

Concessionworks

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College concessionaire jumps to the major leagues

by Susan Cross

Terry Conlon, ECM, has had an interesting year. For the past 15 years, he has been the director of concessions at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, where he is responsible for football, baseball, softball, volleyball, soccer, gymnastics, track, tennis and wrestling concessions. This year, however, has been quite a bit different.



In addition to his normal routine, Conlon has been the director of concessions for a major league football team – the NFL's Chicago Bears. While the Bears' home, Soldier Field, is being renovated, the Bears have called U of I's Memorial Stadium home.

The path to the major leagues for Conlon and his team has involved a glut of new products, a labyrinth of new procedures, detailed press scrutiny, a new state law, and one heck of a weight loss plan. "I've lost 20 pounds!" laughs Conlon.

From Chicago to Champaign

The planning for the Bears influx into Champaign began in October of 2001, long before the University was even chosen for the Bears' home. The University

sent Conlon and three staff to Chicago to three Bears home games to observe "just to get a good idea of what to expect."

The official announcement from the Bears came in February of 2002, and Conlon was off and running. "The big issue was whether or not we would be allowed to sell beer," he stated. "That really wasn't decided until May or June."

As a state school, the University is prohibited from selling alcohol on school property. In order to sell beer at Bears games, a virtual necessity at a pro stadium, there needed to be a state law. The Illinois State legislature passed a law enabling beer sales at Memorial Stadium for Bears games during the 2002-2003 season, with the possibility of extending that should the Bears

need to play additional games in Champaign at the beginning of the 2003-2004 season. "The amendment was passed only for Bears games, and only for beer sales," explained Conlon.

With the Bears and the University's Illini football team sharing a stadium, Conlon became one of a select few people who have run college and professional concessions from the same football venue. Three other universities have hosted both – Arizona State University with the Arizona Cardinals; the University of Washington with the Seattle Seahawks, and Vanderbilt University with the Tennessee Titans. Vanderbilt and Washington, however, did not serve beer.

"I flew out to Arizona to observe how to switch from a college to pro game

overnight. ASU is handled by Fine Host, and Sue Boettcher, ECM, was very helpful to me." Conlon got feedback from Grant Reed at Vanderbilt on what to expect from the crowd. Conlon also relied on industry contacts, including members of the NAC board, of which he is a member. "One day, when I was socializing at the NAC convention, Randy Collins, ECM, of the Charlotte Coliseum Authority gave me some hints on operating a pro venue. Other people on the board like Nick Biello of Sportservice and Carmen Torzon of Volume Services America were also helpful. My NAC colleagues definitely came in very handy – value for my membership!"

Drafting the Teams

Conlon added a full time assistant, another full-time staff person, and two warehouse people to his department to handle the increased workload. He is receiving no additional salary for handling Bears concessions, and notes that it has more than doubled his workload.

"Once we got approval for the beer, that's when we went into high gear." As he relies on volunteer groups to staff his stands, he began recruiting the additional groups he would need to add beer to the menu. "The University then threw us a curve by stating that we could not use volunteer groups to sell beer and pay them a commission as we do with food." With the Illinois Dram Shop Act, the University is protected for their own employees, but it would not cover volunteers, explained Conlon. "The University really wanted that protection, which meant we needed to hire staff to sell beer."

Conlon hired 170 "beertenders" to vend beer for Bears games. "We came out with a competitive rate of \$20 per



LEFT: Conlon oversees the products and technique of one of his volunteer group grill stands at the stadium.

hour plus tips. We didn't advertise; it was simply word of mouth from my own staff and the Athletic Department staff and suddenly we had more than we needed and a waiting list." All the beertenders went through the TIPS program and were certified. "Not one person failed the course."

Choosing the Roster

The menu for regular Illini games had been fairly simple, and was sold out of eleven permanent stands and hawking only. Hosting the Bears meant not only bringing in a larger and more varied menu, including beer, but adding as many points of sale as possible via portable carts. "We've always been kind of a limited-menu school. I've always offered the same menu in every stand; this is the first time I've changed menus between permanent stands," said Conlon.

