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Tuning Out The Band

SELENA ROBERTS

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On the sunny side of Florida International's \$50 million, 20,000-seat football stadium in South Miami, one year removed from its unveiling, construction residue has the feel of pixie dust. The new 14,000-square-foot weight room still has that new-car smell—if your ride is a Bentley. "It's impressive," says Steve Lantz, who is not only the Golden Panthers' team chaplain but also an actor. (He once pushed Tony Stewart in a cart for a Home Depot commercial.) "FIU has arrived; our rivals are Florida and Miami now." And he didn't even appear to be reading lines.

Since moving up from Division I-AA to the Sun Belt in the fall of 2005, the athletic program has been trying to establish itself as a big-time player in the same area code as the Hurricanes'. FIU's football team has dates with Alabama, Rutgers and Florida, in addition to its conference schedule. The basketball team shed its plucky character for a slick coach in designer suits when it gave Isiah Thomas a five-year, \$1.3 million deal in April, even though the former Knicks coach, Raptors general manager and CBA czar has spread bad karma at each stop.

But it's not win-at-all-costs for FIU athletics. What does a budding Division I-A team have to do to live the high life? Dump the muses with tubas. The marching Golden Panthers received their walking papers in June, leaving FIU as the only I-A program in the nation without a band. The culprit was unavoidable budget cuts, university officials say. It was selective savings, band members believe.

"The athletic department could have come through but didn't," says senior Ernesto Fernandez, FIU's would-be drum major, who pitched a save-the-band proposal to outgoing university president Modesto Maidique in April. Fernandez's plan included a measure for the athletic department to up its \$50,000 portion of the band's \$200,000 operating cost. "Everyone else was willing to pitch in more—like the student government—but athletics wouldn't," he says. "I don't want to start a war with them, but they've taken us for granted. They'll miss us when we're gone."

This is tough talk for a 5'5" bespectacled music major who has had his baton taken away. But Fernandez's candor went unchallenged by athletic director Pete Garcia, who in his three-year tenure has spent freely even as the school has had to cough up scholarships—nine in football and two in basketball—because FIU athletes failed to make academic progress. Through a school spokesman Garcia declined to talk about the band. It's a sore subject, for sure. "Athletics just thinks we're a bunch of individuals who make noise," says Fernandez.

It's not noise made by a collection of science and art majors getting their geek on; it's the mood music of college football pageantry, every bit as essential to selling a program as whirlpools in the locker room. What if the halftime show becomes karaoke night? What if the homecoming parade is backed by a boom box? "It could be embarrassing for FIU and regrettable," says Fernandez. Lantz isn't dismayed at the cheap imagery. "The stadium is going to rock," he says. "I can see us piping in rap or hip-hop—well, without the dirty lyrics." (This, of course, leaves FIU with only a bounty of MC Hammer tunes, circa parachute pants.)

Maybe I'm just a wind-instrument sympathizer. I marched in ninth grade as a perm-wearing baritone-sax player, which meant two things: I was kicked off the alto sax for lousy practice habits, and my only highlight was a one-note solo in *Another One Bites the Dust*. So I know from experience there has always been an odd-couple relationship between band members—portrayed as socially awkward wallflowers, like in the movie *American Pie* ("This one time, at band camp ...")—and the big men on campus they support with fight songs even when the battles have been long lost.

The band doesn't boo. It cues the cheers. With its brass finishes it's the bling of a program. It can also become its signature. What is Ohio State football without a select band member—or a surprise celebrity—dotting the *i* in the script *Ohio* formation? How many games would Tennessee have won over the years without its band blasting opponents' senses raw with 602 verses of *Rocky Top* during a game? What would a Stanford-Cal flashback be without the 1982 clip of Cal's Kevin Moen wiping out a Stanford trombone player in the end zone to win the game?

In many ways FIU has sold the soulful side of its program for fancier digs and a shot at a bowl bid. At football practice last Friday a facilities worker pointed to the corner of the improved stadium and said, "That's where the band sits,"

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before correcting himself to say, "The band *used* to sit." The leader of the marching Golden Panthers is—or *used* to be—Fernandez. "I may go to some games to support my friends who play," he says. "But I won't support athletics because they don't support me, my potential, my career, my college dream."

His dream football season ended the day the music died.

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