

Rob Higgins is Tampa Bay's big game hunter

By Greg Auman

Times Staff Writer

Rob Higgins stood behind the lectern making his pitch to bring the Women's Final Four to Tampa.

The carefully orchestrated costumes his staff wore introduced the NCAA committee to the stereotypical characters of the area, from tacky tourist to cruise director to deep-sea fisherman.

"Guys, we feel like we know you better than anybody," said Higgins, himself in a tuxedo jacket during the presentation in 2008. "We will work our pants off for you guys."

With that, he stepped from behind the lectern to reveal he wore no pants. On the back of his boxer shorts were the words, "VOTE TAMPA BAY."

Tampa landed the 2015 event.

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Rob Higgins is a little-known man who creates memorable moments.

At 34, he is Tampa's big game hunter, heading the Tampa Bay Sports Commission, a nonprofit corporation partially funded by Hillsborough County and charged with bidding on and hosting major amateur events.

Since Higgins took over in 2004, it has brought the ACC and SEC men's basketball tournaments, ACC football championship, Frozen Four and Women's Final Four to Tampa Bay. Currently, it is stalking the new College Football Playoff championship game.

Higgins and his team land such events by making a lasting impression on selection committees. He is creative and deft at recruiting the right allies. Among his signature moves is the power cameo, a surprise guest from the local sports scene to underscore his message.

When he decided, in 2005, to pitch Tampa as an outside-the-box option for the Frozen Four, the NCAA hockey championship weekend that had never been held in the South, he found the perfect representative. Midway through his pitch, he was interrupted by the Lightning's Marty St. Louis, the NHL's reigning MVP who walked into the room ... carrying the Stanley Cup.

"It was all about getting people excited about the possibility the NCAA could come here, and obviously, it paid off," said St. Louis, who played in the Frozen Four while at Vermont and told the committee of Tampa's passion for the sport.

"It's a Super Bowl destination. Tampa has so much to offer; warm climate, beautiful weather. There was so much here besides watching a couple of hockey games."

The NCAA intended to award Frozen Fours for 2009-11 but threw Higgins a curve at the end, asking him if Tampa could host in 2012. Without blinking, he reached into his bag and handed over facility and hotel agreements for 2012 — in place as a contingency.

Another power came? When Tampa bid on the 2008-09 ACC football championships, Higgins left his cell phone on during the pitch meeting and a call loudly interrupted him.

He took the call — enjoying the looks of surprise from committee members — and told the caller if the Tampa pitch meant so much to him, he should be there in person. On cue, Ronde Barber, the Bucs cornerback and graduate of ACC school Virginia, walked in to espouse the virtues of Tampa Bay.

Barber said Higgins is a thoughtful friend.

The Buc joked at his retirement announcement that Matt Bryant got the key to the city of Tampa in 2006 for a 62-yard winning field goal against the Eagles in a game during which Barber returned two interceptions for touchdowns. Higgins kidded he'd take care of the slight. And last month, at the end of the Sneaker Soiree, an annual event honoring the local sports community, Mayor Bob Buckhorn gave Barber the key to the city.

"There's something about him. He certainly has creativity, but he also has a lot of initiative," Barber said. "I didn't know him from anything when he called me (for the ACC pitch). He's a very likeable guy who has some really good ideas."

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Higgins, who attended Jesuit and majored in mass communications at USF, has been the commission's executive director since 2005, but he has been precocious all his life. His start with Tampa athletics came at age 7, during Sunday mass with his family the night after a USF men's basketball game.

As congregants exchanged greetings, Higgins turned to then-Bulls assistant Tommy Tonelli and instead of the standard, "Peace be with you," he offered a smile and said, "Good game last night, Coach."

Tonelli asked him after the service to be a ball boy. From there, Higgins remained a fixture with USF basketball, graduating to team manager before he even graduated middle school and coordinating his schedule at Jesuit so he could attend afternoon practices. By his sophomore year of high school, he was traveling for weekend road games.

"At a very young age, he was willing to accept responsibility and understood the importance of what his role was," former Bulls coach Bobby Paschal said.

When Paschal left coaching for an administrative role at USF, Higgins, whose basketball playing days ended in eighth grade, followed suit. He excelled so much, he was an assistant athletic director before he finished his degree.

He came up with a basketball reunion game, calling former players such as Chucky Atkins, selling sponsorships and tickets, ordering uniforms and giving himself a taste of his future. He helped plan the building now called the Lee Roy Selmon Athletic Center and helped coordinate the NCAA Tournament games in Tampa in 2003 — at just 24 years old.

"I knew that being in that position that Rob would exhibit the talent he had to deal with people," Paschal said. "He was so perceptive about how to get things done and how to get people to do things that needed to be done to accomplish our goals. He's done a tremendous job, but even at a young age, I had no doubts he would be extremely successful and a strong benefit to our entire community."

