



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

# THE RIGHT TEAM

**BERRY IS ADDING FOOTBALL** to its strong lineup of varsity sports in the fall of 2013, having received unanimous approval by the Berry College Board of Trustees at its October meeting. After a robust – and sometimes noisy – campus decision-making process, I am confident that this decision positions Berry well for the decades ahead in ways that extend far beyond athletics.

## THE CONTEXT

People in the Southeast are passionate about college football – often beyond logic. The drama of another season concluded recently as Louisiana State University and the University of Alabama met in a rematch to determine the 2011 BCS National Football Championship, ensuring the Southeastern Conference its sixth consecutive national title.

It's difficult to exaggerate the fanaticism that accompanies SEC football. With an average crowd of more than 100,000, home games at the University of Alabama are larger than the Super Bowl. Average attendance at SEC games exceeds that of NFL games. Major-college football is big business: Television revenue alone generates about \$17 million a year for each of the SEC schools.

The discussion about adding football at Berry was inevitably colored by this larger context. Although intercollegiate football at a school like Berry bears little resemblance to the BCS spectacle, many find it difficult to think of football in any other way. For some, college football is appealing, while others find it appalling.

We should all be troubled by what is happening in college football today. The lust to win has created a culture riddled with

recruiting scandals and player misconduct. It's a culture dominated by dollars. The football budgets for LSU and Alabama exceed \$70 million, including multimillion-dollar salaries for the head coaches. Even the assistant coaches earn salaries exceeding \$250,000. Now, advocacy groups are calling for BCS football players to be paid a salary based on their value to the institution. One can make a compelling case that major-college football is out of control.

At the same time, football remains the most popular sport for high school boys with more participants than basketball and baseball combined. Many young men want to play football at the collegiate level, including those interested in an academically challenging residential college like Berry.

Some may be surprised to learn that football has a long history even at Berry, in the intramural and club form. Records

indicate that a student-formed team existed as early as 1906, and two campus literary societies enjoyed an annual Mountain Day tackle football game for a number of years. There is a long-running legend that Martha Berry banned football in her will, but there is no mention of football or any

other sport in that document. And while a 1925 letter did prohibit Berry's high school boys from playing baseball, football and

other sports, a football field is clearly sited behind Richards Gymnasium in a 1937 master plan of the college campus.

## THE PROCESS

Over the last decade, Berry has deliberately increased its number of varsity sports as part of a strategic commitment to enhance the college's reputation as a top-tier residential college. At this point, football is the only major sport that Berry does not offer.

Residential institutions often emphasize athletic participation as an integral part of the campus experience and encourage student-athletes to be broadly involved in campus life. This culture of participation, reinforced by the absence of athletic scholarships, defines Division III of the NCAA, which is why most top liberal arts institutions belong to that division and why Berry joined in 2009.

The issue of football was considered briefly at Berry about seven years ago, but a study was postponed in order to focus on the need for upgraded facilities and expanded opportunities for women. The process of studying football began in earnest in 2010, two years after the opening of the Cage Center.

In spring 2011, Berry retained a consulting firm with experience in the start-up of Division III football programs to provide a formal review of program needs and costs. As part of their review, the consultants interviewed more than 90 people representing all parts of the Berry community. The plan was to present the consultant's report to the Board of Trustees at its May meeting, develop a refined cost projection for Berry during the summer, and then submit all of this material for open discussion on campus in the fall of 2011.

