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On The Line

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On a balmy October afternoon at UC Berkeley’s California Memorial Stadium, the Cal Golden Bears football team is facing the No. 1 team in the country, the Oregon Ducks. Kickoff is moments away. The Cal players, lined up in the tunnel and preparing to run on the field, are jumping up and down, bouncing off each other and yelling with excitement.

On a hill overlooking the stadium, two Cal students dressed in blue-and-yellow-striped polo shirts ignite the fuse of a cannon. As the boom echoes throughout Strawberry Canyon, the players rush onto the field through clouds of smoke and the Cal band strikes up “Big C,” the Cal fight song.

Up in the press box that hangs over the west side of the stadium, in an area reserved for guests of university Chancellor Robert Birgeneau, Dwight Barker, Berkeley class of 1959, stands and claps. He has a cotton yellow Cal hat on his head and he hums along with the music and yells “Go Bears!” at the right time.

Barker is a true “Old Blue”—a committed alum who donates to both university academics and athletics. He has bought season tickets for decades, even though the Bears have pretty much been on a losing streak ever since he graduated from Cal as a general curriculum major in 1959. That was the last year the Bears won the Pacific-10 Conference and the right to play in the Rose Bowl, the most prestigious college football game in the country. Back then, Dwight D. Eisenhower was President of the United States, Joe Kapp was the Bears’ quarterback, and current Cal coach Jeff Tedford was still two years from being born.

The Bears have lost more than they’ve won in the 51 seasons since (250 wins, 299 losses), but Barker has attended as many Bears games as he could, wherever they have played. He has seen Cal lose at some of the most famous college stadiums in the country, including Notre Dame Stadium, Michigan Stadium and the University of Tennessee’s Neyland Stadium. As he remembers it, Barker was the last person to leave the Rose Bowl when Cal played Iowa in January, 1959. “I don’t ever leave till it’s over,” Barker said. “It was a great day, and I wanted to soak it all in.” Cal lost, 38-12.

Now Barker is about to watch the Bears’ fifth loss of a five win, seven-loss season, one of the last games the team will play in the stadium they’ve occupied since 1923. When Barker watches the Bears take the field next season, they’ll be playing at San Francisco’s AT&T Park, home of Major League Baseball’s Giants. After 87 consecutive seasons, Memorial Stadium will be closed for 2011 as it undergoes a nearly $500 million seismic retrofit and redesign.

While Memorial Stadium is one of the nation’s most beautiful college football stadiums, it’s also one of the most seismically threatened and fiscally troubled. The stadium is at the heart of a fierce debate on the Berkeley campus over the role of intercollegiate athletics and whether the athletic department’s spending—in the
midst of the worst budget crisis California has endured—is coming at the expense of the campus’ cash-strapped academic program.

Memorial Stadium straddles the Hayward Fault—it runs end zone to end zone—which is due for a “seismic event.” In 2008, the UC Board of Regents ordered Berkeley to either seismically upgrade the stadium or abandon it. The stadium will be closed for the coming football season as it undergoes a $321 million retrofit. The retrofit follows another stadium project—the Student Athlete High Performance Center, a state-of-the-art locker room and training center that will open in the fall—which came with a $150 million price tag, pushing the total cost of the redesign to $471 million. The Berkeley athletic department, which has struggled financially for years, has also run up an overall deficit of nearly $90 million in the last decade, according to a report by the UC Berkeley Faculty Senate.

To finance the retrofit, the Berkeley athletic department is taking on an unprecedented amount of debt. According to the financial plan approved by the UC Regents, starting in 2013, the athletic department is responsible for paying $19 million annually for 20 years in interest payments on bonds to finance the retrofits. That amount kicks up to $55 million for the remaining ten years of the project. According to Vice Chancellor Frank Yeary, the athletic department has funded some of the construction at a lower interest rate and the debt payments will actually be lower, but the department has yet to release more recent information.

