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Paying Homage to Visions of Bowl Games Gone By

By JIM REISLER

It is nearly time to break out the Barcalounger, football fans. Bowl season kicks off this week, setting off an indulgence of 32 televised games in 20 days featuring teams and players you have scarcely heard of and may never hear from again.

For every nail-biting finish to be commemorated by an ESPN retrospective replete with cinematic slow motion and a Hollywood score will come dozens of obscure games over the next three weeks that you may watch but will probably quickly forget.

What a good time, then, to pay homage to a forgettable pocket of football history: the wasteland of departed bowls. Prowl the Internet, and you will find evidence of 30 or so games in the dustbin. Remember Tampa's Cigar Bowl? The Camellia Bowl? The Presidential Cup Bowl in Maryland? The list goes on and on. Goodbye, Salad Bowl, Bluegrass Bowl, Dixie Classic. So long, Aviation Bowl in Dayton, Ohio.

Many of those bowl games were played in exotic places. So what were organizers thinking in putting together the Garden State Bowl at the midwinter splendor of Giants Stadium?

Starting in 1978, the Garden State Bowl staggered through four lackluster years before its timely death. At least the game extended a season for Rutgers. The [Scarlet Knights](#) dropped the first Garden State Bowl game to Arizona State.

But neither the cold of that game nor the obscurity of Houston's Oil Bowl or San Diego's Harbor Bowl — each played in the 1940s — measure up to probably the wackiest bowl game of all: New York's own Gotham Bowl.

Headlines trumpeted the Gotham Bowl as a welcome addition to the 1960 bowl parade. Organizers envisioned a packed Yankee Stadium with brass bands and 55,000 cheering fans. They trotted out the former [Giants](#) great Ken Strong to drum up excitement. Wouldn't it be great, Strong wondered aloud, if [Notre Dame](#) or Syracuse would accept invitations to play?

But Notre Dame did not play bowl games in those days. Syracuse turned down an invitation to the Gotham Bowl, as did [Oregon State](#), Colorado and even Holy Cross. Who could blame them? Mid-December in New York is usually, well, bone-chillingly cold. The result: no Gotham Bowl in 1960.

Organizers gave it another shot in 1961, when Baylor defeated Utah State, 24-9, at the aging Polo Grounds. The announced attendance was 15,123. Investors lost \$100,000.

Gotham Bowl officials had high hopes for the 1962 game. They matched the Nebraska Cornhuskers against the [Miami Hurricanes](#), led by the all-American quarterback George Mira.

But Nebraska officials held the team's flight to New York on a runway in Lincoln for two hours until they were assured that a certified expense check for \$35,000 had been deposited in the bank. "If I had to do over again, I wouldn't," Nebraska Coach Bob Devaney told reporters before the game.

By game time, Devaney and his Cornhuskers were at Yankee Stadium, but reporters were not — New York newspaper employees had been on strike for days, depriving the Gotham Bowl of major publicity. The temperature was 14 degrees at game time, and only 6,166 tickets had been sold. The actual crowd was estimated at less than half that number.

It was not a bad game, which Nebraska won by 36-34. But Gotham Bowl officials lost another \$50,000. The next spring, the game was folded.

By the 1980s, bowl officials had settled on a warm-weather strategy. But even that was not enough to save some games. Remember the Oahu Bowl in Honolulu? First played in 1998, it died in 2000. And although the Blockbuster Bowl made its debut in Miami in 1990, the game became the Carquest Bowl in 1994 and the Micron PC Bowl in 1998. By 2000, it was the 2000 [MicronPC.com](#) Bowl. Remember its champion? It was [North Carolina State](#).

Trying to remember who played in the MicronPC.com Bowl goes to the heart of the current bowl situation. Many of the games these next three weeks come with tongue-twister corporate names, like the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl in Fort Worth. And on New Year's Day comes not only the Rose Bowl, but the "Rose Bowl presented by Citi."

So maybe some of those forgotten games were not so bad after all. At least the names were simpler. Hard to get revved up about this year's Gaylord Hotels Music City Bowl in Nashville?

Consider, then, that Christmas Day is the 100th anniversary of the first Bacardi Bowl, also known as the Cigar Bowl and the Rhumba Bowl, in Havana. Louisiana State pounded Havana University, 56-0.

For the record, this season's crop of games starts Thursday with the San Diego County Credit Union Poinsettia Bowl.

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