing to say.

“They can kiss my ass, to be honest,” he said.

The more he thinks about it, the more certain he is that some people just don’t understand what it is that the Stars are trying to do.

“Geez, get over it. That’s what I got to say about it,” he said. “The ‘Hit of the Game’ is the ‘Hit of the Game.’ We’re all about sponsorship and marketing opportunities.”

“If we were really interested in making money, we wouldn’t have a team in Austin.”

The Austin Toros don’t need your money. They don’t need your support. They don’t need or care if you don’t buy their tickets or merchandise. They won’t mind if Austin area sports fans do choose to attend their games, but that’s not what they are after.

The Toros are unlike any professional team the Austin sports scene has ever seen, because for them it’s not about generating profit or fan support or even trying to win games. For the Toros, a member of the NBA Development League, it’s all about strictly providing a pipeline of talented young players to their parent team, the NBA’s San Antonio Spurs.

This radical approach took hold of the Toros organization three years ago when the Spurs bought the team. The Toros play in the Austin Convention Center and recently finished the 2009-10 season, their fifth season in Austin, with a third consecutive playoff run, losing to the Rio Grande Valley Vipers in the league semifinals. The Toros front office understands if not many people in the Central Texas area are aware that there has been a professional basketball team in the middle of downtown Austin for the last five years.

“We have different agendas [from the other professional teams],” Toros General Manager Dell Demps said. “The old owners [of the Toros], they were trying to win games, sell tickets and make a profit, whereas we’re trying to develop players.”

Demps said the Spurs will understand if the Toros fail to draw fans and fail to make a profit because as long as they are developing top level players the Spurs will see the Toros as a successful branch of their organization.

“Our main focus is not to make money. If we don’t get anyone in the stands, we’re not going to consider it unsuccessful,” Demps said. “The success we’re measuring is if we’re able to develop players who can contribute to the Spurs.”

Demps’ vision of an empty arena was in full force during the March 31 home game between the Toros and the Tulsa 66ers. Despite the Toros’ philosophy of not needing to win games, the 2009-10 squad proved quite dominant. The Toros entered the third to last home game before the playoffs boasting the second best mark in the NBA Development League’s West Conference at 31-16.

However, even though there was an announced attendance of 1,562 fans, that number was inflated. Like nearly all professional sports teams the Toros announce the number of tickets sold as their official attendance rather than the number of actual fans that pass through the gates the day of the game. There were fewer than 500 actual fans in attendance at the March 31 game to see the playoff-bound Toros.

Roker Adell, attending the game with the pastor from his church and his sister-in-laws two grandchildren, was one of the few hundred fans in the stands. Adell, who has lived in Manor the last five years, was attending his first-ever Toros game after receiving the free tickets as a gift from one of his wife’s clients. He enjoyed the game but was shocked to see so many empty seats in the Austin Convention Center since so few fans came out in support of a team that was making the playoffs for the third straight year.

“You would think for a city this size there would be a few more people here,” Adell said. “It makes you wonder is there a marketing issue, or do people just not think that there’s much going on with the Development League.”

Just as the Texas Stars president and general manager seem to disagree as to their organization’s various goals, so too do the Toros as their top brass is also conflicted regarding their purpose as a professional sports team in Austin.

Unlike Demps, Toros Chief Operating Officer Peter Lubell cares deeply if the team attracts fans.

“Without the fan base you can’t really pay the bills,” Lubell said. “Our goal always is to sell out our venue and create a demand around our tickets which would be any team’s goal.”

The portion of the massive Austin Convention Center that the Toros use for their home games has the capacity to hold 2,500 fans, but the Toros said they average only 1,800 fans per game this season, a number which Demps and Lubell both said is down from previous seasons.

For Demps, however, the team spending more money to attract even a few hundred more fans simply isn’t a smart business plan.

“If you go and spend too much money on marketing for 700 more people, I don’t know if it’s worth it,” Demps said. “As a whole, our success isn’t based on dollars. If we were really interested in making money, we wouldn’t have a team in Austin.”

The sparse crowd at the March 31 game appeared lackluster. Numerous times throughout the game the Toros announcer had to rally the often times subdued crowd to

cheer and make noise for the Toros. Whenever the 66ers were on the foul line, the announcer did his best to drum up and increase the minimal level of support the few hundred fans were showing.

