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Fighting for Legitimacy: The Impact of Football and Stadium Expansion at the University of Southern Mississippi

*By Chad S. Seifried, J. Michael Martinez, John Miller,
and Chris Croft*

The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) began playing football in 1912, the same year it opened for instruction as Mississippi Normal College. Since then, the institution and the city of Hattiesburg have benefited greatly from the positive attention generated by the football team's overall success and economically from the tens of thousands of fans who have annually attended games on campus at Carlisle-Faulkner Field at M. M. Roberts Stadium. As an example, USM football teams produced an overall record of 607-447-27 through 2021 and two College Division National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) national championships in 1958 and 1962. Furthermore, USM football has produced fifty-two All-Americans, over 125 professional football draft picks, and nearly 150 professional football players.¹ Collectively, these achievements generated opportunities for regional coverage of the sport and university by thirteen newspaper outlets, nine television stations, and fifteen radio stations that combined made-up the Southern Miss IMG Sports Network.² Moreover, the participation of USM in Conference-USA (C-USA) since 1995 provided national coverage of the football program and university through network agreements with the Fox Sports, CBS Sports Network, BeIn Sports, and ESPN along with various postseason bowl commitments the conference provided.³

¹ *Southern Miss 2018 Football Almanac* (Hattiesburg, MS: University of Southern Mississippi Sports Information), 102, 131-134.

² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³ *Ibid.*, 55, 57. USM also won five C-USA titles (1996, 1997, 1999, 2003, and 2011).

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Despite the coverage and attention generated by USM football, there is an underexplored legacy regarding its football stadium construction history and its impact on both the university and the southern region of Mississippi. For example, Chester M. Morgan's history of the university offered notable scholarship on USM, but little on the impact various stadiums provided in determining the institution's legitimacy. Further, that work did not contain an adequate review of the critical events and significant individuals that helped build the institution's reputation through football and stadium-related building activities.⁴ John W. Cox and Gregg Bennett also completed a remarkable book on the history of USM football. However, it focuses primarily on the football program and not on how football facilities contributed to the growth and development of the university and the southern region of Mississippi.⁵

The lack of interest in USM's stadium history is notable because football stadiums are highly recognized social anchors for fan communities (e.g., local citizens, students, and alumni). Furthermore, they generate a significant amount of media attention, and their complexity often makes them architecturally and organizationally compelling. As an example, "well-intentioned progressives" made football and college sports permanent through the development of athletic departments, building concrete and steel-reinforced stadiums, and "hiring a corps of professional experts."⁶ Sports facilities like stadiums are also often associated with technological advances and reflective of a changing consumer society that scholarship has recognized as capable of providing legitimacy to institutions.⁷ Finally, football and its stadiums also are capable of facilitating brand awareness and business partnerships, increasing student enrollment, and enhancing alumni relationships and gifts or giving campaigns that

⁴ Chester M. Morgan, *Treasured Past, Golden Future: The University of Southern Mississippi 1910-1920* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

⁵ John W. Cox and Gregg Bennett, *Rock Solid: Southern Miss Football* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

⁶ Brian M. Ingrassia, *The Rise of the Gridiron University* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 9, 149, 171.

⁷ Chad S. Seifried, "The Development of Death Valley in Louisiana: The Modernization of Tiger Stadium," *Louisiana History* 57 (2016): 187-188.

provide significant revenues and resources to universities.⁸

This article offers a descriptive history of the football grounds—Kamper Park, Faulkner Field (renamed Carlisle-Faulkner Field in 2004), and M. M. Roberts Stadium—developed at USM from 1912 to 2022. Throughout the story, we reveal that football was strategically used to promote USM and Hattiesburg and explain how the development of the football stadium enhanced the school's legitimacy. The concept of legitimacy involves assessing an entity (e.g., product or service) "within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions to determine if actions or behaviors" meet the practices and expectancies of the internal and external stakeholders.⁹ In this regard, internal legitimacy "reinforces organizational practices and mobilizes organizational members around a common ethical, strategic or ideological vision."¹⁰ Meanwhile, external legitimacy encompasses association and/or comparison with outside groups/organizations and often seeks to understand their perspectives, not just what they are doing but how outside groups perceive them.¹¹

This article also complements previous ones published in the *Journal of Mississippi History* (JMH) that addressed the history of football and stadiums at the University of Mississippi and Mississippi

⁸ Raymond Schmidt, *Shaping College Football: The Transformation of an American Sport, 1919-1930* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 2007), 151; Chad S. Seifried and Patrick Tutka, "Southern Methodist University Football and the Stadia," *Sport History Review* 47 (2016): 172-192; Chad S. Seifried, Carli Faulkner, Samantha Baker, and James Piker, "The Development of Razorback and War Memorial Stadiums," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 75 (2016): 181-205; Benjamin Downs, Patrick Tutka, Chad Seifried, and Cameron Dean, "The Development of TCU Football and the Construction of TCU Stadium: Building Community and Establishing Legitimacy, 1896-1930," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2019): 204-223; Chad Seifried and Clay Bolton, "The University of South Carolina Football Stadia through the Founding of Williams-Brice Stadium," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 118, no. 4 (2017): 289-316.

⁹ Dylan P. Williams, Chad S. Seifried, and Brian P. Soebbing, "The Five-stage Process of Legitimacy Building within a Sport Interest Association," *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* 12 (2019): 263; Mark C. Suchman, "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches," *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): 571-610; Monica A. Zimmerman and Gerald J. Zeitz, "Beyond Survival: Achieving New Venture Growth by Building Legitimacy," *Academy of Management Review* 27, no. 3 (2002): 414-431; Roy Suddaby, Alex Bitektine, and Patrick Haack, "Legitimacy," *Academy of Management Annals* 11, no. 1 (2017): 451-478.

¹⁰ Israel Drori and Benson Honig, "A Process Model of Internal and External Legitimacy," *Organization Studies* 34, no. 3 (2013): 347.

¹¹ Williams, Seifried, and Soebbing, "The Five-stage Process of Legitimacy Building," 265; Drori and Honig, "A Process Model of Internal and External Legitimacy," 368.

State University.¹² Finally, this work on USM offers a unique story about the institution and southern region of Mississippi's legitimacy building efforts through answering: How and in what ways did football serve the school as a social anchor for various stakeholders of its fan nation? How did changes in USM's football stadium over the years, with respect to size, services, and amenities, impact the legitimacy (internal and external) of the university and region? Moreover, how was stadium-related construction associated with enrollment, and alumni relationships, business partnerships, and revenue production? Finally, how did various construction projects and renovations match the larger pattern practiced by other southern universities?

Origins of USM, Football, and Kamper Park

USM was established by the Mississippi legislature as Mississippi Normal College (MNC) in March 1910. The initial goal of the state was to create qualified teachers for Mississippi public schools. To incentivize enrollment decisions, MNC offered free tuition to prospective students if they committed to teaching three years at state public schools, which included two years in rural areas near the student's residence.¹³ Opening in 1912 with an enrollment of 230 students and eighteen faculty members, MNC administrators included organized sports almost immediately to attract students by formally recognizing athletics as a major activity, even incorporating it into the launch of the university. For instance, MNC created an athletic association, and science professor Ronald G. Slay served as the first athletic director. Student athletic associations were common by the 1890s throughout the South. In the case of MNC, sports generated interest from a "local area vaudeville show," which helped subsidize the college's football program because the vaudeville operators believed promoting through

¹² Adam G. Pfleeger and Chad S. Seifried, "Mississippi State's Davis Wade Stadium: The Modernization of a Football Stadium," *Journal of Mississippi History* 77, no. 1 and no. 2 (2015): 147-176; Chad S. Seifried and Milorad M. Novicevic, "Vaught-Hemingway Stadium at Hollingsworth Field and Ole Miss: 100 Years in the Making," *Journal of Mississippi History* 77, no. 1 and no. 2 (2015): 115-146.

¹³ John P. Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi, 1912-1949," Master's Thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 1967, p. 1.

the sport could help draw more guests to their own shows.¹⁴

Many other schools throughout the country at this time also recognized athletics as a vehicle to create a unique campus identity and spirit. Moreover, the football spectacle with its exciting plays, festival of colors, celebratory music, and crowded stands provided schools with important opportunities to entice potential students to enroll, media to publish information about the institution, and alumni to reconnect.¹⁵ Southern schools also needed to figure out how to prevent the migration of potential students to the North. Thus, athletic programs were often cultivated by southern universities and promoted on campuses through association with positive character traits such as sportsmanship, competitiveness, and responsibility.¹⁶

The first MNC football games were played at Hattiesburg's Kamper Park, a preexisting recreational complex about forty acres in size, which was deeded by John Kamper in 1902 to the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), Hattiesburg Chapter. The UDC chapter spent approximately \$2,000 to beautify the park after assuming control. In 1908, UDC conveyed the park to the city of Hattiesburg, which supported a levy to maintain and improve the grounds and buildings. The levy produced about \$250,000 in park spending to grade, layout driveways, and build a pavilion, in addition to larger construction projects like the creation of bridges and an artificial lake.¹⁷ Managed by the city's park commission, the renovated Kamper Park was developed for "all general recreational and athletic purposes, including the right

¹⁴ Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 2, 4; Siegfried W. Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," Dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1970, pp. 23-24; Gregg Bennett, "David Wants to Be Goliath: Southern Mississippi's Attempt at Affiliation," North American Society for Sport History Conference, University Park, PA (1999), 43, accessed <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll10/id/11440/rec/1>.