Conlon controlled the products that were offered, with the understanding that the Bears wanted more variety in the menu. He added hamburgers, Italian beef and sausage, meatball subs, and outside local vendors with food trailers offering an 8 oz. pork chop on a stick, grilled shrimp, and ribeye steak. "We also added J & J funnel cakes, which the Bears thought would not sell and have done fantastic for us, and snowcones for warmer games." Domino's pizza also delivers personal pizzas throughout the game.

His hot dog variety also took a boost as he offered Vienna Beef, Best, Eisenberg and Hillshire to fans. "We also added 'Chicago-style' condiments, with the exception of diced tomatoes and the poppyseed bun," he noted. "We were trying to give the stadium a 'Chicago feel', and I think we've accomplished that."

Conlon noted that the suppliers have been very helpful, often providing him with carts and equipment. "Azteca nacho chips were at Soldier Field and

they wanted us to use them, offering the carts and equipment from Soldier Field for supernachos. "I asked them for a two-year commitment on the carts so that we would have them past this Bears season. Then maybe we can make enough money to buy our own carts."

All of the suppliers were Conlon's regular companies. Because the venue was a state institution, it is a bid process and sponsorships are not allowed. This was a big change from the way the Bears normally did business. "They asked that we use Johnsonville bratwurst, as they had been a large sponsor of the team. It just so happens that I alternate between bratwurst and Polish sausage every other year, and this was the year for Johnsonville brats, so it worked out fine." The University does have a ten-year contract with Coca-Cola, the only product that has major sponsorship at the school.

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In choosing beer, however, Conlon took a unique approach. "Most stadiums have a prime beer vendor, with some limited presence by other brands. We took the top brands of beer – Budweiser and Bud Light, Miller Lite and MGD, and split it 50-50. The fans have a choice every 15 feet."

Souvenir cups are not being offered, by Bears decision. "I think a lot probably had to do with cost. Also, for beer Soldier Field had always used a waxed paper cup, and I can't stand a waxed paper cup. On a hot day if you don't drink your beer fast enough it deteriorates. We went to a plastic Solo cup that I believe improves the quality of the drink; you're not chewing wax. The Bears really wanted a waxed cup, but this is the cup I wanted. Solo is also a big company in Champaign-Urbana, so we wanted to use them."

Unlike most major league stadiums, Soldier Field did not hawk beer in the stands, a rule that Conlon also followed. "We just took the similar rules that Soldier Field had – like limiting to two

beers per purchase, beer cut off at the end of the third quarter. The Bears were worried about the college environment and underage drinking, as well as fans driving down from Chicago and back."

Beer is sold in portables only and with no food outside of peanuts. Conlon began the season with approximately 50 beer portables and about 150 points of service. Beer inventory is handled by the local distributors, who bring in the product and portables for each game. "Unfortunately, we don't have the space to store the beer portables, as they aren't used for Illinois games."

The way beverages are handled is also different for Conlon and his crew. "We sell a lot of 20-ounce plastic bottles for Illinois games," he stated. "When we sell those, we just give them the chilled bottle. The Bears won't allow that after the incident in Cleveland."

He explained that when a fan buys a soft drink or bottled water from one of the express stands that use plastic bottles, it must be poured into a 32-ounce Coke cup with ice to give to fans. "This has a lot of people complaining, but that's Bears policy," he continued. "Bottled water accounts for more than 50 percent of my normal beverage sales, and people are used to having the bottle."

This is a partial version of the complete story that appeared in the Winter 2002 issue of Concessionworks, the newsletter for NAC members. To become a member of NAC [click here](#). Members that would like to receive the complete story can call the NAC office at (312) 236-3858.



On one of the rare occasions that he sits down during a game, Terry Conlon, ECM, right, shares a moment of rest with his assistant concessions manager Bill Gentzler, left, who spent this entire game in a leg cast, which did not stop him from running around the stadium.