

A Classic entrepreneur

Given sporting chance, Fred Jones scored for can-do

By David Williams

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the third of four profiles of this year's Society of Entrepreneurs inductees, who will be officially inducted into the organization April 22 at the University of Memphis.*

Most of all, Fred Jones remembers the can't-do attitude.

God love it, but the mindset he saw all around his hometown of Memphis was, "It can't happen here. It's not supposed to happen here. And if it happens here, it always happens on a smaller scale."

This was 1990, when Jones was creating something called the Southern Heritage Classic. It was a bold try at establishing a sporting success in a market mostly seen as minor league. More than that, it was an attempt to change the way Memphians saw their city.

"I wanted to show that it could be done here," said Jones, 58, whose success -- ringing and sustained -- is being recognized with membership in the Society of Entrepreneurs, a fraternity of the accomplished in Memphis that already includes Frederick W. Smith, Kemmons Wilson, Allen Morgan Jr. and J.R. 'Pitt' Hyde. Ceremonies are April 22 at the University of Memphis.

These days, the Classic is a local sports-and-entertainment institution, with the centerpiece football game at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium drawing some 50,000 fans each year.

Not so, in the beginning.

"The first time he came in, it was like, 'Oh my gosh, what am I doing?' He was apprehensive," said Jo Anne Clemons, owner of Elite Trophy Co., which has worked with Jones throughout the Classic's history. "We're friends now. He comes in smiling and gives me a hug. ... He didn't come in smiling that first year."

All these years later, Jones is among the most influential figures in a dramatically upgraded local sports scene.

Along with the Grizzlies -- of which Jones is a



Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

Helmed by Fred Jones, the Southern Heritage Classic is an institution: The centerpiece game at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium draws some 50,000 fans yearly.

limited partner -- there's FedExForum looming over Beale Street, the Redbirds and AutoZone Park a short walk away, and, most of all, a new mindset:

It *can* happen here.

And Jones, a graduate of then-Memphis State, can't think of a better place -- home.

But if Jones has helped make Memphis a more interesting place to live and play, he's also helped make it a more competitive place to do business in sports and entertainment. Corporate sponsors and fans alike have more options than ever, challenging the Classic to evolve.

"From some of the projects I've had the pleasure of working on for him, I've always found him to be interested in trying to find ways to keep it fresh, and meet the needs of his stakeholders -- particularly sponsors," said Dick Irwin, who studies the local sports market as a University of Memphis professor in Sport and Leisure Studies.

He said Jones was a pioneer in the 1990s of seeking sponsor feedback:

"He asked us to conduct an assessment with the sponsors to find out their satisfaction and fulfillment and really push the needle on, 'How can we keep them involved and move this forward?'"

At the time, Irwin said, many event organizers nationwide would "never consider setting themselves up for that kind of evaluative criticism."

Today's Classic has a who's who list of corporate partners, including presenting sponsor FedEx, as well as AutoZone, First Tennessee and Nike.

It's a long way from 1990, when "Classic" was a bold word for an untested event, in a market sporting quite an inferiority complex.

Sixteen years later, Jones can take a break from work on this year's event and look back, with pride.

"If you go out and talk to anybody in this community," he said, "I don't care where you go, and you say, 'Fred Jones' You say, 'Southern Heritage Classic.' Or you say, 'Memphis Grizzlies.'"

"You tell me what their reaction is.

"I'll tell you right now, it's going to be very positive."

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