“All right Toros fans, let them hear ya,” he said enthusiastically and often.

The announcer’s chants of “De-fense! De-fense!” echoed through the building whenever the 66ers had the ball. A few scattered cheers arose in support, but quickly died down. The squeak of the players’ sneakers on the hardwood and the loud public address system, and not the fans, were the loudest and most audible sounds in the Austin Convention Center this evening.

For their efforts, the Toros, however, did their best to keep the fans engaged. At the start of the game the announcer welcomed the fans to the building.

“We’d like to thank you, the fans, for your support and loyalty. You are a part of the Austin Toros family.”

About a dozen young children under the age of 10 dressed sharply in their red uniform collared shirts representing the Riverbend Church Choir stood at mid-court and sang the national anthem before tipoff. The Toros also gave away free programs at the door and had numerous in-game promotions and fun fan-oriented events targeted to keeping the fans involved.

Lubell believes the team has done as well as they could given the market forces working against them. He said “monopoly” is the perfect word to describe UT’s hold over the Central Texas sports scene.

“Every team that comes into the Austin market understands what they’re up against,” he said, “because Austin is built around UT. The jobs, the economy, everything is centered around the pulse of the university.”

While UT, win or lose, never has any trouble drawing fans, Lubell believes there’s a reason why so many past and present Austin area teams have struggled to survive in what should be a profitable market full of hungry sports fans.

“I do hear quite a bit about the number of teams that have come and gone,” he said. “The number one reason why the minor league teams take a backseat to UT is because they can’t compete with the same dollars. I think we all accept and realize it, because in some ways that’s good for the Austin market.”

Unlike the other Austin area pro teams, the Toros are the only team that isn’t looking to tap into the wealth of sports fans the UT fan base represents. If Central Texas sports fans, particularly UT fans, choose or don’t choose to attend a Toros game, it doesn’t matter to Demps, who is also content with letting local fans just go to the Longhorns basketball games they already enjoy.

“We’re not trying to get the UT students or fans,” he said. “If you like basketball, maybe you can come to both, but again, that’s not why we’re here.”

Even as the Toros end their fifth season in Austin with their third straight playoff run, Lubell continues to come across a large portion of local sports fans who first learn about the Toros through him.

“The first thing out of most newscasters’ mouths has to do with how UT did in the game the night before,” he said. “There have been a lot of times where I come upon people who say to me, ‘I didn’t realize Austin even had a basketball team.’”

Just as the Stars General Manager Scott White believes his team would have a tough time existing without the support of their parent NHL team, the Dallas Stars, Lubell likewise cites the Toros connection with their parent NBA team, the Spurs, as the main reason why they have lasted as long in the Austin market as they have.

“I do think that having the Spurs as our parent company adds to our credibility,” he said. “It would be difficult to operate without them.”

When the Spurs purchased the Toros after their second season in Austin, the Toros were coming off back-to-back losing seasons and may not have lasted much longer in Austin. After they became a feeder team to the Spurs, the Toros would advance to make deep runs in the D-League playoffs every year, reaching the league finals in their first year under new management in 2008 followed by consecutive appearances in the semifinals last year and this year.

For Lubell, a Development League championship would be a beautiful thing.

“I would love to see us win the championship, no doubt,” he said.

For Demps, however, his approach to building the team is not about generating profit or wins, only the development of players.

“We look at it like research and development,” he said. “We bought the team and did what we wanted to do and run it like a minor league team that feeds to the pro team. It’s not about wins and losses that determine our success, it’s about the players.”

Demps said much like how a college football team's recruiting class can take years before the players make an impact, the Toros success will be measured in the years to come for how well they develop the young players they have now into NBA-ready stars of the future.

While some may question Demps' approach to running the team, he said many of the business practices he employs are not that unusual given the nature of the NBA Development League.

"Each team has different objectives. The LA team doesn't even sell seats; they aren't even open to the public. They could care less about marketing," he said. "The only way you can go to their game is if you get tickets for a Lakers game and they play them like a JV game before the Laker game."

The two most powerful men in the Toros organization, the Chief Operating Officer Lubell and General Manager Demps have drastically different views for the team heading into the future.

"I'd like to see us build our brand to the point where we become as much of a household name [in the Austin area] as the Round Rock Express and UT," Lubell said. "Everyone should know and would like to know that there's a professional basketball team in Austin."

For Demps, the goal he's working towards could not be more different than Lubell's as the team is in Austin based simply on the city's geographical location and nothing more.

“We’re in Austin because it’s close to San Antonio and we can keep an eye on guys that we’re trying to develop and scout,” Demps said. “If we wanted to make money, we would set up a team in Billings, Montana.”

“We gotta start paying for all this stuff.”

Hot Texas days gave way to hot Texas nights with seemingly no relief in sight. The field lights came on, the extra innings dragged on and the fans became restless. It was Fan Appreciation Day and they had been promised fireworks.

They wanted to see the fireworks, they wanted victory, but most of all, the sparse crowd that remained wanted to celebrate what could be the final win of the season for the Round Rock Express. Roughly half of the seats were filled for the Saturday, Sept. 6 ballgame between the Express and the Omaha Royals, the second to last home game of the 2009 season for Round Rock.

The Express trailed 2-1 in the bottom of the ninth inning before rallying to tie it up 2-2. Despite the ninth inning comeback, the Express squandered several scoring opportunities with men on base in the 10th and 11th innings. The bats finally broke through as an Express line drive off the glove of Omaha’s diving third baseman broke the tie, brought home the winning run and sealed the victory for Round Rock in the bottom of the 15th inning. The Express’ dugout emptied in a rush as the players jumped and cheered. The fans went wild, fireworks lit up the Texas night sky and for a moment the turmoil of a terrible season was momentarily forgotten.

“It’s the energy here that I love,” said Georgetown resident Kelly Griffin, who brought her two daughters and toddler son to the game. “I wasn’t a baseball fan before this.”

Named after the nickname for the team’s principal owner, MLB Hall of Famer Nolan Ryan, the Express reside in the city of Round Rock, which is considered part of the greater Austin area. The team’s stadium, the Dell Diamond, is a mere 20 miles north of Austin. Given the sports hardships of the surrounding area, the Express presented something of an anomaly. They have managed to do something no other Austin area professional sports team had been able to accomplish: survive.

The 2009 season served as a summer long celebration for the Express as the organization toasted its 10th season in the area since moving to Round Rock in 2000. Like many local sports fans, Jay Miller, the chief operating officer and one of several co-owners of the Express, also can’t believe the team first planted its roots in the Austin area a decade ago.

“Every time we tell people it’s like, ‘Wow, can you believe it’s been 10 years? It’s been 10 years already!’” Miller said. “I personally can’t believe it’s been 10 years because it’s been so much fun.”

The 10th season, however, was tough on the Express, which finished with a disappointing 63-81 record. This resulted in the fans coming out in fewer numbers.

The Dell Diamond has the ability to hold nearly 12,000 fans, but other than the team’s best year in attendance in 2004 in which nearly 10,000 fans attended each game, the team typically hopes to average between 9,000 and 9,500 fans a night. For the 2009

season, the team failed to meet its own expectations and saw a dip in attendance as the club averaged below 9,000 fans a game, in the 8,000 plus range.

Although the difference of 1,000 or more fans may seem miniscule, over 1,000 fewer fans per home game over the course of a 72-game home season can have drastic effects. It can translate to nearly 100,000 fewer fans, which can add up to millions of dollars in lost revenue.

It wasn't just a losing ballclub that stifled the Express' attendance in 2009. In addition to the team's poor performance on the field, the Austin area as well as the nation as a whole was still suffering through a serious economic recession. To make matters worse for the Express, which as a baseball team sees its season run entirely in the spring and summer, the Austin area had over 60 sweltering days of 100-degree or higher temperatures during the summer of 2009.

All these factors came together in a perfect storm for the Express, affecting their individual ticket buyers, which made up a hefty 20 percent of their ticket revenue. The majority of the tickets the Express sells are either season tickets, which make up 50 percent of their total ticket sales, or group tickets, which make up 30 percent. This led to many potential Express fans choosing other entertainment options in the Austin area over the summer.

"You can't rely on the individual ticket buyer, the general population, to go to a game last minute, because there's so much to do in Central Texas," said Henry Green, the team's vice president of sales and marketing. "We're just another option in the area."

Ryan originally wanted the team to play in Austin, but the franchise failed to get the voter support needed to approve the use of city funds to build the team's stadium, so the franchise moved slightly up north to Round Rock, which became a blessing in disguise.

"We're in Round Rock, that's where we ended up and it's been a great marriage," Miller said. "Where we ended up choosing to put the ballpark is the best place for us."

The Express initially had no trouble attracting fans. Miller fondly remembers that first season as "magical." The Express, then a double-A team in 2000, which would not become a triple-A club until 2005, would set an all-time double-A attendance record in its first season on its way to winning the Texas League Championship. The team would then break its own attendance record in each of the next four seasons.

Miller credits the team's stadium as a large part of their early success in drawing fans. In the outfield concourse of the Dell Diamond there is a basketball court, a swimming pool, a bungee jump and a speed pitch game.

"You don't have to be a baseball fan to come to our park," he said, "because there's so much stuff to do for all ages."

The popular stadium with its many fan-enticing amenities, though, came at a cost. The Express put in \$18 million for the stadium and the city of Round Rock, which owns the stadium, put in \$7.35 million of its own money for a combined price of over \$25 million. The Express ownership group, however, borrowed the money to build the stadium and 10 years later is still paying it back. This past season the Express also spent \$3.5 million on a new stadium club behind home plate.

The team also underwent the costly procedure of revamping its concessions throughout the stadium this offseason, promising a fresh look for the 2010 season with their new corporate partner, the multinational food services corporation, Sodexo. The team sees all this spending as a necessity to continue to grow its brand and draw fans in the competitive Austin area sports market. It all adds up, though, to a hefty price tag in the millions of dollars the Express will be forced to pay off for years to come.

“We’re in a, ‘We gotta start paying for all this stuff’ mode right now,” Miller admitted.

While the team is classified as minor league and their ticket prices are far cheaper than that of a Texas Longhorns football game or any Major League Baseball game, the Express’ concession prices, however, are more in-line with the typical price of food at most major sporting events. In addition to hot dogs, pretzels, burgers and other standard ballpark food, in 2009 the Express charged \$9 for a large draught of Land Shark beer, \$7.50 for a large popcorn, \$7.25 for a large soda, \$6.50 for a fruit cup, \$6 for a tray of nachos and \$4.50 for a bag of sunflower seeds.

Miller concedes that the concession prices at Express games are high, but argues that it’s fair given the nature of professional sports.

“I’m a consumer, too, but I don’t think you can go to any sporting event where people don’t feel like concessions are too high,” he said. “You’re always going to pay a little more when you go to a sporting event.”

Miller and the Express, however, have no regrets for what they see as the cost of doing business as he reminds people there were four previous attempts to bring

professional baseball to the Austin area. The previous potential ownership groups, however, didn't want to put up the upfront money needed to get started, expecting instead for the city and surrounding community to pitch-in. The Express, though, understood the market, borrowed the money and took the risk.

While they are still paying off their startup fees, their initial investment has more than paid off. Miller said the Express has routinely made it into the top five for highest attendance throughout the entire minor league system. The Express has also regularly made a profit and is currently in no danger of folding up shop and leaving town like so many other Austin area sports teams have done.

The Express continue to set the example for the other Austin area pro sports teams in other ways as well. While most of the past and present professional Austin area sports teams feel threatened by UT athletics as the obvious alpha male in the region, the Express take the unique approach as one of the only professional teams that welcome the Longhorns.

“I personally love that this place has a huge college campus,” Miller said. “I think if anything it helps us, having UT here, because of the success UT has had in all sports. It's helped breed hungry sports fans. There are so many people in this area, there's plenty to go around.”

Although both the Express and the Longhorns baseball team offer the Austin area fans the chance to watch high level baseball, they don't directly compete with each other. Many of the Longhorns baseball games are during the day while nearly all of the Express games are at night. Since the Longhorns begin their season in February, their final home

games, even with a deep playoff run, only overlap onto two of the five months in the Express' season schedule.

By having the Express feed off the sports hungry market that UT has created, Miller has found ways to use the Longhorns success to his advantage.

"I've actually marketed off their games. I'd rather play off that," he said. "I like being around a champion and that's what they are."

Miller says UT's football defensive coordinator and head coach designate Will Muschamp as well as UT head basketball coach Rick Barnes and athletics director Dodds have all recently attended Rock Round games. As three of the most powerful men in UT athletics, Miller knows those are individuals he'd rather find a way to work with and not against.

"Gosh, I want them on my side," he said. "I don't want to say anything negative about them [UT athletics]."