To help pay off the debt, in 2009 the university adopted an ambitious seat-selling plan aimed at die-hard fans like Barker. The first-of-its kind program, called the Endowment Seating Program, or ESP, lets donors essentially own the best seats in the house for a higher price than any college or professional team has ever tried. Around 3,000 plush seats were made available, with the asking price of between $40,000 and $225,000 to own the seat for up to 50 years. Some of the revenue from this program goes straight to the athletic department; what’s left after paying off the construction debt is to be invested to build a $1 billion athletic endowment handled by the UC Berkeley Foundation.

But the plan carries risk. If not enough donors buy into the program, critics say, the university will be left to foot the bill. There is no contract for an ESP participant to sign, so a donor can opt out whenever they want, raising the question of how the program will fare if the Bears struggle to win football games, or if the economy doesn’t recover fast enough—or tanks again.

Some of Berkeley academics think the bond debt, in light of the department’s financial problems, puts the rest of the campus at risk. “I think it’s financially dangerous, physically dangerous, and it’s also dangerous to faculty morale,” said art history professor Margaretta Lovell, who has taught at Berkeley for 30 years and has served on the university athletic board and faculty senate. “The faculty can’t help but notice the shoveling of resources toward this campus appendage at the same time we’re getting slash and burn on the campus.”
University officials see it differently. To them, fixing the stadium is worth it for many reasons—among them school pride, pleasing alums by keeping football games on campus, developing a top-tier athletic program, and ensuring public safety. "We needed to fix the stadium," Yeary said. "I can understand why they wouldn't want an earthquake with 70,000 people inside."

Supporters in the administration and athletic department say the seat-selling program is “tracking on” and right on schedule. More than a year and a half into the program, the university has pledges for nearly $200 million, and 60 percent of the seats. When the annual debt payments come due in 2013, Yeary said, money raised by the seat-selling plan “will provide plenty of financial flexibility for athletics to repay the loan.”

As of February, though, the ESP program had collected only $19 million from donors, of which $12 million is in the endowment, and the 60 percent of seats selected is down from the 70 percent the university reported soon after the program launched in 2009, when a donor wasn't required to put any money down to claim a seat. The endowment for the high performance center also currently holds a fraction of the project’s cost: at the end of March, it totaled $29.7 million, one fifth of the center's cost to build.

That only $19 million has been collected for the ESP endowment so far raises red flags for sports economist Roger Noll, a Stanford professor who co-authored *Sports, Jobs and Taxes: The Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Stadiums.* “That’s peanuts,” Noll said. After analyzing other recent college football stadiums and examining Berkeley’s plan, Noll believes the ESP will fall $50-100 million short of paying off the stadium debt. "It's ambitious, and it's optimistic. And unfortunately, they’re going to have to commit to spending $350 million before they know whether they’ll get the revenue," Noll said.

The stakes are high, and even critics and supporters inside the university can agree with Dwight Barker on one thing: "It has to work," he said.

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When the Loma Prieta Earthquake shook Northern California in 1989, Richard Blum was inside Candlestick Park in San Francisco with thousands of fans, waiting for the hometown Giants and Oakland A's to take the field for Game 3 of the World Series. He was on his way to his seat when the ground started moving.

Blum is an investment banker, chairman and president of Blum Capital (which owns CB Richard Ellis, one of the largest real estate firms in the world), and a Regent of the University of California, the 26-member board that governs the UC system. Blum is also married to California Senator Dianne Feinstein, and in 1989, Feinstein was
less than a year removed from a two-term stint as mayor of San Francisco. One of the last projects of her tenure was the seismic retrofitting of the upper deck of Candlestick Park.

When the earthquake started, Blum didn’t realize what was going on, so he walked to his seat and sat down and looked over the field. It didn’t hit him until a guy behind him with a portable TV told him there was a hole in the Bay Bridge. “There is some belief,” Blum said, “that if the new support beams [at Candlestick] hadn’t gone in, the upper deck may have collapsed and you would have killed hundreds of people.”

Averting the disaster of having tens of thousands of people trapped in a stadium during an earthquake was on Blum’s mind fifteen years later when he became chairman of the Board of Regents, and inherited the job of minding one of the state’s most seismically vulnerable stadiums. Sandy Barbour, the Cal athletic director, calls California Memorial Stadium “the most beautiful place in the country to watch a college football game.” The stadium opened in 1923 and sits at the mouth of Strawberry Canyon, nestled into the rolling hillside of pine trees, and overlooking a breathtaking view of the San Francisco Bay. A white, cement bowl with rows of wood benches, it was modeled after the Coliseum in Rome and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

But it is built across the Hayward Fault, which has produced 12 major earthquakes in the last 2,000 years, an average of one every 167 years. It has been 143 years since the last quake on the fault, in 1868. That quake—a magnitude 6.8—was described as “one of the most destructive in California’s history” by the United States Geological Survey. In a 2008 report, scientists from the USGS called the fault “a tectonic time bomb due anytime for another magnitude 6.8 to 7.0 earthquake.” The next quake on the Hayward Fault, the scientists wrote, “could cause hundreds of deaths” and “leave thousands homeless.”

University officials have known for years that the stadium needed a seismic fix. After the ‘89 earthquake, there was a lot of talk about repairing campus buildings that were vulnerable. But it still took eight years for the university to release a seismic safety report, much less begin major construction. The Seismic Action Plan for Facilities Enhancement and Renewal (SAFER) report was released in 1997, and revealed that 57 buildings—nearly a quarter of the campus—were in “poor” or “very poor” condition. Those ratings meant that the buildings should be given “a high priority for expenditures to improve their seismic resistance” or “be considered for abatement programs, such as reduction of occupancy.” Memorial Stadium was rated “poor.” The cost of seismically retrofitting all of the buildings was estimated at close to $1 billion. The cost to fix Memorial Stadium, however, was initially set at only $14 million.
Though the “poor” rating was supposed to move the stadium to near the front of the retrofitting queue, it took nearly a decade before any action was taken. Bob Milano, the Berkeley Assistant Athletic Director for Capital Planning and Management, said the reason it took so long was because donors couldn’t be sold on a purely seismic retrofit—to convince financial backers to pay, the university would have to improve the facilities for the oldest stadium in the Pacific-10 Conference.

“No one wants to pay for a retrofit. There’s no marketability,” said Milano, who helped survey donors on stadium construction and possible improvements. “And with no marketability, you’re going to have no project.”

University officials also discussed options that would have avoided a retrofit, like hosting football games off-campus. But the Oakland Coliseum was too far and there were safety concerns with the area. A site in West Berkeley near the Golden Gate Fields racetrack, on land that the university owns, was also turned down because it was not on campus.

Those were only “theoretical” options, according to Yeary, a former head of mergers and acquisitions for Citibank. Yeary is a Berkeley alum who joined the administration in 2008 and has become one of the ESP’s most vocal supporters. “I say ‘theoretical’ because huge parts of our community would have objected violently to that,” Yeary said, “and in a world where increasingly for this university to maintain the financial resources it needs to sustain its greatness, it will be increasingly looking to its alumni.”

In 2005, Chancellor Robert Birgeneau announced Berkeley would renovate the stadium and add a new academic commons building to the area, between Haas Business School and Boalt Law School across the street from the stadium, as a way to bridge the two schools and make it easier for them to design programs together. According to a UC Berkeley press release, the plan was to “better integrate athletic and academic aspects of campus life.”

Later that year, plans were amended to turn that additional building into the Student Athlete High Performance Center, not an academic commons building, because locker rooms and office space for the intercollegiate teams wouldn’t fit inside the retrofitted stadium. “We couldn’t cram everything in,” said Karl Pister, the Berkeley Dean of Engineering who chaired a task force that looked into improving the area of campus around Memorial Stadium. The plans called for the amended project to begin in December, 2006 and be completed in time for the 2008 season. By this time the total price tag for the project had ballooned to nearly half a billion dollars.

