

# Geoff Calkins: U of M failures don't include lack of passion

- By Geoff Calkins
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PHOTO BY [MARK WEBER](#)

Memphis athletics director R.C. Johnson

It was deep in the third quarter, and Central Florida was already up by 24, so the broadcasting crew decided to kill some time by having Memphis athletic director R.C. Johnson in the booth.

Within moments, Central Florida scored another touchdown.

"Again, the timing's terrible, guys," said Johnson.

He can say that again.

The timing is terrible for Memphis. The timing is terrible for anyone who wishes the program well. The Big East keeps adding members in a desperate attempt to stay alive. Today, the conference is expected to ask three more Conference USA schools to join up.

Schools that will be invited: Central Florida, SMU and Houston.

A school that will not be invited: Memphis.

Again, the timing's terrible, guys.

And the leadership. And the vision. And all the things we've been over before.

Maybe it's an accident that Louisville, Cincinnati, South Florida, TCU, Houston, Central Florida and SMU have all now managed to find a way into a BCS Conference and Memphis has not.

"We've been selling -- our women's soccer is now fourth in the nation," Johnson said to the guys in the booth.

Deep, deep sigh.

Listen, I'm not going to spend yet another column outlining all the reasons it's time for Johnson to move on. I just want better for the program. I lament days like this.

Nobody is going to argue that Memphis is Ohio State or Oklahoma. Nobody is going to suggest that Memphis should be some kind of football power.

But I continue to believe that if Memphis could somehow get into a BCS conference, that if teams like Louisville and UConn and Rutgers came to town, that if Memphis was in a position to earn a spot in a BCS bowl by winning its conference, it would change everything around here.

People in Memphis would support a real football program. People in Memphis want to pull for their school.

We hear all the time about the challenges that Memphis football has to overcome, but we don't hear nearly enough about the one thing Memphis has going for it that a lot of schools don't.

Passion. As in, people really care about the place. Nobody in Dallas gives a flip about SMU. Sports fans in Houston have the Texans to worry about.

In Memphis, it's the Tigers. It has ever been thus.

So, yes, I blame the current leadership for squandering that passion, for not harnessing it as part of a BCS campaign. What does it say that the push for an on-campus stadium a few years back came from the grass roots, from the fans? The administration summarily squashed it, which seems to be its chosen role.

Rick Pitino has been a more effective spokesman for the university than the people who are paid to do the job. He seems to really believe in the place. Pitino for AD?

Or maybe he's doing enough right where he is. That's the silver lining in all this. While Memphis won't get a BCS invitation today, one could still come.

The Big East is down to five football schools. Central Florida, Houston and SMU will push the number to eight. Boise State, Air Force and Navy -- if they join as football-only members -- will get it to 11.

The conference needs at least 12. So Memphis has a chance. Most people seem to think the Tigers rank behind BYU and Temple, but nobody knows for certain. And BYU may well pass on the invitation. And Villanova wants to keep Temple out.

So Memphis could yet get an invitation, despite itself.

And, yes, I would be happy for Johnson at that point. Who wouldn't be?

He could ride off into the sunset with a modicum of self-respect. He would be able to claim victory on his way out the door. In the meantime, the broader university would be able to move on to another topic, and wouldn't that be nice?

The other day, I went to a breakfast hosted by Elliot Perry to highlight his new Education Champions campaign. Rabbi Micah Greenstein spoke, too, and brought up the Memphis business school.

A decade ago, the business school was in danger of losing its accreditation. Now it's among the top 25 percent of business schools in the land. Isn't it too bad we don't hear more about that, said Greenstein, and less about the football program?

Answer: Of course it's too bad. And of course that's how the world works. Alabama and LSU will get a lot of attention this week, and it won't be for their social work programs.

So here's to the business school, for coming back from near death. And here's hoping the football program can do the same thing.

UCF, Houston and SMU have shown it's not that difficult. Maybe Memphis can be next.

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