Miller, however, can understand how harsh and unforgiving the Austin sports scene can be for smaller professional teams which don't have the backing of an NFL, NBA, NHL or MLB team, which most of the previous Austin sports teams whom folded and failed to last in the area didn't have.

"If you're independent, that's why you're failing," he said.

Just as the Stars and the Toros are thankful for their connection with an NHL and NBA team, respectively, the Express are supported by their MLB affiliate, the Houston Astros. This allows the Express to take the necessary gambles and endure the risks that

come with building a successful professional sports team and fan base in and around Austin.

“It’s real hard without that backing,” Miller said. “Personally I would never be involved with an independent league team.”

Just as the Aztex, Turfcats and others have done, Miller and the Express understand that fan support begins in the community as the team works with a number of charities each year and offers discounted tickets for military personnel.

While Green is proud of the 10 seasons and counting the Express and their fans have carved out in the Austin area, he believes each of the smaller professional teams can make it here, too, as long as their definition of success is within reason with market forces. This for many teams means they may have to lower their expectations.

“I want to see everyone be successful. I know that sounds utopian,” Green said. “There is room for everybody to have a certain measure of success. It depends on what you consider as a level of success. Is it 2,000 people a game or 10,000 people a game?”

Just five short years ago in the spring of 2005, neither the Aztex, Stars, Toros or Turfcats existed in the Austin area; the Round Rock Express, however, had just begun its sixth season. It wouldn’t surprise Green if in the years to come the current set of smaller pro teams thrived and found their niche or if a new crop of teams came to town to try their hand in the wake of the recently fallen teams that currently call Austin home.

“From where Austin was five or six years ago the city is now leaps and bounds further ahead in terms of what it can offer the casual sports fan,” Green said. “And who knows where it’s going to be five years from now. It could go to a whole other level.”

“I don’t feel sorry for them. They don’t feel sorry for us.”

The heartache remains, throughout much of Austin. It’s late January, a few weeks after the Longhorns’ 37-21 loss January 7 to the Alabama Crimson Tide in the 2010 BCS National Championship Game in Pasadena, California. It was only the third in a recent growing list of national championship disasters for the Longhorns athletic department. The baseball team would fail to claim the program’s seventh national title and lose to the LSU Tigers in the deciding third and final game of the College World Series National Championship Series in Omaha, Nebraska seven months earlier on June 24.

The second place national finishes would continue for the Longhorns. The two-time national champion UT women’s volleyball team, which hadn’t lost once during the entire 2009 season, finally did on December 19 in the national championship match in Tampa, Florida, losing 3-2 to the Penn State Nittany Lions.

If the consecutive baseball, volleyball and now football national championship losses troubled Dodds, he doesn’t show it.

“We’re going to win our share,” he said calmly, confidently and without hesitation.

And he was right. On March 28, the UT men’s swimming and diving team won its 10th national championship. Under Dodds’s reign as athletics director, which began in 1981, UT athletics has won 13 national championships in nine different sports. Leading the most financially successful college athletic department in the country, one that came

close this year to boasting four national championships in a nine-month stretch, is no small task.

The affairs of the 20 UT men's and women's teams that contend nationally for dollars and success are Dodds's only professional focus. The cries of the smaller area sports teams that dot the greater Austin landscape are news to him. These teams shouldn't complain, he says. They made their choice to come to Austin.

"I don't feel sorry for them. They don't feel sorry for us," he said. "Everybody has to sell their own. It's hard to get a foothold in Austin. It's hard to build up a fan base. We know that. It's part of the game."

Dodds sits at his desk in an office that is modest and unassuming for a man of his position. He speaks with a gentle tone in a measured approach that softens the seriousness of his words and belies the importance of what is being said by a man who has worked for nearly 30 years to build an empire. Beneath his words is a respected, quiet pride for what he's labored so tirelessly to accomplish.

"We have a short agenda left," he said, "and down is not an option."

Dodds admits that a major advantage UT has is that the Longhorns don't have to compete with any major professional teams from the NFL, MLB, NHL or NBA.

"Having pro teams divides the market place," he said, "and reduces what you can garner from it."

Dodds sees the monopoly UT has over the smaller area pro teams for the Central Texas sports fan's interest as "a good thing for us." After all, he believes UT has earned it.

“We’ve been here for over 100 years,” he said. “And they’ve been here for a year or two or three, so, you know.”