Higgins' community pride shines through everything he does. His wife, Casey, who played basketball at Kansas, is the athletic director at Corpus Christi Catholic middle school in Temple Terrace, where daughter Laney, 9, and son Landon, 7, attend. You'll find Higgins at their soccer and basketball games, happy to boast he has never lived or worked anywhere but in Tampa.

"Have never, and hopefully, will never. This is a dream job for me," he says from his office at Tampa's SunTrust Financial Centre. "I was fortunate enough to go to high school here, and there's a reason why I chose to go to USF and stay in my hometown. I wanted to be here forever. I really don't envision myself doing anything else."

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Through the years, Higgins has built relationships that have helped unite the local sports community. When he came to the sports commission, he had a staff of two and there were about 100 such groups across the country. Now he has a staff of six and there are more than 600 such groups.

Tampa's has had its hands in 115 events over the past year. They range from local children's triathlons to national events, including preparations for that 2015 Women's Final Four he bid for with no pants.

Last month's Sneaker Soiree, a fundraiser for the commission, brought together a who's who of local sports, including coaches Greg Schiano (Bucs), Joe Maddon (Rays) and Jon Cooper (Lightning).

Higgins' job was to introduce Florida graduate and former ESPN reporter Jenn Brown as emcee. But he always likes to put on a show.

He had two requests for Titus O'Neil, a former Gator football player now a 6-foot-6, 270-pound pro wrestler who was supposed to grab him on the stage and carry him off as part of the banquet's opening: throw him over the shoulder nice and easy and take it easy on the baby oil so as not to ruin Higgins' suit.

O'Neil came on stage as scripted, glistening with oil, of course. But a bigger surprise awaited Higgins when O'Neil hoisted him up.

"He goes five-hole," said Higgins, referencing the space between a hockey goalie's legs.

So the look of shock on Higgins' face as he hung above the air was not staged, a reminder that some of the more memorable events in life are beyond even the most detailed, careful planning.

"He does not mind making fun of himself," Barber said.

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Creativity, fun and relationships might help Higgins' next big game hunt, the championship of the new four-team College Football Playoff.

Bill Hancock is the executive director of the BCS and College Football Playoff. Higgins has known him since he was an executive with the NCAA basketball tournament.

Hancock jokes about the size of the NCAA's operations manual ("an inch-and-a-half thick") but said he learned during an early visit to Tampa about Higgins' attention to detail.

"We could say we need 24 water bottles for each bench, and he'd say, 'No, the book says 28,' " Hancock said. "And he did it in such a nice, polite way: I'm coming to you hat in hand here. The book says 28."

Higgins and his team impressed Hancock again this spring, bidding for the first championship in January 2015, a competition widely thought to be a shoo-in for Cowboys Stadium in the Dallas suburb of Arlington. Higgins' presentation nearly pulled an upset and put Tampa in position to land a future title game. (The next cycle could be awarded as soon as this summer.)

"He got all the resources of the community together and said to them: 'Everybody's talking about Dallas, but I think we have a chance at this. Let's get after it,' " Hancock said. "Rob and his team put together a bid that absolutely got our attention. They didn't win at the end of the day. Dallas' stadium more than anything (won) for them.

I don't want to improperly create expectations about the next round, but Rob's work was very impressive."

And no matter what his target, Higgins will be able to rely on his allies.

"He's one of those guys you're willing to do things for because he's such a good guy," Barber said. "I've never said no to him, actually. You know if he calls you, it's a good cause and something that will benefit the area."

Greg Auman can be reached at auman@tampabay.com. Follow him on Twitter at @gregauman.
. Fast facts

Tampa's

greatest hits

The Tampa Bay Sports Commission has hosted several big events since Rob Higgins became executive director in 2004. The biggest:

2007 ACC men's basketball tournament: A sellout crowd of 22,269 watched North Carolina win the title. N.C. State, the No. 10 seed, knocked off No. 2 and No. 3 but lost in the final to the No. 1 Tar Heels.

2008 NCAA men's basketball opening rounds: Best known for its upsets — four teams seeded 12th or lower winning — and wild finishes — Western Kentucky's 3-pointer with 1.5 seconds left in overtime beating Drake and San Diego's shot with 1.2 seconds left in overtime beating Connecticut.

2008 NCAA Women's Final Four: Tennessee won its eighth national championship — and last under legendary coach Pat Summitt — beating Stanford easily in the final behind All-American Candace Parker. The event returns in 2015.

2009 SEC men's basketball tournament: Mississippi State, 9-7 in the conference during the regular season, won four games in four days. With Florida and fan-favorite Kentucky out before the semifinals, the final against Tennessee drew an announced 10,093.

2012 NCAA Frozen Four: The event had never been held in the South, but more than 18,000 fans watched Boston College beat Ferris State in the final. The host school — closest with a Division I program — was Alabama-Huntsville