¹⁵ Patrick Miller, "The Manly, the Moral, and the Proficient: College Sport in the New South," *Journal of Sports History* 24 (Fall 1997): 298; Michael Oriard, *King Football* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 13.

¹⁶ Lovick Pierce Miles, "Football at the South," *Outing*, December 1894, pp. 3-4; Chad Seifried, Tiffany E. Demiris, and Jeffrey Petersen, "Baylor University's Football Stadia: Life Before McLane Stadium," *Sport History Review* 52, no. 1 (2021): 3.

¹⁷ B. L. McGregor, "A Condensed History of Kamper Park," Kamper Park Commission 1915-1917, Jessie Morrison Collection, Box 1 Folder 12, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, 1-2; Kamper Park- Legal, 1891-1949, Jessie Morrison Collection, Box 1 Folder 13, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, 2; Mayor Moran M. Pope: Kamper Park Legal Documents 1902-1956, Hattiesburg Municipal Records—Mayoral Records, Box 7 Folder 14, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, 1.

to erect and maintain swimming pools, playgrounds, . . . and athletic purposes such as foot-ball (sic)."¹⁸

Although Kamper Park did not initially support any stadium or grandstand seating for football and other athletic contests to be staged at the facility, MNC was attracted to the complex because of its natural beauty for festival seating and the accessibility it offered via streetcars to the school's campus. Of significance, student-athletes were provided special rates to get to and from the facility with their personal equipment for games and practices. Meanwhile, regular students interested in attending only needed to walk approximately one mile to the park.¹⁹ The Kamper Park arrangement was not unlike that offered by other southern schools in previous decades when they established their own football programs. For example, the University of Tennessee started in 1891 at Chilhowee Park, an area best known for its boating and recreation space that was accessible through a newly created streetcar line. Mississippi State played its first football games in 1895 on Starkville's parade grounds.²⁰

The first football game at Kamper Park was played on October 13, 1912, between MNC and the Hattiesburg Boy Scouts.²¹ Although the sport generated significant interest from the student body, it did not initially engender significant attendance from the local community. A subsequent contest played against the Gulf Coast Military Academy also was not considered a prestigious event. Fortuitously, a Thanksgiving Day game between Ole Miss and Mississippi State (then known as Mississippi A&M) was arranged to be played at Kamper Park in 1912. Sponsored by the Hattiesburg Commercial Club to draw visitors to the town (particularly from Jackson), the event received significant

¹⁸ "Kamper Park-Legal, 1891-1949," 1.

¹⁹ Yvonne M. Arnold, "A Summary of the History of The University of Southern Mississippi 1910-1999," Box 1 Folder "Faculty," McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, 4; Venues with festival seating do not support actual physical seats but allow patrons or invitees to create their own seats. Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 25; Fagerberg referred to an interview with Frank Montague Sr. by Dr. W. D. McCain from January 11, 1965.

²⁰ Pflieger and Seifried, "Mississippi State's Davis Wade Stadium," 153; Chad S. Seifried, Benjamin J. Downs, Jeffrey Graham, and Adam Love, "Life before Neyland: The Early Development of Football Fields at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 79 (2020): 232-233.

²¹ Bennett, "David Wants to Be Goliath: Southern Mississippi's Attempt at Affiliation," 43; Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 5; "Football," *The Hattiesburg News*, October 14, 1912, p. 3.

promotion. However, that contest was canceled due to a player eligibility disagreement shortly before Thanksgiving, prompting the Commercial Club to find an alternate game, which featured Howard College (now Samford University) and Mississippi College. Despite the disappointment regarding the potential Ole Miss and Mississippi A&M match-up, the Howard College-Mississippi College contest was successful in gaining attention from the local community, increasing local knowledge about football, and attracting out-of-town visitors to Hattiesburg.²²

The success of the first Thanksgiving Day event eventually set the stage for a future relationship between MNC and the Hattiesburg Commercial Club to continue promoting football to the local community. Moreover, interest by the club eventually led them to assist in securing funds to help Ronald Slay, the 1912 MNC head coach, hire W. J. "Blondie" Williams as his replacement. Williams was formerly a popular star quarterback at Mississippi A&M in 1911, leading them to a 7-2-1 record, including a win over Ole Miss and a tie with Alabama. It is likely that his celebrity status, along with the success of scheduling Ole Miss to play at Kamper Park on Thanksgiving, produced the larger crowds that MNC enjoyed in 1913.²³

Unfortunately, the momentum MNC generated from 1913 did not carry over into 1914 and beyond for several reasons. First, Williams's team was not very good in 1913 (1-5-1 record), which compelled him to step down as head coach shortly after the season concluded. Second, the transition to a new coach, A. B. Dillie, combined with the previous year's dismal record did not make the MNC program attractive enough to schedule better opponents. For instance, from 1914 through 1916, Dillie's teams produced a 6-10-1 record, which included several unattractive games against high schools such as Perkinston, Poplarville, Copiah-Lincoln, and Meridian. The only colleges willing to travel to Hattiesburg were smaller, less prestigious football-playing schools like Spring Hill and Mississippi College. Third, the United States joined World War I, and as happened at many institutions,

²² Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 6; "Mississippi College Football Team is Strong Aggregation," *The Hattiesburg News*, November 27, 1912, p. 1.

²³ Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 7; "Normal Eleven Will Battle University Thanksgiving Day," *The Hattiesburg News*, September 17, 1913, p. 1; "Ole Miss Given Hard Battle by Normal," *The Hattiesburg News*, November 28, 1913.

football was discontinued at MNC in 1917 and 1918.

As athletic director, Ronald Slay resurrected the MNC football program in 1919 and “journeyed throughout the state” to contact “several students who had football experience and planned to attend Normal College.”²⁴ Within this effort, Slay made it a point to pursue student-athletes returning from war who previously played at better known schools like Ole Miss to promote MNC and improve the school’s football program. To entice their interest, Slay developed a “football training table” in the school cafeteria.²⁵ The provision of a training table was important for MNC because many schools offered such tables by 1900, not only to provide special meals to players but to improve the morale and cohesion of the team.²⁶ Overall, the goal for MNC and Slay was to produce a legitimate team with a “first class rating . . . hard to equal in this State.”²⁷

To help promote MNC, Slay improved the quality of opponents and the support offered at Kamper Park. For instance, in addition to scheduling a game against Ole Miss in Hattiesburg for 1920, Slay successfully scheduled a contest for 1919 against the Gulf Coast Military Academy because its head coach, Ray Morrison, was a former star player at Vanderbilt University. Other recognizable institutions Slay pursued games with included Tulane, Millsaps, Spring Hill, and Mississippi College.²⁸ Before he left MNC in 1921, Slay also was instrumental in supporting the development of a formal relationship with the Women’s College of Hattiesburg and the subsequent creation of a “special ladies section” to cheer for opponents. With this innovation, Slay and others believed the cheering section would entice other schools to visit Kamper Park.²⁹

In 1921, the MNC football program and Kamper Park experienced

²⁴ Ibid., 8; “Football Team of Normal Will be Formed Soon,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 19, 1919, p. 12.

²⁵ “Laurel’s Team May Come for Game Saturday,” *Hattiesburg American*, October 8, 1919, p. 3.

²⁶ Chad Seifried, Jim Evans, and Allison Mosso, “Renown to Rubble: The Rise and Fall of Pitt Stadium 1925-1999,” *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* 11 (2018): 54.

²⁷ “Normal to Have a Fine Team this Year,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 10, 1919, p. 3.

²⁸ Bacon, “A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi,” 9.

²⁹ “Mississippi Normal is Nosed Out in Great Football Game by Mississippi College Warriors,” *Hattiesburg American*, November 18, 1919, p. 8.

some interesting but mixed results as Hattiesburg and the wider region's high schools started to expand their investment in football. Kamper Park was generally viewed as inadequate for producing the gate receipts necessary to create contractual guarantees with many high-profile football-playing colleges. However, high schools required no guarantees. Thus, their football games assumed a greater portion of the Kamper Park calendar because the area high schools did not pressure the city of Hattiesburg to improve the size and quality of grandstand seating.³⁰

With the poor condition of Kamper Park and its inability to produce revenues through gate receipts, MNC sought to play games in Jackson, Mobile, and New Orleans beginning in 1921. MNC viewed playing in Jackson, the state capital, as an opportunity to legitimize the school amongst its peers in Mississippi and to enhance student recruiting efforts.³¹ Other schools in the southern region chasing gate receipts and publicity also played at neutral sites in more populated areas.³² However, it was obvious that moving MNC home games was a result of an inadequate facility.³³ With the potential for significant financial losses at Kamper Park, new head coach O. V. "Sprout" Austin made appeals to Hattiesburg's businessmen to "underwrite the game expenses" and improve the venue to attract a potential commitment from schools like Ole Miss to send a team to Kamper Park.³⁴ Although local businessmen did not provide the financial support Coach Austin desired, their failure to do so prompted the formation of the Alumni Athletic Club in 1924, which was specifically formed to help raise money for athletics and potentially a new football field.³⁵ Coincidentally, MNC

³⁰ "Football is Played First Time by High," *Hattiesburg American*, September 24, 1921, p. 3; Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 12-15.

³¹ Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 12. As one example, MNC's games against Millsaps from 1921 to 1923 were all played in Jackson.

³² Blake Gumprecht, "Stadium Culture: College Athletics and the Making of Place in the American College Town," *Southeastern Geographer* 43 (2003): 35, 39.

³³ W. O. Kincannon, "Magnolia Grid Teams Lacking Power of Lore," *Hattiesburg American*, October 8, 1923, p. 3.

³⁴ "Frosh Eleven of Ole Miss May Play Here," *Hattiesburg American*, October 17, 1923, p. 3.

³⁵ "Normal-Fresh Tilt Now Off, Is Announced," *Hattiesburg American*, October 24, 1923, p. 3; Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 31, 34; Fagerberg refers to an issue of the *Normal College News*, March 1, 1924, p. 5.

was also rebranded in 1924 as Mississippi State Teachers College (STC).³⁶

In 1925, STC applied for membership with the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIAA). Although he did not personally view athletics as a critical part of the curriculum, President Joseph A. Cook (1912-1928) supported the SIAA application. Cook understood that football was attractive because of the spirit it engendered among the students and the subsequent prestige it could provide through its ability to create favorable comparisons (i.e., winning on the field meant a school—not just a team—was perceived as better than another). Cook also recognized that conference affiliation was considered to be part of what makes a legitimate athletic program.³⁷

Improving the identity of the institution remained a priority with athletic and academic administrators, and the SIAA appeared desirable for additional reasons. First, the SIAA was formed in 1894 for “the development and purification of college athletics throughout the South” and specifically to assist the formation of eligibility standards, define amateurism, and establish standardized rules for contests. Second, the SIAA was attractive because it helped secure schedules and provided an opportunity for faculty oversight of athletics to gain their support.³⁸ Third, State Teacher’s College was not publicly considered a major school so affiliation with the SIAA, and the prospect of earning championships and all-conference player honors, was viewed as a boost for the school’s name recognition with potential students and business partners.³⁹

STC’s initial application to SIAA failed to secure enough votes for an invitation to join, but the school annually applied for membership until finally receiving acceptance in November 1929. A major reason for the lack of consideration given to STC concerned the unwillingness of potential conference members to travel to Hattiesburg. As previously emphasized, SIAA members negatively viewed Kamper Park’s inability to produce sufficient gate receipts for

³⁶ Bacon, “A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi,” 16.

³⁷ Fagerberg, “A History of Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi,” 25, 31, 61; Bennett, “David Wants to Be Goliath,” 43.

³⁸ *Southern Inter-collegiate Athletic Association* (Athens, GA: E.D. Stone Printing, 1895), 3.

³⁹ “Football Fans in State Will See 15 Battles,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 2, 1927, p. 2.

them to share. Moreover, the Hattiesburg area was still considered to be underdeveloped technologically, and transportation to the region was still a bit challenging.⁴⁰ In response to the criticism, STC created an Athletic Advisory Council in 1929, which benefited the school's application to the SIAA. The Athletic Advisory Council was developed to inspire interest of Hattiesburg fans in STC athletics and to create an advertising committee able to "solicit public support for the athletic department."⁴¹

The creation of similar advisory committees also was implemented at other schools because critics of football, although in the minority, were still vocal. As evidence, writing for *The North American Review*, Samuel Grafton presented football as not only a spectacle to behold but also as an activity viewed as a "blight" by others.⁴² The blight that critics cited included cheating, professionalism, and the lack of genuine interest in education by participants. By contrast, athletic advisory committees and new stadium projects, in particular, were viewed as vehicles to unite "men of different [university] departments on common ground" and to develop significant bonds across communities. Overall, this viewpoint may explain why nearly fifty new college football stadiums were built in the nation during the 1920s.⁴³

Enrollment at STC grew to 810 by the end of the 1920s, but annual financial losses associated with Kamper Park's failure to produce revenues provoked more discussion about building a new football facility. President Claude Bennett (1928-1933) wanted to maintain public support in the 1930s after joining SIAA and viewed losses associated with football as unacceptable, thus justifying his backing for a new venue.⁴⁴ By 1930, college alumni and residents of Hattiesburg also realized the benefits to the college and community that a thriving

⁴⁰ Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 17-24; "Four S.I.A.A. Games Played at Home," *Student Printz*, February 5, 1930, p. 1.

⁴¹ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 36; "The Worth of S.T.C.," *Hattiesburg American*, October 9, 1929, p. 16.

⁴² Oriard, *King Football*, 13; Samuel Grafton, "A Million Dollars for Football," *North American Review* 5 (1928): 582.

⁴³ Patrick Tutka and Chad Seifried, "An Innovation Diffusion Ideal-type on the History of American College Football Stadia," *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* 13 (2020): 324.

⁴⁴ Fagerberg, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 35; See Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 62.

athletic program could provide, especially as transportation and communication in the area improved.⁴⁵ For example, local business leaders at the time believed STC had channeled roughly \$20 million into the Hattiesburg area's economy since 1912. Further, they worried that the lack of a good football program and a legitimate facility would eventually become a liability, impairing the image of the region, thus, preventing visitors from spending money in the area.⁴⁶

Faulkner Field

The 1930 STC football schedule was comprised of SIAA members, including the likes of Union University as well as Delta State Teachers College, Louisiana College, Millsaps College, Mississippi College, Spring Hill College, Louisiana Normal College, and Louisiana Institute Southwestern in a nine-game lineup.⁴⁷ It is clear that the STC schedule was considerably better than previous seasons because it included only four-year institutions and SIAA members. Importantly, this upgrade helped demonstrate to the community a genuine effort to produce a more attractive set of games to benefit fans and local businesses.⁴⁸ The increasing attention STC gave its athletic program also motivated Mississippi's governor-elect, Martin (Mike) Conner, to promote STC's membership in the SIAA and offered a rationale for subsequent public support and financial investments by the state during the Great Depression.⁴⁹

STC produced a 3-5-1 record in 1931 and had several players receive All-State and SIAA recognition, a source of pride for the institution. Still, school authorities declared the 1931 season a "financial flop due to a large measure from the lack of a good playing field and gate crashers" that Kamper Park's physical condition and/or arrangement

⁴⁵ Morgan, *Treasured Past, Golden Future*, 59.

⁴⁶ Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi," 27.

⁴⁷ "Four S.I.A.A. Games Played at Home," *Student Printz*, February 5, 1930, p. 1; "Jackets Close Season Friday," *Hattiesburg American*, November 26, 1929, p. 9.

⁴⁸ "Four S.I.A.A Games Played at Home," *Student Printz*, February 5, 1930, p. 1; "Jackets Close Season Friday," 9; "State Teachers College Admitted to Membership in S.I.A.A.," *Hattiesburg American*, December 16, 1930, p. 6.

⁴⁹ "State Teachers Defeated," *Hattiesburg American*, October 5, 1931, p. 6.

could not prevent.⁵⁰ For instance, approximately 1,500 people attended a November game in Hattiesburg, but this figure is misleading as 500 were students who did not pay admission, and another 215 boys, attending the Older Hi-Y Boys conference, were guests of the college. As a result, the lack of paying customers and aforementioned gate crashers created low box office receipts, but burgeoning student and community interest compelled STC officials to pledge to build a new facility.⁵¹

Unfortunately, the timing for a new stadium could not have been worse for STC. The Great Depression saw national average incomes fall nearly 50 percent between 1929 and 1932, which reduced game attendance at STC and other institutions of higher education by 25 percent.⁵² As with other state-supported schools at this time, the most significant concern for STC was insufficient financial support from the state and a drop in enrollment. To counter the monetary difficulties and to oversee higher education in the state, the Board of Trustees for Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) was established in 1931. STC was reported to be \$25,000 to \$40,000 in debt at this time, prompting the IHL Board to introduce initiatives that allowed STC's athletic program to be positioned as an investment.⁵³

STC President Claude Bennett (1928-1933) announced that the college would construct a new stadium by the fall of 1932. He envisioned the facility to be the focal point for all athletics at STC and a source for the development of favorable academic qualities.⁵⁴ As an investment, Bennett hoped "to have an athletic field that will make Hattiesburg and Teachers College a mecca for all high school and

⁵⁰ "Teachers Can Use Freshies," *Hattiesburg American*, September 30, 1930, p. 7; Without the freshman exception, STC would only be able to support a team of ten players. "S.T.C. Plans Concrete Stadium to House Varied Sports Events," *Hattiesburg American*, December 9, 1931, p. 1.

⁵¹ Cox and Bennet, *Rock Solid*, 26-27.

⁵² John Watterson, *College Football* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 177.

⁵³ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 38; Interview with R. E. Rivers by Siegfried W. Fagerberg, January 1970; *Report of the Functions of the State Institutions of Higher Learning in Mississippi* (Nashville, TN: Division of Surveys and Field Studies of George Peabody College for Teachers, 1933), 53; STC enrollment dropped to 556 for the fall semester of 1932.

⁵⁴ "S.T.C. Plans Concrete Stadium to House Varied Sports Events," 1B; Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 28.

college athletic tournaments in South Mississippi.”⁵⁵ It should be noted that the conditions presented by the Depression and annual financial losses by football and other athletic teams predictably created some critics of the stadium project, who believed any money provided by the state should be used to enhance the academic programs at STC.⁵⁶ Still, the decision of the IHL and Bennett was not unlike other projects approved across the country. Many universities were receiving support from state and federal sources to be spent on athletics during the 1930s because government and education leaders collectively felt that positive attention from athletic competition helped boost enrollment, which in turn helped to recruit alumni gifts as well as increased gate receipts.⁵⁷ The development of stadiums generated significant publicity and excitement that schools could capitalize on because “[t]here is no one activity on a campus that arouses as much interest and enthusiasm as a football game.”⁵⁸ Former Southeastern Louisiana College coach Lloyd J. Stovall (1938-1940) supported this conclusion and went one step further saying that state schools in Mississippi were “excellent illustrations of the attempts made to increase the enrollment through means of publicity engendered by prominent football teams.”⁵⁹ Overall, the stadium was viewed as “becoming just as much a requisite of up-to-date university equipment as a gymnasium or physics laboratory.”⁶⁰

The diversity of people beyond the campus community interested in football was also a significant reason groups like the IHL decided to support athletic facility construction at STC. The 1930 U.S. census documented that Forrest County and surrounding counties were growing in population.⁶¹ This growth meant the various hotels,

⁵⁵ “S.T.C. Plans Concrete Stadium to House Varied Sports Events,” 1B.

⁵⁶ Fagerberg, “A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi,” 39.

⁵⁷ Abraham Flexner, “American Universities” in *Opinions and Attitudes*, ed. S. Morgan and W. Thomas (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1934), 18; Lloyd J. Stovall, “Present Trends in Intercollegiate Football,” Master’s Thesis, Louisiana State University (1940), 11, 35, 39, 59. Stovall cites Auburn and Ole Miss as examples of schools using football as part of a university strategic plan to boost enrollment.

⁵⁸ Stovall, “Present Trends in Intercollegiate Football,” 16; Ingrassia, *The Rise of the Gridiron University*, 165.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁰ Ernest Quantrell to Amos Alonzo Stagg, December 5, 1922, Amos Alonzo Stagg Papers, Box 24, Folder 5, Football General 1921–1925, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁶¹ *Decennial Population 1930*, United States Census Bureau, accessed, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/population-volume-3/10612963v3p1ch10.pdf>.

gas stations, restaurants, storekeepers, and other businesses often profited from football being played in their region.⁶² Alumni voices also were prominent for STC as the number of its graduates continued to grow. Collectively, these stakeholders all rationalized and promoted the social value of football by associating it with social bonding opportunities amongst Hattiesburg locals, STC students, and visitors, along with the development of personal traits such as perseverance and competitiveness.⁶³

The initial groundwork of the new STC stadium started in December of 1931 under the leadership of project director L. E. Faulkner, who donated important materials and equipment. Faulkner was vice president of Mississippi Central Railroad and also chairman of the Central Relief Committee of Hattiesburg. He offered President Bennett about thirty unemployed laborers to do the construction and help with the grading of the athletic field. In the end, due to his efforts, the stadium was constructed at no cost to the college and named after Faulkner.⁶⁴

It should be noted that Faulkner was a strong opponent of integration. In 1948, he opposed President Harry Truman's attempt to make the Fair Employment Practices Commission a permanent agency. In 1955, he worked with the Citizens Council to attempt to get the NAACP's tax-exempt status revoked.⁶⁵

Faulkner Field opened on October 29, 1932, with 4,000 wooden seats filled to capacity for a match against Spring Hill College and with much acclaim as it coincided with the Hattiesburg Golden Jubilee, a festival organized by White leaders to celebrate the city's fiftieth anniversary. Notable features of Faulkner Field included a press box (described as comfortable) and a large speaker stand in the south end zone. The facility was also characterized as conforming to national trends that maximized "the number of seats in preferred locations" and in "controlling access to and from the building" for the collection of

⁶² Stovall, "Present Trends in Intercollegiate Football," 24; John R. Tunis, "What Price College Football?" *The American Mercury* 48 (October 1939): 139.

⁶³ Stovall, "Present Trends in Intercollegiate Football," 25, 66-67; "S.T.C. Plans Concrete Stadium to House Varied Sports Events," 1B.

⁶⁴ "Governor's Day and Football Game Bring out Many Smart Costumes," 5; "S.T.C. Plans Concrete Stadium to House Varied Sports Events," 1B; "Work Started on S.T.C. Field," *Hattiesburg American*, December 15, 1931, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Ashton Pittman, "Protesting Racism, USM Football Players March From Stadium Named For Segregationist" *Mississippi Free Press*, August 30, 2020.

gate receipts.⁶⁶ The venue itself was officially dedicated by Mississippi First Lady Alma Graham Conner, a member of STC's (i.e., MNC) first graduating class.⁶⁷ Many other women also similarly turned out for the game to show off their fashion in "Southern Mississippi's finest athletic arena."⁶⁸

It should be noted that football victories in the early 1930s, better local attendance, and enhanced media interest helped to settle some of the persistent financial and enrollment challenges STC faced during the decade. Regarding enrollment, STC's shortages were not quite as severe as other peer schools in the South, suggesting that the football investment may have benefited the school. More specifically, enrollment remained steady at near 550 after the severe early drop.⁶⁹ To support the move into the new facility and football specifically, STC athletics employed a variety of strategies. For instance, STC dropped the price of admission to 60 cents per game so that more spectators from Hattiesburg would be able to attend home football games during the Depression.⁷⁰ Next, the Alumni Athletic Association emerged to assist players in purchasing clothes and other school or living essentials. To further cut costs, the STC freshman football team was discontinued in 1934 along with the sports of basketball and baseball in 1935.⁷¹

With these changes, STC strategically decided to invest more into varsity football, beginning by adding lights in 1934 to elevate the spectacle at Faulkner Field. Lights were considered in the original plans for Faulkner Field in 1931, but STC waited until 1934 to save on the cost and to see whether other schools that added lights realized gate receipt benefits. Eventually, STC saw several southern schools, such as LSU and Loyola of New Orleans, enjoy "an enormous increase in patronage, as well as a sharp gain in interest." The cost of STC's

⁶⁶ Bacon, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Southern Mississippi, 1912-1949," 27; Schmidt, *Shaping College Football*, 41.

⁶⁷ "Teachers Show Well in Game," *Hattiesburg American*, October 24, 1932, p. 6; "Governor's Day and Football Game Bring out Many Smart Costumes," *Hattiesburg American*, October 31, 1932, p. 5.

⁶⁸ "Governor's Day and Football Game Bring out Many Smart Costumes," 5; Fagerberg "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern," 28.

⁶⁹ *Biennial Survey of Education in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1942), 154.

⁷⁰ "Governor's Day and Football Game Bring out Many Smart Costumes," 5.

⁷¹ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 41; "S.T.C. Gridmen Grind Away in Lengthy Spring Workouts," *Hattiesburg American*, February 22, 1935, p. 7.

lights was paid by the Emergency Relief Agency and gained STC considerable attention from local citizens and peers who characterized Faulkner Field as the “best athletic stadium in the state.”⁷²

This statement finds support for this position from Stovall, who criticized the quality of Scott Field at Mississippi State College (changed from Mississippi A&M in 1932). More specifically, Stovall commented that the poor condition of Scott Field forced Mississippi State to play all their games on the road one season. Further, Stovall said that school officials at Mississippi State wanted a better on-campus stadium to not only generate more revenue for the institution but to bring more visitors to Starkville, which had a smaller population and fewer businesses than the Hattiesburg area. Mississippi State, like other schools with small local populations and inadequate playing facilities, was often forced to play games at neutral sites near large population centers to generate gate receipts capable of sustaining their athletics program. Gate receipts remained the main source of revenue from football. Some universities with large on-campus facilities were providing profits to their institution for the construction of academic buildings and student service programs.⁷³ In the case of Mississippi, regional peers Mississippi State and Ole Miss responded by expanding their own facilities for these purposes in 1936 and 1937 to seat 26,000 and 24,000 respectively.⁷⁴

Interestingly, internal initiatives and external pressures from the aforementioned regional peers led to the creation of an STC booster organization known as the 500 Club in 1937.⁷⁵ Its purpose was to generate support for college athletics at STC, which at the time only budgeted about \$2,400 for football. President Jennings Burton George (1933-1945), an alumnus himself, described the 500 Club as “a group of interested citizens in Hattiesburg, feeling that they should do more to make a greater institution out of State Teachers.”⁷⁶ The 500 Club included leaders from a variety of local civic groups such as the Lions

⁷² “Lights Will be Installed,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 4, 1934, p. 7; “State Teachers and Louisiana College to Meet at Faulkner Field,” *Hattiesburg American*, November 4, 1932, p. 6; “Southwestern Beaten 12 to 6,” *Hattiesburg American*, October 20, 1934, p. 3; “S.T.C. Plans Concrete Stadium to House Varied Sports Events,” 1B.

⁷³ Stovall, “Present Trends in Intercollegiate Football,” 88-89.

⁷⁴ Pflieger and Seifried, “Mississippi State’s Davis Wade Stadium,” 159; Seifried and Novicevic, “Vaught-Hemingway Stadium at Hollingsworth Field and Ole Miss,” 130.

⁷⁵ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 28.

⁷⁶ “Workers Will Meet Tonight,” 1.

Club, Business and Professional Women's Club, Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, PTA, Garden Club, and Alumni.⁷⁷

The 500 Club connected the importance of the athletic program to the growth of the school as well as the southern Mississippi region. Its leaders pointed out that the athletic department and its facilities had steadily improved, but stressed the need for more progress to elevate the status of athletics and the institution. As one example, the locker rooms at Faulkner Field were considered poor and small, which often discouraged high-quality opponents from playing at STC.⁷⁸ Notably, Hattiesburg's mayor, Travis H. Boykin, also supported the 500 Club after proclaiming "that a sound athletic program was necessary to the growth of the community and college."⁷⁹ Further, the president of the Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce urged all residents of the city to support STC's athletic program to help bring better teams and improved facilities to the area.⁸⁰

To achieve its goal of becoming a major college athletic power, STC needed to improve revenues to help fund athletic scholarships. Thus, improvement to Faulkner Field required renovations perceived as modern and capable of producing both gate and now radio revenues.⁸¹ Connecting to the latter point, the next initiative was produced by the student body (Class of 1937) and the staff of the *Student Printz*, the student-run newspaper, which donated money for a new loudspeaker system capable of being integrated into radio broadcasts for WFOR and additional stations. To that end, production space was built into the press box because every major football-playing school had a press department by 1930, and many were generating revenue from radio

⁷⁷ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern," 44; "Workers Will Meet Tonight," *Hattiesburg American*, August 10, 1937, p. 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 43. Beginning with Coach Allison "Pooley" Hubert in 1935, continuing with Reed Green in 1937 and Thad "Pie" Vann in 1949, STC produced thirty consecutive non-losing football seasons.

⁷⁹ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern," 45.

⁸⁰ "Map Drive to Build S.T.C. Athletics," *Hattiesburg American*, August 5, 1937, p. 1.

⁸¹ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 43-44.

broadcasts before the end of the decade.⁸²

To accommodate housing needed for returning students and growing enrollment, STC also announced plans to construct a stadium-dorm on the east side of the football field.⁸³ Other southern schools such as LSU, Alabama, Ole Miss, and Arkansas, had already successfully incorporated the dorm-in-a-stadium idea to support student housing needs and interest in producing more gate receipts. Thus, Chancery Court judge Ben Stevens of Hattiesburg “validated \$77,000 worth of the college revenue bonds purchased by the Federal Government at 4%.” Additional support from the Public Works Administration and other federal agencies awarded another \$63,000 and \$38,000 respectively for the construction.⁸⁴

The concrete stadium-dorm addition was built over the winter of 1938-1939, with members of the football team working on the construction. The construction project created a new residence for 165 students, which included football players, and it provided players with “extra money by working on the construction team, hauling concrete for about 19 cents an hour.” Since the players both literally and figuratively built the 10,000-seat stadium with rock and poured the concrete, the facility became known as “The Rock.”⁸⁵ The subsequent success enjoyed by the football team in “The Rock” led to increased exposure for both the team and school and to accompanying gains in attendance and gate receipts between 1938 and 1949.

Legitimation of the institution and football program improved through not only better performing STC teams but the improved facility. As evidence of this point, STC generated more revenue from the renovated facility to expand the number of number of football scholarships and team members from twenty-six to thirty-three. Further, STC successfully convinced Ole Miss to visit the new venue in 1939. As the administration and school enlarged the football program and facility, there was noticeable demand for continued improvement to meet the expectations for a more modern academic institution. However, as the institution entered a new decade and rebranded into

⁸² “Teachers Open Season Tonight,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 24, 1937, p. 1; Oriard, *King Football*, 133; Kathleen M. O’Toole, “John L. Griffith and the Commercialization of College Sports on Radio in the 1930s,” *Journal of Sport History* 40, no. 2 (2013): 241-257.

⁸³ Morgan, *Treasured Past, Golden Future*, 59

⁸⁴ “Stadium Bonds are Validated,” *Hattiesburg American*, November 26, 1938, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 39.

Mississippi Southern College (MSC) in 1940, MSC athletics suffered from new challenges during World War II as building materials required for potential renovations were redirected to the war effort.⁸⁶

The Search for New Affiliations: Success and Struggle

MSC struggled during World War II as its enrollment declined again and as happened in World War I, the school dropped football competition from 1943 to 1945. Yet, from a facility standpoint, the athletic dorms were beneficial because they supplemented the war effort, resulting in \$25,000 in rental fees for future athletics interests via the Army Administration Program and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation.⁸⁷ The college's leaders sought ways to rebuild an enrollment that dropped to 350 in 1945. Markedly, athletics soon became a major component in MSC's plan in 1946 to reestablish previously lost enrollment momentum.⁸⁸ New president Robert C. Cook (1945-1954) echoed this focus in 1946 stating, "A well-rounded program in physical education and athletics was important to any college."⁸⁹

Confidence in football likely resulted from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill, which offered funding to soldiers interested in returning and/or enrolling in college. Such support by the federal government flooded campuses with new students, new money, and eventually new members of the alumni base. Football was noticeably supported and promoted during World War II as having significant synergy with troop training, mass mobilization, and various military strategies. Exposure to football occurred with coaches recruited to serve as military training officers and through the Office of War Information sending out daily broadcasts and news releases about the sport.⁹⁰

As football competition resumed at MSC following the war,

⁸⁶ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 46; Morgan, "Treasured Past, Golden Future," 84; Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 39.

⁸⁷ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 100.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁸⁹ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 46.

⁹⁰ Chad Seifried and Matthew Katz, "The United States Armed Forces and their Bowl Games from 1942 to 1967," *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 22 (2015): 231-247; Oriard, *King Football*, 116.

budgetary concerns proved difficult, but success on the football field was reestablished. After breaking even in 1946, due in large part to a \$10,000 Reconstruction Finance Corporation payment and winning its first SIAA championship, the school's administration sought to increase the athletic program's legitimacy by doubling its budget from \$48,000 to \$100,000 (excluding employee salaries).⁹¹ Enrollment grew to more than 2,000, which allowed MSC to invest more revenue into its athletics program. Next, it should be noted that the SIAA, geographically, was too big and possessed too many members. Major football-playing schools gradually left the conference to play schools like themselves in their own geographic area. Likewise, MSC moved to the Gulf States Conference (GSC) in 1948, following the lead of other regional schools with ambitions of "major college status."⁹²

The conference affiliation helped address the post-war scheduling and travel issues that MSC had experienced with the SIAA, but administrators still found scheduling games against prestigious teams difficult. Eventually, head coach and athletic director Bernard Reed Green worked towards establishing the legitimacy of MSC football by utilizing contacts cultivated from his time serving in WWII. As an example, coaches such as Paul "Bear" Bryant (Kentucky), Bud Wilkinson (Oklahoma), Don Farout (Missouri), and Jim Tatum (Maryland) enjoyed a relationship with Green, who was hopeful he could schedule future games with their teams.⁹³

Entering the 1950s, Green hired Thad "Pie" Vann to replace him as head coach. Under Vann's leadership, MSC achieved incredible success on the football field, while also benefiting from increased external support. For instance, in early 1950, the Mississippi legislature appropriated money for several Mississippi schools (MSC, Mississippi State, and Delta State) to build new stadium dorms. MSC received \$350,000, leading to the construction of additional seats on the west side of the stadium, which expanded the facility's seating capacity to

⁹¹ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 101.

⁹² "Southern is Member of New Conference," *Hattiesburg American*, May 10, 1948, p. 10.

⁹³ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 53, 87.

15,000.⁹⁴ During this time, MSC's excellence within the Gulf States Conference took hold, including one undefeated conference slate in 1948 and four-straight conference titles under coaches Green and Vann.⁹⁵

Concurrently, struggles with the conference started to escalate almost immediately. The GSC had wanted its members to play more games within the conference, a move that would have resulted in lost revenues for MSC and a diminished regional status with aspirational peer schools in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and Southern Conference, whom MSC had begun to play more regularly.⁹⁶ MSC ambitiously attempted to schedule bigger name opponents with the hopes that such affiliation might prompt an invitation to join their conferences. As evidence, Coach Green contacted schools such as "Houston, Texas Tech, the University of Miami, Alabama, Wake Forest, George Washington, and Wyoming in the fall of 1952 for possible 'big games'." This change also came in response to growing concern from fans and students who "were not satisfied with the caliber of teams" MSC played in the GSC.⁹⁷

In 1952, MSC left the GSC to become an independent while also receiving acceptance as a full member of the NCAA. Reflecting on the decision to leave the GSC in 1952, Green stated, "It may be that we are more ambitious than some of the other teams in the conference, but it is necessary that we continue our relationship with larger schools."⁹⁸ President Cook echoed this sentiment believing that the GSC was problematic because it was not nationally known. Big wins over Alabama in 1953 and 1954 helped convince Cook and likely many internal and external stakeholders that MSC should look to join a major conference.⁹⁹

MSC eventually pursued entrance into both the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and SEC during the 1950s, citing regional advantages

⁹⁴ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 105. This information came from an interview Fagerberg completed with Bernard Reed Green in January 1970.

⁹⁵ "Southern Miss 2019 Football Almanac," 89.

⁹⁶ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 71.

⁹⁷ "Green Explains Withdrawal from GSC," *Student Printz*, October 10, 1952, p. 2.

⁹⁸ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 71.

⁹⁹ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 61, 64; House Resolution No. 7 Mississippi State Legislature, September 20, 1954.

to draw from markets in New Orleans, Mobile, and Jackson.¹⁰⁰ During this time, it should be noted that MSC moved some of its home games to Jackson to play against Louisville (1952) and Georgia (1953) as SEC schools Ole Miss and Mississippi State had similarly done.¹⁰¹ Notably, moving games to Jackson served a financial purpose, as it allowed MSC to generate a large enough gate to pay up to a \$25,000 guarantee. Winning 19 of 21 games during the 1952 and 1953 seasons and receiving back-to-back invitations to the Sun Bowl those years also offered evidence to re-affirm MSC's pursuit of membership with the SEC or ACC.¹⁰² Still, despite these achievements, the attempts to join a new conference failed, leading MSC to remain an independent.¹⁰³ Part of the failure to join either the SEC or the ACC stemmed from the smaller athletic budget MSC had compared to schools in those conferences and the size of MSC's on-campus football facility, which was already considered too small within five years of the 1950 renovation.¹⁰⁴

While success with football was steady, enrollment continued to be a major interest for MSC in the 1950s. Cook considered the emerging middle class in Mississippi as a demographic that could be tapped to improve enrollment beyond the initial boom that the G.I. Bill had provided shortly after WWII concluded.¹⁰⁵ To reach the emerging middle class, school administrators initially rationalized that moving games to different locations away from Hattiesburg would benefit enrollment by prompting renewed interest from athletic success to advertise the legitimacy of the university near Mobile, Jackson, and New Orleans.¹⁰⁶

However, visiting these locations ultimately created a scenario where less attention was provided to Faulkner Field. MSC administrators and Hattiesburg business leaders wanted to build a larger, more state-of-the-art stadium on campus to better legitimize the school and town. Larger facilities already had been built at Mississippi State (1947: 32,000 seats) and Ole Miss (1948: 34,500 seats) with

¹⁰⁰ "Green States Southern Open for Conference," *Student Printz*, September 25, 1953, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 83.

¹⁰² Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 92.

¹⁰³ "New League Heads Goals," *Student Printz*, December 11, 1953, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 91.

¹⁰⁵ "Welcome to Alumni," *Hattiesburg American*, November 6, 1953, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 57.

amenities to accommodate the maturing interests of spectators and media partners.¹⁰⁷ Further, MSC students were paying a \$13 annual fee to help support athletics and likely preferred to stay in Hattiesburg versus traveling to Jackson.¹⁰⁸

Interim President Richard A. McLemore (1955) also positioned athletics as “responsible for the growth of the school and area.” Further, he felt that a larger, more state-of-the-art, on-campus stadium would help bring and/or keep games in Hattiesburg, while also providing for a better on-campus experience for students and fans. Supporting this notion, Coach Green attributed continued growth of enrollment to the publicity that wins over Alabama, Auburn, and Georgia provided MSC and the fact that MSC had played against notable star athletes such as Johnny Unitas (Louisville) and Bart Starr (Alabama).¹⁰⁹ President Cook added that the presence of football helped MSC secure attention from state officials, who provided the school with more money. Moreover, he thought football decreased student unrest and increased campus pride. Their opinions were significant because all these individuals were respected by “professional, religious, and civic groups.”¹¹⁰

The middle and later 1950s also saw MSC again explore conference affiliation. Within this consideration, the institution’s leadership did not want to be in a conference with smaller Texas, Louisiana, or Alabama schools that would prevent MSC from achieving major school status.¹¹¹ For instance, in 1955, MSC considered forming a new conference with Miami, Florida State, Memphis State, and Chattanooga, with the possibility of Tulane and Vanderbilt who were beginning to explore the possibility of leaving the SEC.¹¹² When school enrollment reached 3,000, conversations about expanding the football stadium also reemerged as a priority for MSC.

With many of the school’s major games going to neutral sites due

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 69; This information came from an interview Fagerberg completed with Richard A. McLemore in November 1969. For information on the nationwide stadium building boom see: Patrick Tutka, “An Ideal-type Through Innovation Diffusion,” PhD Diss., (Louisiana State University, 2016), 201-266.

¹⁰⁸ “Athletic Staff Plans Freshman Team for Approaching Football Stadium,” *Student Printz*, March 25, 1955, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Fagerberg, “A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi,” 85.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹¹¹ “New League Heads Goals,” 7.

¹¹² Fagerberg, “A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi,” 94.

to their larger stadium size, there was concern that this hindered MSC's escalation into a "big time" college program in the eyes of major conferences.¹¹³ Eventually, the success of the 1950s prompted the Mississippi legislature to give the "school authority to issue revenue bonds worth up to \$750,000 to expand Faulkner Field."¹¹⁴ The goal was to more than double the size to 40,000 seats. The Landry and Mattis firm of Hattiesburg drew preliminary plans for the expansion of the football stadium in 1955. Inflation only allowed the stadium to increase by 4,000, and the legislature failed to back the general obligation bonds. Instead, MSC was forced to itself issue the bonds, which carried a higher interest rate. To help retire the bonded indebtedness, MSC added a 20 percent stadium fee to the cost of tickets.¹¹⁵

The expansion of Faulkner Field was done with the purpose of attracting major football-playing schools to Hattiesburg and to build MSC's national athletic ranking. However, Faulkner Field was still small compared to its regional SEC and state peers. Even with new seating and a ticket tax, not enough money was generated to pay SEC schools to visit Hattiesburg as their guarantees approached \$35,000.¹¹⁶ Still, MSC desired to have a major college football program, so beginning in 1956, the school adopted the SEC player-eligibility rules that Mississippi State and Ole Miss practiced.¹¹⁷ Without an opportunity to join the SEC by 1957, MSC continued to build its legitimacy by scheduling road games against SEC and ACC schools in order to bask in their opponents' reputations.¹¹⁸ The challenging schedule eventually paid off as MSC won two NCAA College Division football national championships in 1958 and 1962. While these championships provided recognition for the institution, they also made many major schools (in the NCAA University Division) less likely to schedule MSC in the 1960s. In a bizarre twist, this success on the field hindered MSC's efforts to rise to major college status since the NCAA required teams in the University Division to schedule at least 60 percent its games

¹¹³ "Athletic Staff Plans Freshman Team for Approaching Football Stadium," *Student Printz*, March 25, 1955, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 83.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Willie Simpson, "Southern to Play 3 Major Foes, Seating Capacity Presents Problem," *Student Printz*, October 18, 1957, p. 7.

¹¹⁷ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 84.

¹¹⁸ Fagerberg, "A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 95.

against other larger schools.¹¹⁹

Faulkner Field Becomes a Real Stadium

Following the disappointment of the efforts to join either the ACC or SEC in the 1950s, MSC officials reflected on the quality of the football stadium and program throughout the 1960s and 1970s as the school transitioned into the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in 1962. Achieving university status motivated school officials' desire to upgrade Faulkner Field into a modern football stadium.¹²⁰ Improving the facility's capacity was critical because it was still the primary source of revenue for the athletic department, which had to provide monetary guarantees to opponents. At Faulkner Field, visiting schools were typically guaranteed \$5,000 to \$18,000. However, SEC member schools required at least a \$35,000 minimum guarantee, with the elite programs requiring \$45,000 to \$50,000. This requirement often forced USM to either play on the road or to continue playing games at neutral sites like Mobile, New Orleans, and Jackson that possessed bigger stadiums.¹²¹

In 1969, USM contracted with consulting engineers B. M. Dornblatt and Associates, Inc. of Gulfport and New Orleans to develop a feasibility study for the prospects of building a new stadium. Enrollment had increased to nearly 8,000 from 6,300 in 1965 and was anticipated to grow to 12,000 by 1980. Faulkner Field was condemned for failing to match enrollment trends unlike regional peers that had successfully completed their own renovations at this time.¹²² The lack of parking at Faulkner Field was also a hindrance to scheduling home games with big-name opponents whose fans increasingly enjoyed participating in tailgating activities.¹²³

With respect to parking, Dornblatt and Associates determined that

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹²⁰ Jim Cleland, "Southern Could Lose Major Status," *Student Printz*, March 3, 1961, p. 2.

¹²¹ Fagerberg, "A History of Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi," 69, 104.

¹²² B. M. Dornblatt and Associates, Inc., "Stadium Feasibility Study for the University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS," December 1969, Box 4 Folder "Stadium Feasibility Study McCain Library and Archives," University of Southern Mississippi, 1, 3, 5; "Let's Go Ahead with a New Stadium," *Hattiesburg American*, March 31, 1971, p. 6.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 3, 5, 14; See "Let's Go Ahead with a New Stadium," 6.

1.1 million cars were registered in Mississippi. With the popularity of USM's success, they thought a 30,000- to 40,000-seat facility capable of expansion and supporting roughly 8,600 cars in ninety acres of parking was appropriate. Dornblatt and Associates used predictions for regional population and previous attendance figures as reference points. For instance, they reported on USM-Alabama games played in Mobile and Montgomery along with games played at Memphis. Another point of consideration involved the amount of land USM owned, which was deemed to be considerable.¹²⁴

The stadium capacity and design recommendations were also influenced by the comparison to stadiums at both Ole Miss and Mississippi State. However, construction activities completed or underway at other schools such as North Carolina State, Colorado State, and Auburn were also of interest. For instance, Dornblatt and Associates recommended the use of pre-cast concrete similar to construction at Colorado State that would help save \$100,000. Next, Dornblatt and Associates provided information about the potential installation of synthetic turf, citing examples of installation costs (e.g., \$250,000) at places like the Houston Astrodome, Camp Randall Stadium (Wisconsin), Michigan Stadium, and Razorback Stadium (Arkansas). Referencing a study conducted by Monsanto Company of 185 schools, Dornblatt and Associates relayed that knee and ankle injuries are less likely on artificial turf than on natural grass (i.e., 1.6 to 9.3).¹²⁵

Inside the facility, Dornblatt and Associates also suggested that USM construct a state-of-the-art press box and install \$75,000 worth of lighting capable of providing sufficient power for television broadcasts. Furthermore, they recommended the construction of a VIP or President's Box, which had gained popularity in football stadium renovations throughout the nation. Other observations argued for more restrooms and particularly women's restrooms based on "discussion with stadium managers." The study also proposed improved accommodations for visiting teams, along with a modern scoreboard and stadium sound system.¹²⁶ Overall, Dornblatt and Associates anticipated their recommendations for a new stadium could range from

¹²⁴ Ibid., 9, 15, 28, 29, 53; See "Engineers Finalize Stadium Study," *The Student Printz*, April 30, 1970, p. 1.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 15, 32, 33, 36, 38.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 44, 45.