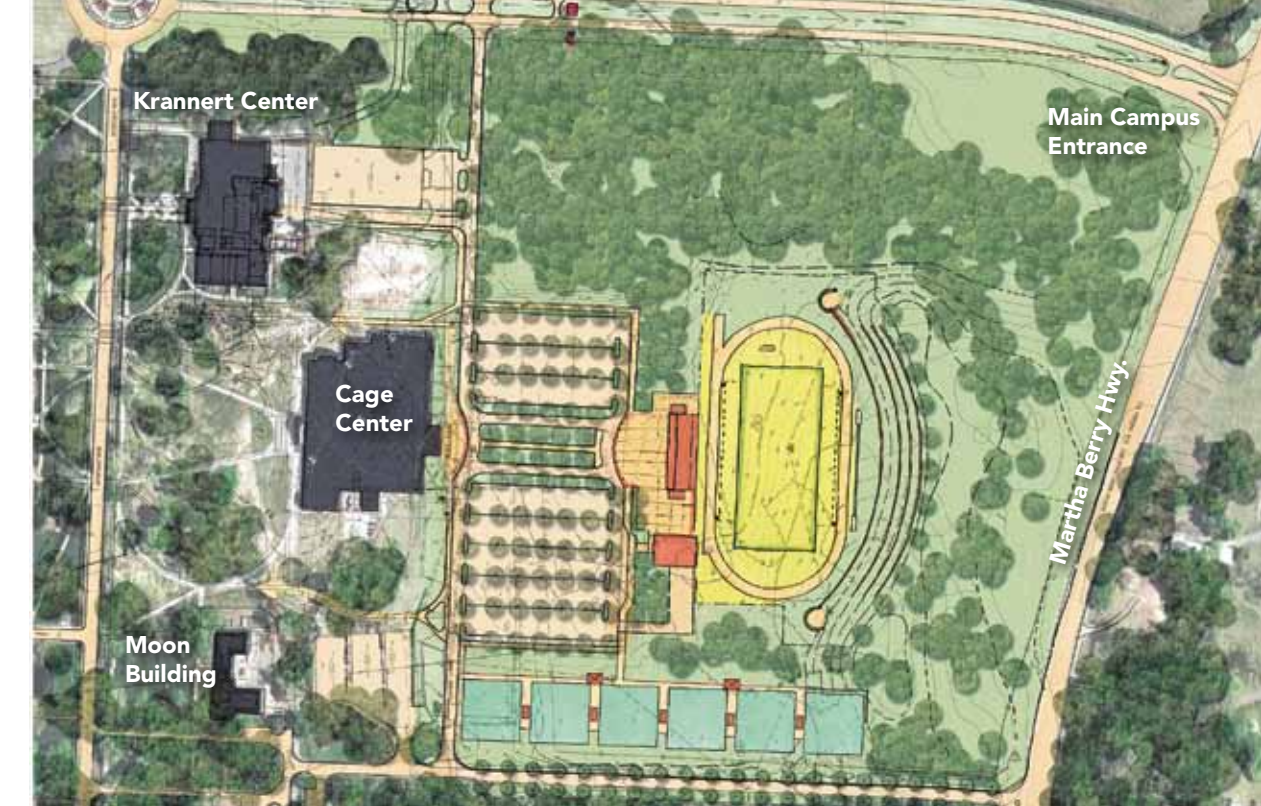
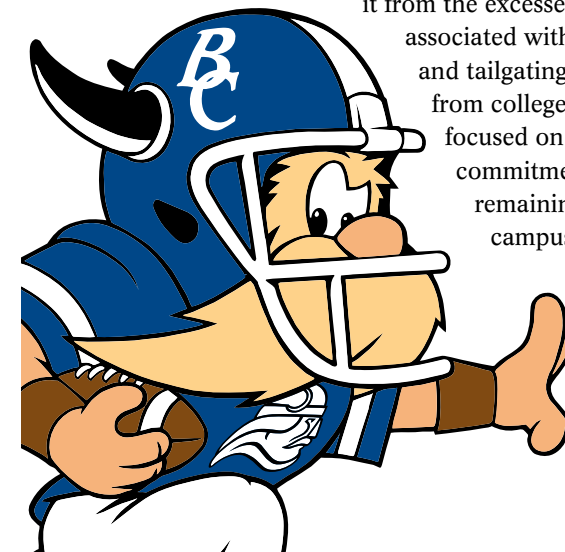
In the days leading up to the May meeting of the Board, however, the question of football took on new urgency. In joining Division III, one of our hopes and goals was to be accepted as a member of the Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference (SCAC), a group of 12 highly regarded colleges and universities extending from Georgia and Kentucky to Texas and Colorado. After several years of inquiries and overtures from us, a group of the SCAC's eastern members approached Berry about joining them in forming a new conference. The one stipulation was that Berry had to agree to add football and make that decision within two weeks (by the end of May).

While it was Berry's good fortune to be in the midst of a football study, our Board determined it inappropriate to make such a decision without completing the on-campus review process. Thankfully, the other members of the new conference affirmed this principle, and Berry joined them as a charter member of the Southern Athletic Association, which commences play in 2012. The on-campus discussion then ensued as planned.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In the early stages of review, campus vibrancy, particularly in September and October, and an improved male-to-female ratio were identified as two primary benefits of adding football. As the game tends to be a social experience as well as an athletic event, football at Berry will add many opportunities to have parents, alumni and friends on campus in the early fall and to build additional appropriate events around it.

Campus culture and cost were the areas of greatest concern. People at Berry care about its special culture and want to protect it from the excesses sometimes associated with football and tailgating. Questions from college constituents focused on Berry's commitment to remaining a dry campus and the



This initial rendering demonstrates the planned location for Berry's football, track and tennis complex to be constructed as funds are raised.

behavioral challenges of having a large group of men all part of one team.

In many ways, it was affirming to hear students and alumni talk about the reasons they love the Berry community and the kind of campus experience we provide. Everyone agrees that we must pay careful attention to setting the right tone, beginning with the selection of the right head coach, in order for football to be successfully integrated at Berry. It will not be enough just to endorse Berry's mission; the right coach must be a champion for Berry's campus culture. (By way of update, we had already received letters of interest from 65 candidates prior to release of the position description in early January.)

Operating costs for the football program are estimated at \$600,000 per year (including coaching and related staff salaries as well as uniforms, insurance and game-day expenses). These expenses will be offset by the tuition (less regular financial aid) generated by the 80 or more additional students at Berry who will play on the team. This net revenue will also be sufficient to cover the additional faculty members needed to maintain our current student-to-faculty ratio.

One of the clear preferences expressed by many on campus was to add football only if Berry could "do it right," meaning building appropriate facilities on campus. But there also was a concern about borrowing money to fund these facilities. Our current plan is to build a facility across the parking lot from the Cage Center, using an existing ridge line to hide the field from Martha Berry Highway.

Phase I will cost approximately \$4 million and includes stadium and terraced (hillside)

seating, a synthetic turf field, lights and a locker room facility. Phase II (another \$2.5 million) adds additional seating, a new complex of tennis courts and an eight-lane track that will open track and field as a new athletic option for both men and women. The facility will be funded by gifts to the college; construction will begin as adequate funds are raised.

## THE FINAL FACTOR

In the end, after considering all factors, our board approved the addition of football largely because it believes that Berry's continued success will be enhanced through long-term affiliation with the colleges and universities that are members of the Southern Athletic Association. Athletic affiliations of this sort often facilitate academic comparisons, as seen most notably in the Ivy League, which was formed as an athletic conference. By adding football, we strengthen the stability of the SAA and facilitate conference scheduling. We accentuate the visibility of our affiliation with these fine institutions even as we help ensure that the new conference will thrive.

We have joined the right team, a fact that was underscored in early December when two very highly regarded academic institutions were accepted as affiliate members of the SAA, competing in football only, beginning in 2015. The new colleagues in Berry's conference are the University of Chicago and Washington University at St. Louis. I hope to see you here in 2015 when Berry hosts one of those renowned institutions on our campus! **B**