University engineers have raised questions about accuracy of the initial $14 million SAFER estimate. Ed Denton, the Vice Chancellor of Capital Projects, said the consulting firm hired for the SAFER report did a “drive-by estimate” of the stadium,
and didn’t do a thorough examination. “I don’t think they took any time to fully understand,” Denton said, adding he thinks that only the structural cost was taken into account, not extra costs like installing a fire alarm system and sprinklers and improving wheelchair accessibility. Those extra costs, Denton said, account for $200 million and make up about 70 percent of the current construction costs.

The construction of the high performance center was expected to be completed three years ago, but was set back by a legal battle that is still going on today. After the project went through the final stages of UC approval in December, 2006, the university was hit with a lawsuit from the City of Berkeley, a neighborhood group called the Panoramic Hill Association, and the California Oaks Foundation. The suit challenged the project’s environmental impact and seismic safety report. Around the same time, a group of protesters climbed into trees in an oak grove that were to be removed to build the high performance center. The protest lasted for nearly two years, cost the university hundreds of thousands of dollars in security costs, and resulted in hundreds of arrests. Another lawsuit followed that claimed the land was an Indian burial ground.

After years of delays, following Blum’s lead, in 2008 the Regents voted to order the university to either seismically retrofit Memorial Stadium or abandon it. “I took the same view that my wife took, which was, we know there’s a risk,” Blum said. “I said, ‘Look, I don’t want people to continue to occupy that stadium if there is that kind of risk.’

In July, 2008, with some of these claims still pending in court, a judge allowed construction on the high performance center to begin. The stadium—now projected to open in 2012—would come next.

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The Berkeley administration knew the athletic department didn’t have enough money to pay for the retrofit out of its own coffers. The department regularly has more expenses than revenue—out of 27 teams on campus, only football, men’s basketball and rugby turned a profit in 2009. Taking on a $500 million project with its current revenue streams, without additional help from the campus, was out of the question. “Against the backdrop of them having challenging financial times,” Yeary said, “that would have been a pretty significant challenge.”

Times have indeed been challenging, both for Berkeley’s athletic department and for the larger UC system. California is facing a $26 billion budget deficit, and the UC system is facing a $1.5 billion budget gap of its own, which the UC Regents recently said will be have to be filled with annual tuition increases. The cuts and tuition hikes have been met with howling objections from the student body, which has responded with mass protests, including occupations of campus buildings and shutting down the 880 freeway.
The athletic department had previously taken on a large fundraising commitment when it took out $150 million in bond debt to build the Student Athlete High Performance Center. According to a report by the UC Berkeley Faculty Senate, the department has operated at a nearly $100 million cumulative deficit over the last decade, has already been ordered by the chancellor to reduce its cost to campus to $5 million annually.

Funding the stadium retrofit through bonds took some pressure off the athletic department, and to repay those ponds, university officials bet on the idea that, collectively, the Bears’ biggest fans could come up with the money. The ESP was devised by Nathan Brostrom in 2007, when he was Berkeley’s new Vice Chancellor for the Administration. Brostrom, a former managing director for JP Morgan, said it was “desperate at times” trying to come up with a plan to finance the seismic retrofitting, considering the university was already facing a host of financial and legal problems centered around the stadium.

To the UC Regents, though, Memorial Stadium was still a top priority, Brostrom said. Pressure to fix the stadium “wasn’t irrational, in that it’s very high-profile, very symbolic. The thought that the regents were leaving this unaddressed was of great concern to them,” Brostrom said.

The stadium is not eligible for state funding because it is an athletic facility. So in order to figure out a way to raise private money to pay for the stadium, the athletic department surveyed donors on what they would want in a stadium. A group of university officials also toured college and professional stadiums around the country to see what sort of stadium upgrades worked, and what might be the best fit for Berkeley. They visited the University of Texas, the University of North Carolina, North Carolina State, Penn State and Ohio State.