\$6.15 to \$6.38 million. Moreover, they offered several viable financing strategies, which included a combination of revenue bonds, an alumni campaign, and federal assistance (via College Housing Program, Open Space Land Program, and Advance Acquisition of Land Program).¹²⁷

Unfortunately, Hurricane Camille, one of the strongest storms ever to make landfall in the continental United States, slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1969 and disrupted planning for a new stadium. However, renewed enthusiasm for the potential project emerged from several prominent individuals and groups.¹²⁸ President William D. McCain (1955-1975) thought athletic programs should be built to win and that football should have a new stadium because athletics were a major factor in the previous growth and development of the school.¹²⁹ To complement the last point, the student body was behind a new stadium along with many USM alums and the local media, who “organized concentrated campaigns in every corner of the state.” Next, several state legislators via the State Building Commission worked for a prospective USM stadium project. The commission initially approved \$2 million in funding in 1970, recognizing that previous appropriations provided to USM were substantially less than Ole Miss and Mississippi State.¹³⁰

Coach Vann and athletic director Green strongly supported the project, arguing that football is big business and that a modern stadium was a necessary prerequisite for any school to claim or assume status as a major institution. Again, Green promoted the idea that football and athletics generally brought important publicity to the school and again cited wins against SEC schools as support for his thesis. Coach Vann further remarked that any plans to join a conference or to develop USM into a strong independent like Notre Dame, Syracuse, and Penn State required a major football-playing facility to establish

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 48, 50.

¹²⁸ Fagerberg, “A History of Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi,” 108.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74, 77. This information came from an interview Fagerberg completed with McCain in January 1970.

¹³⁰ “Let’s Go Ahead with a New Stadium,” 6.

legitimacy.¹³¹

There were obviously some critics of the proposed stadium project. For instance, some citizens felt that millions in state monies should be used for educational programs rather than sport facilities.¹³² Moreover, some condemned the idea that a new football stadium should have priority over new classrooms. State senators Ed Pittman and Bill Burgin discovered this first-hand when a small but vocal minority criticized their support for a new stadium.¹³³ Ultimately, this criticism pushed USM to compromise and pursue the renovation of Faulkner Field because the subsequent renovation plan was cheaper and still viewed as an attractive alternative.¹³⁴

Recognizing USM was already late to the stadium game, state senator Ray Chatham reported on January 5, 1973, that a “joint study of the State House and Senate would recommend to the legislature a \$2,886,000 appropriation to expand Faulkner Field” rather than build a new stadium.¹³⁵ Preliminary plans for a 36,000-seat facility were provided by Finch and Heery (Atlanta) to the lead architect Steve H. Blair, Jr. (Hattiesburg) and Polk Construction (Columbia, Mississippi). The renovated facility was envisioned to possibly be larger than that of both Ole Miss and Mississippi State and designed to expand, possibly to 60,000.¹³⁶ Also included in the proposed facility were other recommendations by Dornblatt and Associates, such as a modern press box and a scoreboard capable of electronic messaging. The construction activity over 1974 and 1975 required USM to play eleven road or neutral site games that would previously have been

¹³¹ Fagerberg, “A History of the Intercollegiate Athletic Program at the University of Southern Mississippi,” 85, 98, 102, 145, 306, 334; This information came from an interview Fagerberg completed with Vann in February 1970. Steve Sparks, “Feasibility Study Gives Green Light,” *Student Printz*, April 16, 1970, p. 4; The notion that football and athletics generally were big business is supported by a review of the financial records. For instance, from 1958 to 1968, the athletic department made \$100,000 profit, and football was the only revenue producing sport.

¹³² Mickey Edwards, “They Say,” *Hattiesburg American*, March 26, 1971, p. 14.

¹³³ “Senate Votes \$2 million for Stadium or Something,” *Hattiesburg American*, March 26, 1971, p. 1; “Pittman Amends Burgin Bill,” *Student Printz*, January 21, 1971, p. 1.

¹³⁴ Jack Elliott, “Hopes for New Stadium Depend on Compromise,” *Student Printz*, March 31, 1971, p. 1.

¹³⁵ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 147; The state legislature ultimately approved \$4.8 million.

¹³⁶ Rick Cleveland, “USM Stadium Work May Begin March 18,” *Hattiesburg American*, March 6, 1974, pp. 1, 6; Polk Construction Company (Columbia, MS) won the construction contract with its \$5,784,338 bid.

played at home. More specifically, USM rescheduled homes games to be played in Jackson (1974 Texas-Arlington, 1975 BYU), Birmingham (1974 Alabama), Mobile (1974 VMI and Bowling Green), Biloxi (1975 Cal-State Fullerton), and New Orleans (1975 Lamar).¹³⁷

The new facility opened as M. M. Roberts Stadium in September of 1976 with a seating capacity of 33,000. Roberts was a 1917 graduate and football player on MNC's 1915 and 1916 teams. Roberts was also a longtime member of the IHL Board of Trustees, even serving a term as president. As an advocate for USM for nearly fifty years, Roberts was instrumental in helping the institution raise faculty and staff salaries, address various legal matters the school faced, and provide financial support to nearly 500 students via scholarship programs. Roberts was also a well-recognized supporter of USM athletics as an active participant in the school's Century, Big Gold, and Hardwood clubs, which were often used not just to support athletics but also academics at the institution. His support of athletics led to his being named the 1973 recipient of the annual USM Department of Intercollegiate Athletics Distinguished Service Award."¹³⁸

For the record, it should be noted that Roberts strongly opposed integration. As president of the IHL Board of Trustees, he voted to withhold a degree from James Meredith, who had integrated the University of Mississippi. Roberts also worked with the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a state sponsored spy agency that fought advances in civil rights for African Americans. He further sought unsuccessfully to ban civil rights leader Charles Evers from speaking on Mississippi college campuses.¹³⁹

A Conference to Call Home

The next significant change to M. M. Roberts Stadium did not occur until 1985 when new locker rooms, coaches' offices, a meeting room, and a weight room expansion project were added. The renovation was supported by a large single donation of \$250,000 recruited by the Big

¹³⁷ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 147, 151-152. A beverage contract with Coca-Cola helped cover the expense of the scoreboard.

¹³⁸ M. M. Roberts Stadium: USM vs. Ole Miss Game Program—Stadium Dedication, September 25, 1976; "Howard Sit, USM Construction: Up, Up, and Away," *The Southerner* (Hattiesburg, MS: University of Southern Mississippi Press, 1975), 284.

¹³⁹ Ashton Pittman, "Protesting Racism, USM Football Players March From Stadium Named For Segregationist" *Mississippi Free Press*, August 30, 2020.

Gold Club. According to athletic director Roland Dale, the gift was “largest single cash donation the school has ever received.”¹⁴⁰ The single meeting room accommodated up to 150 people while the addition of two new offices for coaches brought that total to nine.¹⁴¹ The weight room facility doubled in size and received air-conditioning in addition to offering a welcome space for visitors in an enlarged lobby area.¹⁴² These facility upgrades were supported by President Aubrey K. Lucas (1975-1996) as part of a clean campus initiative and highlighted both student and student-athlete recruiting as a point of emphasis and motivation for renovation.¹⁴³

In 1986, expenditures in college athletics were rising nationally and at USM, although the university experienced a \$417,000 decrease in state funding as the state of Mississippi set a new policy not to provide more than \$300,000 for school athletics.¹⁴⁴ This development prompted USM football to look for new opportunities to increase revenue. USM agreed to a television deal with the College Football Association (CFA) for \$140,000 following the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* case in 1984. This decision provided institutions and conferences the ability to control their own television contracts rather than rely or depend upon the NCAA to manage such affairs for them. Before the end of the 1980s, television contracts were a growing source of revenue even though gate receipts still remained the largest source for athletic departments.¹⁴⁵

Following the last of the renovations in the 1980s (i.e., installation of a new drainage system in 1989), USM joined Conference-USA (C-USA) in its inaugural season in 1995.¹⁴⁶ C-USA was initially comprised of twelve member institutions, six of which would compete for the league’s first football championship in 1996 with the winner going to the St.

¹⁴⁰ Chuck Abadie, “Renovation Project Planned,” *Hattiesburg American*, March 29, 1985, p. 1C.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4C.

¹⁴² Van Arnold, “Renovations Refresh USM,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 28, 1985, p. 2C.

¹⁴³ Abadie, “Renovation Project Planned,” 1C; Arnold, “Renovations Refresh USM,” p. 2C.

¹⁴⁴ Teresa L. Hollifield, “USM Football Revenue Expected to Increase by \$325,000 This Year,” *Student Printz*, July 9, 1986, p. 1.

¹⁴⁵ *NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, 468 U.S. 85 (1984).

¹⁴⁶ Smith, “Stadium Field Gets Drainage System,” 1.