When he first took over as the athletics director, UT athletics was nowhere near the money-making machine it is today. Dodds turned the department around through decades of hard work and smart business practices that included tapping into UT’s enormous alumni base for financial support. He did this by creating the immensely successful Longhorn Foundation, which is a central piece of the athletic department’s revenue and fundraising. In its 25th year, the Longhorn Foundation boasts more than 13,000 donors and has raised more than \$293 million.

Dodds also fully realized the power of television rights, licensing deals and sponsorship dollars long before they became the standard practices they are now among college athletic programs. In short, he ran a college program like a professional one when doing so was unheard of in the college game.

“He has a great mind of how to take advantage of the revenue streams that are out there,” Goble said. “He’s been a real visionary in terms of forward thinking and driving new and different types of revenues relative to athletics. Because of our philosophy here we try to run our operation like a profit-oriented business, like a professional sports franchise.”

Dodds also limited the number of sports teams UT has to only 20, a small number for a major university. Through these actions UT has managed to transform itself from its humble beginnings under his regime in the early 1980’s into the Goliath program that now leads all others.

Although UT athletics only has 20 sports teams for what Goble estimates is 600 total student-athletes, the \$130 million budget translates to the department spending over \$216,666 this year on each student-athlete. Looking back at the 1999-2000 academic year, the UT athletic department had a budget of only \$41 million. Considering UT athletics took over control of the Erwin Center in 2003, the \$41 million budget should be adjusted to reflect the now \$12 million annually committed to the Erwin Center's maintenance. Still, the adjusted \$53 million from the 1999-2000 budget is only a fraction of the \$130 million budget UT athletics now has only 10 years later.

As for the smaller teams, just as it saddens many within the Aztex, Toros, Stars and Turfcats organizations, it's understandable to Dodds that most Austin and Central Texas citizens are by and large unaware of the existence of these smaller professional sports teams.

"You don't hear much about them and you don't read much about them, so it doesn't surprise me," he said. "I'm not opposed to them being here, but they chose to be here and it is what it is."

Goble hopes all the small Austin area pro teams do well, but he does understand how difficult it would be if he found himself in the same situation the smaller teams are in; trying to survive in what is predominantly Texas Longhorns country.

"It's unlikely that they'll ever get to a point similar to where we are with our football program. If I was the CFO [Chief Financial Officer] of one of those organizations, I would probably think, 'We don't have a chance,'" Goble said. "We don't

go out trying to hurt another area team by any means, but we'll try to be as successful as we can be.”

Dodds agrees with the front office of many of the smaller pro teams that the key to their success is building relationships with the public first. Dodds also concedes that population-wise Austin is large enough to support many teams, but that the community has fully embraced UT as the main sports focus. That control the fans have given UT as their primary sports devotion doesn't appear to be waning any time soon.

Although he is content right now with the several seasons of impressive upgrades to Royal – Memorial Stadium, Dodds said the UT athletic department does plan to one day enclose the stadium, making it a complete bowl. This would increase the stadium's capacity to over 115,000 fans. While Goble estimates the process will cost between \$200-\$225 million, it would make Royal – Memorial Stadium the largest non-motor racing true sports stadium of any kind, college or professional, in all of North America and the third largest in the world.

In the end Dodds believes the competition for the attention and dollars of the city's sports fans is good for Austin as the smaller teams offer variety and help keep the UT athletic department on its toes without posing the serious threat to UT athletics that a major league sports team from the NBA, NFL, MLB or NHL would.

For the man who built the empire that changed the face of college sports and set the rules that have left all other collegiate athletic programs playing catch-up, it's as clear to him as anything he's accomplished that the successful dynasty of wealth and wins that he first pioneered decades ago has only just begun.

“My hope,” he said, “is that we’ve just set the table for the future.”

Appendix

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT (millions \$)

ACADEMIC YEAR	BUDGET	TOTAL REVENUE	FOOTBALL REVENUE	MEN'S BASKETBALL REVENUE
2006 - 2007	93.1	105.0	63.8	14.6
2007 - 2008	107.6	120.2	72.9	12.9
2008 - 2009	126.8	138.0	87.0	14.7
2009 - 2010	130.0	138.0*	87.0*	14.0*

* Estimated

Data from UT Athletic Department
Table created by the author

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Vita

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