The group, however, concluded that Memorial Stadium presented a unique set of challenges and should be approached differently than other stadium upgrades. All the other stadiums had something Memorial Stadium didn’t: luxury seating. But Cal alumni had made it clear in surveys that they didn’t want to be separated from the rest of the fans in enclosed luxury boxes, and the bowl shape of Memorial Stadium meant that it doesn’t have levels that could be altered and upgraded, anyway.

Instead of creating special booths just for top buyers, the university, led by Brostrom, decided to adapt a plan created by the firm Stadium Capital Financing Group, a division of Morgan Stanley, called “Equity Seating Rights.” Fans buy their seats for a number of years at a set price, and can do what they choose with the seat, including selling it on the open market for a higher price. Brostram modified the program so top donors could purchase seats with a tax-deductable donation, and pass the seats on to their kids.
In Cal’s version of the plan, the ESP participants have options for how much they want to spend on their seat, and how quickly they’ll pay it off. There are three seating sections, with corresponding price ranges and payment plans targeted at donors ranging from recent graduates to wealthy alums. Each of the seating sections has access to a private club inside the stadium, with plush seats that improve as the price goes up.

The athletic department began selling ESP seats in January, 2009. Two years in, there are still more than 1,000 seats that haven’t been secured with a pledge. While university officials have blamed the state of the economy, the seats that have sold the slowest have been the higher-end seats, raising the question about whether there are as many rich, generous donors as were projected. Additionally, a low number of the donors—around seven percent—have chosen to pay upfront instead of over the long term. “That strikes me as a warning sign,” sports economist Noll said, “that people have bought the right to have tickets for a few years but they haven’t really bought into the endowment part.”

Rich Magid, the Chief Executive Officer of Stadium Capital, agreed it was the “worst possible time” to roll out the program. Knowing that, Magid said, he still is pleased at the rate seats are selling more than a year before the stadium is slated to re-open. “We’re seeing a level that we’re extremely comfortable with, to be in an area of 50 percent this far in advance,” Magid said. Universities around the country are watching how the ESP performs, he said, and other schools have shown interest in creating a similar model. Magid said his company expects to announce a partnership with another school soon.

Critics worry that another school is serving as a warning of how this program can go wrong. Months after Berkeley rolled out its program in 2009, the University of Kansas embarked on a plan with striking similarities. Working with Stadium Capital, Kansas announced a plan to sell 3,000 club seats to high-end donors to finance an upgrade to its Memorial Stadium. Kansas’ plan called for the seats to be sold to donors for $30,000 to own a seat for five years or $105,000 to own a seat for 30 years. All payments were required upfront, with the goal of raising $40 million and financing a $34 million upgrade to the side of the field with the improved 3,000 seats.

But the plan fell $30 million short and was scrapped in 2010, according to Kansas associate athletic director Jim Marchiony. He blamed bad timing for the program’s failure, but also said fans weren’t willing to shell out that kind of money for tickets to football games. “Most of the fans we talked to were really looking for options that were not as ambitious as those [prices],” he said.

Magid said that although Stadium Capital helped design the Kansas program, the school decided to carry out its own implementation. He agreed that Kansas rolled out the program at a bad time—the football team had been on a losing streak and the coach was fired, and the school’s athletic director retired a year early after a
ticket scandal. But the biggest difference between the two, Magid said, hinged on the fact that Kansas gave itself a much shorter timeframe to recoup costs, and that its donors may not have been sufficiently surveyed. “The Berkeley plan was much further down the road,” Magid said. “We spent a year-plus on the Berkeley side really making sure we had proper input and designed it properly.”

