

New USFL Waiting In the Wings

By Alan Dell
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The USFL has risen from the ashes of Donald Trump's arrogance.

It doesn't have the swagger or the money it flaunted when Trump was throwing his influence around before the USFL died in 1987 at the age of 4.

The new United States Football League says it doesn't want an adversarial relationship with the NFL or any other entity. It wishes nothing but the best for Major League Football, the professional spring league that made Manatee County its headquarters last week and hopes to begin playing in March.

MLFB officials say they are not worried about the new USFL, but they have to be hearing footsteps.

This is not your mother's and father's USFL. It doesn't have the clout of the original USFL, and it plans to own all the teams like the MLFB to keep costs down.

But the two entities differ in how to handle the costs and raise money.

MLFB, a publicly owned corporation, says it concentrated on getting teams and venues lined up before filling its coffers.

Jim Bailey, USFL president and CEO and former FSU receiver from the 1960s, says his organization wants to get all the money it needs before it starts contacting cities to house its teams.

"We don't have a start-up date because we want to make sure that we are fully capitalized," Bailey says. "We looked at other people who tried to do this and failed, and the common denominator is that they ran out of money."

Officials from both leagues have been careful not to criticize the other, but it is evident they have different philosophies. MLFB is a publicly owned entity that sells stock.

"We are not going to be publicly owned," Bailey says. "We are going to finance ourselves and are looking for additional seed money. We have a couple of phases of fundraising we have to go through."

MLFB has repeatedly said its publicly financing approach is a sound, solid way to get the league on its feet. Bailey, who was executive vice president under Art Modell with the Cleveland Browns for 17 years and the Baltimore Ravens for four years, doesn't share that optimism.

"I wish them luck with their public offering. I am not aware it has succeeded in the sports business before, but there is a first time for everything," Bailey said. "We have a very different financing approach. We are going to finance ourselves and are looking for additional seed money to launch a private placement of about \$500 million and are confident we can get into a previously untapped marketplace."

MLFB officials say they will reveal an accurate picture of their financial situation July 31st in their annual report. Bailey said his group doesn't want to get started with teams and cities until his USFL gets at least \$500 million.

Both leagues have name recognition players who were receivers. The USFL has NFL Hall of Famer Paul Warfield, who played for the Miami Dolphins and Cleveland Browns after a standout career at Ohio State, and the MLFB has Wes Chandler, a four-time Pro Bowler who played for Florida.

One of the key executives with the new USFL is Fred Biletnikoff Jr., the son of NFL Hall of Fame Oakland Raiders receiver Fred Biletnikoff. Bailey played with him and Ron Sellers, another highly touted receiver at FSU who is in the College Football Hall of Fame.

Bailey likes to point to former Cleveland Browns quarterback Brian Sipe in showing a need for another spring football league. The 1980 NFL MVP led the Browns to the playoffs.

"He was drafted in the 13th round and turned out to be good. Today, we don't even have 12 rounds in the draft, and he wouldn't have gotten a chance," Bailey says. "We hope to be a developmental league for the NFL and would be able to help guys like Sipe develop. All the market research we have done says there is a tremendous appetite for football in the spring.

"We are not going to make money for at least a few years," Bailey says, "There are salaries, stadium leases, coaches expenses, facility expenses, front office expenses, uniforms, league office travel and advertising. and you've got to feed the players. Then things are going to happen that we don't expect and we want to make sure we can cover that. We are not looking to break the bank on the revenue side. We want to make sure we are affordable. You need at least \$500 million."