Jude Liberty Bowl in Memphis.¹⁴⁷ After USM joined C-USA, athletic director Bill McLellan stated, “This is the most important step that Southern Miss has ever taken in its athletic history.” Most important were the television contracts C-USA enjoyed with ESPN, ESPN2, ABC, CBS, and Fox Sports Net who produced a “game of the week” for the new conference.¹⁴⁸

To prepare for competition in the new conference, USM athletics added a new scoreboard and signage to spruce up the stadium. Handrails, exterior fences, and south end speaker towers were painted black, and unsightly barbed wire around the stadium was removed. Associate athletic director Nick Floyd stated, “Some of the things we’re doing were suggested by our fans.” The changes to the stadium and move into a conference provided an immediate boost in attendance. Facilitating the attendance growth was the creation of a new support campaign called “Sellout ‘95” that helped sell “blocks of tickets to local businesses and organizations.”¹⁴⁹

One year later, USM continued to improve Roberts Stadium through the addition of a new \$1.3 million state-of-the-art video display board by Daktronics, a popular scoreboard manufacturer. The new video board was a significant upgrade that showed live action and replays along with graphics, statistics, and animations. It also used LED lights that “last three times longer than cathode-ray tubes and use half as much energy.” Regarding this point, David Bounds, USM assistant athletic director, acknowledged the school wanted the stadium to use less energy. The video board was financed through advertising sales and collectively accepted as improving the spectator experience and enhancing the overall appearance of the venue and university.¹⁵⁰

Over 2002 and 2003, a new 60,000-square foot building opened that housed the athletic department’s administrative offices and coaches’ offices, along with training space and locker rooms for the players. Approximately 25 percent of the money for the addition came from a 1996 state appropriation, while the remainder of the funding

¹⁴⁷ Cox & Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 226. Other C-USA schools vying for the conference crown were the University of Houston, Tulane University, University of Memphis, University of Cincinnati, and University of Louisville.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; See Tim Doherty, “USM Stadium Gets Facelift,” *Hattiesburg American*, August 20, 1995, p. 1B.

¹⁵⁰ Tim Doherty, “Lighting Up the Board” *Hattiesburg American*, April 5, 1998, pp. 1B, 4B.

was provided by private donations from the Circle of Champions, a support group that promised to donate \$10,000 per year for ten years.¹⁵¹ Soon after the completion of the new athletic department building, USM athletic director Richard Giannini heralded the stadium renovation capital campaign entitled “Building Dominance” as the most comprehensive building endeavor in the department’s history. The “Building Dominance” campaign expanded and renovated M. M. Roberts Stadium, but it also provided enhancements to other athletic venues.¹⁵² To put into perspective the need for athletic facilities upgrades at USM, Giannini stated, “Many of our facilities have had an only cosmetic renovation since their construction and, by today’s standards, are fast becoming obsolete. To remain competitive in C-USA and in NCAA Division I-A, this is a move we have to make.”¹⁵³

The “Building Dominance” campaign raised roughly \$32.7 million to renovate Roberts Stadium mainly through the establishment of premium football seating and enclosing the south end zone. Designed by Trahan Architects (Baton Rouge, LA), additional renovations included the installation of new artificial turf, a refurbished press box, new concession space and restrooms, and updated dressing rooms for visiting teams.¹⁵⁴ The success of the fundraising campaign permitted the USM Athletic Department to create the “Touchdown Terrace” of thirty luxury suites that seated twenty to twenty-four people at a cost of \$26,000-\$31,000 per year on five, seven, or ten-year leases.¹⁵⁵ Finally, more than 3,000 club seats were added in the end zone and east side of the M. M. Roberts Stadium, while more than 1,800 bench seats were added to the south end zone. Elsewhere, the west side club section added 650 new seats that swelled the stadium capacity to 41,300.¹⁵⁶

Giannini stressed the importance of the upgrades by stating, “In today’s world of college athletics, you’re either moving ahead or you’re falling further behind. Maintaining the status quo is not an option.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵¹ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 250.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁵³ “Athletic Facilities Renovation Unveiled,” *University of Southern Mississippi Athletic Department*, para. 4, accessed https://southernmiss.com/news/2003/4/10/Athletic_Facilities_Renovation_Plan_Unveiled.aspx.

¹⁵⁴ Daimon Eklund, “USM Details Facility Plan,” *Hattiesburg American*, April 11, 2003, pp. 1B-2B.

¹⁵⁵ Eklund, “USM Details Facility Plan,” 2B.

¹⁵⁶ Cox and Bennett, *Rock Solid*, 256.

¹⁵⁷ “Athletic Facilities Renovation Unveiled.”

USM felt they would fall behind Ole Miss and Mississippi State, which were well ahead of USM in the number of premium suites and club seats after renovations during the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, an overwhelming number of USM supporters believed that luxury boxes and club seats were symbols of legitimacy because they help get more people to games and convey to prospective students that USM is a major university. Luxury suites and club seats also are attractive to businesses. Since Hattiesburg is near several large southern cities with well-to-do alumni and businesses, the stadium improvements were perceived as capable of potentially producing the revenue needed to be perceived as legitimate by other schools.¹⁵⁹ USM fans and business partners responded by leasing all the suites for the 2006 season. USM coordinator for athletic development and community relations Reggie Collier considered the suite designs to be on par with other institutions around the country.¹⁶⁰

In 2004, Giannini revealed that the football field would be renamed, Carlisle-Faulkner Field at M. M. Roberts Stadium.¹⁶¹ USM athletic and university officials renamed the facility in honor of USM graduate and Golden Eagle supporter, Gene Carlisle, who donated money to install a hybrid natural-artificial turf field (Momentum Turf) in Roberts Stadium.¹⁶² The new Momentum Turf cost approximately \$300,000 and was supposedly capable of maximizing “player stability, speed, and performance, while maintaining a natural grass surface.” Giannini also added that the new surface reduced maintenance costs.¹⁶³

In 2013, a new \$550,000 artificial surface called Matrix Turf was installed by Hellas Construction as a result of damage to the field from a tornado that earlier swept through Hattiesburg.¹⁶⁴ There was also the installation of a new high definition videoboard in the north end zone to

¹⁵⁸ Pflieger and Seifried, “Mississippi State’s Davis Wade Stadium,” 169; Seifried and Novicevic, “Vaught-Hemingway Stadium at Hollingsworth Field and Ole Miss,” 142.

¹⁵⁹ Stan Caldwell, “Most USM Sky Boxes Leased,” *Hattiesburg American*, October 26, 2004, p. 8A.

¹⁶⁰ Daimon Eklund, “USM Leases All Suites for Roberts Stadium,” *Hattiesburg American*, March 23, 2005, p. 6A.

¹⁶¹ “*Carlisle-Falkner Field to be Dedicated on Saturday*,” University of Southern Mississippi, October 20, 2004, accessed https://southernmiss.com/news/2004/10/20/Carlisle_Faulkner_Field_To_Be_Dedicated_On_Saturday.aspx.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Jared Florreich, “New Football Turf Unveiled,” *Student Printz*, April 20, 2004, p. 1.

¹⁶⁴ Tim Doherty, “End in Sight for Turf Work,” *Hattiesburg American*, May 2, 2013, p. 1B.

improve the spectator experience.¹⁶⁵ In December of 2015, USM athletic director Bill McGillis revealed that \$1.6 million had been allotted for the renovation of a new football locker room, an expansion of the strength and conditioning center, and the development of a nutrition center for athletes. McGillis stated, “There may be bigger places, but the quality and functionality and aesthetics of what we’re about to have, we won’t have to take a back seat to anybody that we compete against. This locker room will be as nice as any in the SEC, as nice as any in the Pacific-12 Conference, as nice as any in America.”¹⁶⁶ Head football coach Todd Monken further claimed, “To have a championship program, you’ve got to have great facilities. We’ve had that, we want to sustain that, we want to build upon it. We’re on the cutting edge. We want to be ahead of our competition, not even, we want to be ahead of our competition.”¹⁶⁷

Conclusion

Collectively, the information in the present article demonstrates that reflexive thinking by key social actors (e.g., student-athletes, administrators, coaches, fans, alumni, and business partners) showcases their focus as often strategically employed to establish and/or pursue legitimacy. Further, the pursuit of legitimacy was often motivated by interest in increasing enrollment, alumni relationships and gifts, business partnerships, brand awareness, and revenue. Therefore, press boxes were built for media groups, premium seats for well-to-do patrons, businesses, and alumni, and advertising spaces like scoreboards with advanced technology were added. Next, internal spaces (e.g., weight rooms, locker rooms) and amenities (e.g., restrooms, concessions) were improved for fans and participants, along with the development of campaigns to help raise funds for athletics and academics. Overall, these advances helped improve the football program, its facilities, and the institution of USM over time. However, we also found the timing, scale, and frequency of changes to USM football and its facilities did not always meet the rate of progress

¹⁶⁵ Anna Grissett, “*M. M. Roberts Stadium-Southern Mississippi Golden Eagles*,” October 6, 2016, accessed <https://stadiumjourney.com/author/anna-grissett/>.

¹⁶⁶ Alan Hinton, “Southern Miss Announces \$1.6 Million Upgrade of Football Locker Room, Strength and Conditioning Facilities,” *Sun Herald*, December 14, 2015.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

shown by aspirational peers, thus preventing USM from accelerating its institutional status.

Finally, we show the pursuit of legitimacy by enhancing the football program and improving the stadium has provided other benefits for USM. For instance, efforts to join a conference (SIAA, GSC, and C-USA) and/or successful affiliation with high-prestige football-playing institutions in the South (SEC schools) or beating them (e.g., the five wins against the University of Alabama) boosted USM's reputation and financial situation. Moreover, these affiliations and commitment to football and stadium development provided USM with the opportunity to join the Sun Belt Conference in 2022. In this instance, the Sun Belt Conference made sense to USM and its supporters for a variety of the previously stated reasons that USM pursued changing conferences. First, the Sun Belt was attractive because its reputation and play has improved substantially in recent years, thus lending additional external legitimacy to USM. Second, USM athletic director Jeremy McClain noted that playing more regional peers will decrease yearly travel expenditures by \$500,000 for the athletic department, thus providing internal legitimacy. Third, the Sun Belt actually has a more attractive television agreement (i.e., coverage range and slight financial improvement) with ESPN than what C-USA offered with the CBS Sports Network, which is less viewed and heralded.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Rick Cleveland, "Southern Miss Move to Sun Belt Makes Sense on so Many Levels," *Mississippi Today*, October 26, 2021.