Just because the Kansas plan missed its target doesn’t necessarily doom UC Berkeley’s efforts, Noll said. Cal has a wider network of alumni it can tap than Kansas does, and an athletic department that has yet to reach its full fundraising potential, as the 2010 faculty senate report mentioned. A member of the faculty, math professor Calvin Moore, who served on the task force on intercollegiate athletics, did a risk analysis of the ESP that appeared in that report. He projected that under most circumstances, the program would succeed; he gave it less than a 10 percent failure rate to produce an endowment within 30 years. "There are always risks when you invest in securities and undertake a program like this," Moore said. "But we felt the risks were rather small."

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For some faculty members, any risk, no matter how small, wasn’t worth it for athletics. While Berkeley has had a losing football team over the years, its reputation as the leading public academic university remains intact. A recent poll by The Times Higher Education, which ranked schools all over the world for their reputations as institutions of teaching and research, slotted Berkeley at No. 4, behind Harvard, MIT and Cambridge, and right ahead of Stanford. For some of the Berkeley faculty, athletics has become too important to the administration, at the expense of academics—and the stadium is the latest example.

"Why on earth are we going into such debt?” said computer science professor Brian Barsky. “If we really must go into debt, then at least it should be for the academic program, please, and not for a football stadium."

Barsky likes to say he is the “spokesman” for campus faculty upset about athletic spending. Over the last two years, Barsky has extensively researched the role athletics plays at universities around the country. He’s become the poster boy of the upset Berkeley faculty, arguing with university spokesperson Dan Mogulof on the radio, being interviewed by the San Francisco Chronicle, and writing opinion pieces for the editorial pages of the Daily Californian, the student newspaper. But he’s not the only professor on campus concerned about the role of intercollegiate athletics.

In 2009, along with seven other faculty members, Barsky authored the “Academics First!” resolution, which calls for intercollegiate athletics to be self-supporting, and for the chancellor to urge donors to “prioritize academics at the Berkeley campus.” In November, 2009, the faculty group presented it in front of Birgeneau at a Faculty Senate meeting. The resolution passed, 91-68.
Art history professor Margareta Lovell, who has served on the university athletic board and faculty senate for a number of years, also signed the resolution. She’s seen presentations from Brostrom on how the ESP is supposed to work. But, she worries, what if it doesn’t? “What we do know is that a huge debt is being incurred that we’re all responsible for,” she said.

Barsky tried to address just how much that debt is in an op-ed for The Daily Californian on January 11, 2011, entitled, “UC Berkeley’s Endowment Seating Program Doesn’t Quite Add Up.” Using data from the ESP website, Barsky calculated that 82 percent of ESP participants so far have opted for the 30-year payment plan, meaning they’ve given less money upfront that can be invested in the endowment fund. The seats in the top-end “University Club” section have raised as much money so far as those in the cheapest section, the “Stadium Club,” even though the “University Club” seats are nearly seven times more expensive.

Barsky also calculated that the university had $20 million on hand from ESP payments so far—about $2 million more than the university reported having on hand at the end of February. That number makes him nervous. “Although nothing is impossible,” Barsky wrote in the op-ed, the athletic department “provides no convincing argument that it will succeed in raising so much more money in the near future. This is all too reminiscent of the practices based on unfounded expectations that catalyzed the sub-prime mortgage crisis.”

Yeary responded to Barsky’s op-ed with one of his own, “A Home Fit for the Golden Bears.” While Yeary did not mention how much money is on hand from the ESP, he did write that “$130 million, which amounts to 49 percent of the ultimate goal” worth of seats are under contract. While Barsky points out there is no contract for an ESP participant to sign, Yeary argues that there is an agreement, similar to an agreement a donor makes when giving to academic programs, that someone who buys into ESP will make their scheduled payments.

Barsky and other faculty believe that’s not good enough, and that it’s still too much risk for the university to undertake for an athletic enterprise, especially in the midst of a budget crisis. “I think it’s unconscionable for the university to do this,” Barsky said.

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The battle on campus over intercollegiate athletics does not always have clear sides. Take Karl Pister, Dean of Engineering, for example. Pister is a big Cal football fan. He’s held season tickets in the alumni section for 31 years, sitting with the same group of friends and former coworkers. “Really dyed-in-the-wool Cal people,” Pister said. “They’re there win or lose to support Cal.” This is true about Pister as well. “It really means a lot to me to be there and be a part of this,” he said, “because I’ve been
doing it for more than half a century. So it's in my blood.” He often chokes up when the band plays at the start of a game.

Back in 1946, Pister was a recent World War II veteran, sitting in Memorial Stadium’s stands with a bunch of other veterans as they watched in horror as the Bears lost to hated rival Stanford, 25-6, to cap a disappointing two-win, seven-loss season. Pister and his friends responded to the loss by ripping up the benches in the Berkeley rooting section. “I think the damage at the time was assessed to be seventeen hundred bucks,” Pister said, laughing as he remembered the day.

Although they were never caught, he said, he was punished anyway: in 2004, Chancellor Birgeneau asked him to chair a task force that looked at how to fix Memorial Stadium and upgrade its athletic facilities. From that committee, plans for the stadium renovation and construction of the Student Athlete High Performance Center were born. “My punishment was to chair this damn committee,” Pister said with a laugh.

Despite his longtime football fandom, Pister has also been a critic of the campus spending on athletics. In the faculty senate report on intercollegiate athletics, the appendix includes a letter to the chancellor from Pister and a group of professors. “We urge you to work with the leadership of Intercollegiate Athletics to repay its deficit, rework its financial model, and delineate appropriate future institutional support levels,” the letter said.

Now that the ESP program is in place, Pister has decided not to participate, even thought it meant giving up his own seat. The section he has sat in for three decades—FF—is where some of the ESP seats will be installed. “I'm going to lose my seat so I don't know where I'll end up,” he said. He did not buy in, he said, because it would be unfair to his children, he said. “It would diminish our trust too much. I can't really justify doing it.”

Pister said he donates money to the Berkeley academic side, and supports the athletic department with his season-ticket purchases, the cost of which includes a donation to the athletic department. “But that's not my main support of the campus,” Pister said. “It's engineering and the Bancroft Library.”

Richard Blum has helped build structures on campus like the Blum Center for Developing Economies. He, too, chose not to buy into the ESP. Blum said his family “could care less about football.” He said he likes going to games where he sometimes sees people he hasn't seen in years, and he also sees the importance of a good football team to the life of a campus. But he also said he's not as interested in going to games if his team is struggling. He said he attended more games as a San Francisco high school student in the late '40s, when the Bears were good, than when he was a student later in the decade, when they weren't. “I'm an 'Old Blue,'” Blum said, “but I'm a bit of a fair-weather fan.”
Though he didn’t buy in, Blum said he still supports the ESP and thinks it will work, although he worries about what will happen if the stagnant sales continue. Cal can’t afford to abandon its program like Kansas did—construction is well underway. "The truth of the matter is, the university has the financial wherewithal to see it through if there’s a funding glitch at some point," Blum said. "I mean, it’s not like the university is going to run out of money for capital projects."

Nathan Brostrom is also a Cal football fan, even though he went to Stanford. Though it’s not his job to be involved with the ESP any longer, he still is participating in the plan as a seat holder in the “Field Club,” the lowest-priced section, which he’s paying off on an annual basis. Brostrom said he thinks more people will buy in once the financial picture clears up, evidence that he says has been shown by donations to Berkeley athletics after other recent financial crises. “Once they had a certain amount of certainty and stability, they were willing to participate,” he said.

Longtime Bears fan Dwight Barker also bought in, buying two “Stadium Club” seats, the middle-priced section, which he paid off up front. Barker has been following the progress of the ESP, and said he hasn’t been informed about any contingency plan if enough donors aren’t found to fill the seats. He believes the plan will work. “I have no reason to think it wouldn’t,” he said.

Now the question is: How many people like Dwight Barker are out there?