

Booster Bowl

It's Phil Knight vs. Bobby Lowder for championship

Forget the millionaire coaches and all those superstar athletes running around, look up to the executive skyboxes. The big championship game between the UO and Auburn Jan. 10 is really a showdown of the two schools' top boosters: Phil Knight vs. Bobby Lowder.

Here's a matchup of the two public universities' septuagenarian top power players:

POWER

Knight — *The Oregonian* last month gave front-page credit to the secretive Nike billionaire's "lavish donations" for putting the Ducks in the national championship. The year before, the paper's sports columnist John Canzano credited the team's rise to the deep pockets of "Uncle Phil," saying, "The Ducks could not sustain what they've done over the past decade in conference play without Knight."

Lowder — In 2006, ESPN dubbed the secretive bank tycoon "the Most Powerful Booster of college sports." Lowder "is arguably the most powerful person in the state of Alabama, let alone on the Auburn campus." His "fingerprints have lingered for three decades in the hiring and firing of coaches and athletic directors alike — even university presidents."

CONTROL

Knight — Knight and top UO officials have denied that the sneaker tycoon controls the UO, but in the past two decades, Knight has allegedly used the threat of cutting off contributions to control human rights stands, personnel decisions and building construction at the school, according to press reports in *The Oregonian* and elsewhere.

In 2000, Knight threatened to withhold \$35 million to expand Autzen Stadium because he was angered that student protests had lead the university to join a worker's rights group critical of Nike sweatshops in Asia. The next year, the UO withdrew from the human rights group and Knight's millions flowed again to UO athletics.

In 2001 Knight cut off donations to the UO track team to protest the coach's perceived de-emphasis of distance running. The coach soon resigned.

In 2006, Knight criticized the UO athletic director for decisions regarding track and for not retaining a staff member Knight favored. Knight said the director's perceived failings made him reluctant to contribute to a new basketball arena. Four months later, the athletic director resigned with a \$1.8 million severance package, reportedly requiring his silence.

The AD was replaced by a booster friend of Knight's who quickly rehired Knight's favored staffer.

Knight has made his private control of building projects a condition of his donations, evading state open bidding and



Knight



Lowder

transparency laws designed to avoid waste, fraud and abuse. Construction of the \$250 million basketball arena, the \$42 million "jock in the box" learning center and a planned, perhaps \$100 million new athletic office building, the most expensive and lavish buildings in the state's history, were all under Knight's private control without open bids or records.

Knight successfully made a \$100 million endowment contribution for the Athletic Department contingent on his demand that the state Legislature quickly vote to approve \$200 million in state-backed bonds for the new arena.

UO President Richard Lariviere recently warned the State Board of Higher Education that the "negative consequences" to fundraising would be "really, really profound" if it did not immediately approve Knight's private control of construction of the new athletic office building, *The Oregonian* reported. After "some of the starkest ever" warnings about Knight's power, the state board quickly voted yes, according to the paper.

Noting the "KGB" secrecy around Knight's arena deal, *Oregonian* columnist Steve Duin called the UO administration "100 percent servile" to Knight. *Oregonian* sports columnist Canzano wrote of the UO president, "He's got the title, but Knight has the keys."

Lowder — Lowder and top Auburn officials have denied that the banking tycoon controls the public university, but *Fortune* magazine reported, "Lowder has been accused of making backroom deals with governors and treating the Auburn football program like a private fiefdom."

Lowder's estimated \$20 million in contribution's to Auburn pales compared to Knight's estimated \$300 million, but Lowder's power comes less from raw cash than political gamesmanship, ESPN reported. Lowder is Auburn's longest serving trustee, at 28 years, and chairs the board's powerful finance committee. When a governor tried to remove him from the position in 1995,

he contributed \$25,000 to a replacement governor who reappointed Lowder and allegedly gave him power over other Auburn trustee appointments, ESPN reported.

In 2003 Lowder secretly flew the Auburn president and other top officials on his private jet in a failed "attempted coup" to recruit a replacement football coach, ESPN reported. The ensuing scandal toppled the Auburn president and athletic director and put the university on probation with its accrediting agency. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) expressed concern that Lowder controlled the board of trustees through the appointment of his personal and business associates and that the university president did not have "ultimate control over the athletics program," ESPN reported.

When a fellow trustee angered him, Lowder allegedly threatened to have him killed and canceled funding for an economics program he favored, *Fortune* reported. After the campus newspaper angered Lowder, he allegedly retaliated by moving the journalism department into the communications school, according to the business magazine.

One of the football coaches that Lowder ousted has alleged that Lowder was involved in a pay-for-play recruiting scheme in the past, ESPN reported. Last month, Auburn star Cam Newton was suspended for pay-for-play violations but quickly reinstated (24 hours later, in fact) after the NCAA blamed his father for the scheme.

FUTURE

Knight — Knight's power at the UO and in Oregon only appears to be growing. He told *The Oregonian* last month that he backs a UO plan to create a board of trustees similar to Auburn's with the power to raise tuition. But he hasn't given the Legislature an explicit threat that he'll cut UO contributions unless the plan is approved, yet. Last year, Knight became one of the state's top political power brokers with more than \$600,000 in contributions to Republicans and to oppose taxes on the rich. While the nation suffers record unemployment, Nike's third world sweatshops are humming with the corporation's stock up 40 percent in the last three years. Knight's age, 73 next month, has apparently made him only more powerful as UO officials "whisper" about the prospect of getting a large part of his \$11 billion estate when the Nike tycoon dies, according to *The Oregonian*.

Lowder — Lowder's power at Auburn appears to be on the wane, giving Knight the edge in this booster bowl matchup. Lowder recently stepped down from control of Colonial Bank just before federal regulators seized the \$26 billion institution in one of the largest bank failures in U.S. history, *Fortune* reported. The bank and Lowder speculated heavily in the real estate bubble, and Lowder now faces civil and perhaps criminal lawsuits alleging that he misled investors and regulators, the magazine reported. Lowder lost a personal fortune and \$2.8 billion in Federal Deposit Insurance money, but the booster still chairs the Auburn trustee finance committee. **EW**

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