

Liberty Bowl founder Bud Dudley dies at 88

Reputation built on salesmanship, loyalty

By Ron Higgins

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AutoZone Liberty Bowl founder A.F. "Bud" Dudley, the only person in college football history to create and become sole owner of a bowl game, died after an extended illness at a Memphis nursing home early Tuesday morning.

He was 88.

Dudley, a Notre Dame graduate, World War II veteran and former Villanova athletic director, created the game in 1959 in Philadelphia, Pa. He kept it there for five years and moved it to Atlantic City, N.J., in 1964 before bringing it to Memphis in 1965.

His original intention after he left Atlantic City was to move the bowl every year or so to various cities that didn't have a bowl. But, as he once said, "After I got to Memphis, I never got to the other cities."

Dudley retired as the bowl's executive director in 1994, replaced by current executive director Steve Ehrhart.

"Bud was one of the giants of the college football world," Ehrhart said. "There wasn't a finer gentleman in the bowl business than Bud.

"While he'll be remembered for being a great promoter and a progressive thinker, our intent is to always preserve Bud's mission for this bowl. And that's emphasizing patriotism and liberty."

As word of Dudley's death spread Tuesday, plaudits came from near and far. They all emphasized Dudley's brilliance as a promoter, as well as his class and civility.

"Saying that Bud Dudley is one of Memphis' finest is probably an understatement," said Dick Hackett, former Memphis mayor who, in his former fundraising role for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, convinced Dudley the bowl should have a charitable tie-in with the hospital. "He loved his God, his family and his city. Those were the orders of his life and he lived them."

Former Notre Dame athletic director and Atlantic Coast Conference commissioner Gene Corrigan said Dudley's salesmanship set an example for all bowls.

Dudley was one of the first bowl executives to attend the annual business meetings of the various major college athletic conferences. Until the 1980s, most conferences

didn't have contracts for bowl tie-ins, so it was up to the bowls to wheel and deal with schools.

"Back in the '60s, other than the four major bowls then -- the Rose, Sugar, Orange and Cotton -- bowls weren't a big deal," Corrigan said. "Bud was selling something that a lot of people weren't buying.

"He was selling Memphis. He wasn't selling New York or Los Angeles. He sold Memphis, and there wasn't anybody who didn't walk away from that (Liberty) Bowl thinking Memphis wasn't a terrific city."

Dudley's personal touch was so strong that those in the college football world felt the Memphis game could have easily been called "Bud's Bowl."

"Other bowls had corporate sponsors and many committees, but Bud was deeply involved in everything about his bowl," said Grant Teaff, executive director of the American Football Coaches Association and Baylor coach who led the Bears to a 21-7 victory over LSU in the '85 Liberty Bowl. "He made you really feel wanted in his bowl and when you got there you felt at home."

Bill McElroy, a former Liberty Bowl president, longtime scout and one of Dudley's closest friends, said the secret of Dudley's success was simple.

"Bud's loyalty stood out," McElroy said. "He was loyal to everything and everybody I can think of -- his family, his friends, his church, the city of Memphis and the game of football."

Dudley was preceded in death by his wife, Peggy, and is survived by his six children.

Visitation will be 5 to 7 p.m. Thursday at Canale Funeral Home. Services are 1:30 p.m. Friday at St. Louis Catholic.

Contributions may be made to Shelby Residential and Vocational Services, 3592 Knight Arnold, Memphis, 38118.

A.F. 'Bud' Dudley

Personal: Born Aug. 26, 1919, in Philadelphia, Pa.; graduated from Notre Dame in 1943; served in Army Air Corps; awarded Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with five clusters and seven major battle stars.

Family: Wife, Peggy (deceased); survived by his six children and 11 grandchildren.

Professional: Athletic director, Villanova, 1953-57; started Liberty Bowl in December 1959, serving as executive director.

Honors, awards: Inducted into Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame in 1988; recognized by National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame, Notre Dame University and the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge.