

Throwing a Hail Mary!

The University of Maryland Football Film Project

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Abstract

Documentation of the planning, preparation, and implementation of moving image preservation and digitization projects is difficult to find in scholarly sources, despite the large numbers of deteriorating films housed in archival repositories and the increasing demand to access and utilize audio-visual materials. “Throwing a Hail Mary!” chronicles one such project, undertaken over the last seven years at the University of Maryland (UMD). Since 2008, the University of Maryland Archives has raised over \$100,000 to preserve and make accessible its collection of historical football film footage. This project faced long odds, representing the Archives’ first venture into serious preservation work on its athletics-related holdings and its first major digitization project with funds raised privately, rather than through grant allocations. In this case study, the UMD Archives staff traces the progress of the entire digitization project from start to finish, recounts challenges faced along the way, celebrates successes, and outlines plans for the future, to serve as a guidepost for libraries and archives interested in starting similar projects at their own institutions.

Keywords: digitization, audio-visual preservation, fundraising, archives, outreach, athletics

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Since 2002, the University of Maryland (UMD) Archives knew it faced serious challenges to the long-term survival of the historical football film footage in its holdings, dating from 1946 to 1989. Staff recognized that it would take significant external fundraising to execute crucial preservation and access activities. It was only a matter of time before a major portion of the University of Maryland's athletic heritage would be lost, and swift action was necessary. It was not enough, however, to simply digitize the reels. The Archives also needed to make the footage easily accessible, so it could be enjoyed by former players, their families, and Terrapin fans everywhere, as well as utilized by the UMD Department of Intercollegiate Athletics and broadcast media outlets. To reach these goals of preservation and accessibility, the Archives overcame major hurdles, and through a series of partnerships and collaborations, developed a solution that met the needs of all stakeholders in the project.

Project Origins

One of the first preservation initiatives undertaken by the UMD Libraries' Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) audio-visual archivist, hired in 2007, was a survey of the condition of the film holdings in the various SCUA collection groups. This survey generated some bad, but not unexpected, news: one of the largest components of the University Archives' film collection, the historical football footage, was in serious trouble, with 68% of the over 2,100 reels showing signs of advanced chemical deterioration. The staff was not surprised by this verdict, since the footage had been stored under very poor conditions for a very long time before the transfer of the canisters to the Archives began in earnest five years earlier. Armed with this

information and filled with the sense of urgency it created, we met with the UMD Vice President for University Relations to determine what could be done to begin preserving this massive, endangered collection and other sports-related holdings in the Archives. We felt confident in approaching the vice president because of the strong relationship the University Archives had developed with him over a period of years through interactions in support of alumni events and the university's 150th anniversary.

Kickoff

Our Vice President encouraged us to begin meeting with major university athletics donors to help frame our fundraising strategy. With some of his staff, he helped us set up consulting sessions with these individuals to make them aware of the problems the film collection was facing and the urgency of finding a solution. The fundraising ideas resulting from brainstorming in these meetings, held in late 2007 and early 2008, proved very helpful throughout the course of the project, and the donor awareness generated ultimately resulted in the largest gift to the project to date.

The Vice President also assigned a long-time development officer to this fundraising initiative in summer 2008, whose assistance throughout the course of the project became critical to its success. As the daughter of a long-time faculty member and an alumna, the development officer had a long history with the university and knew a multitude of individuals who could be potential donors to the project. Also, as a member of the central development staff and not assigned to a particular unit, she could reach across college, school, and department boundaries to encourage financial gifts from donors the Libraries ordinarily could not reach.

Creating a Game Plan: Initial Fundraising

With assistance from the development officer, we established an account for the project with the University of Maryland College Park Foundation to manage the funds raised. This also enabled us to begin contacting potential donors. We set a tentative overall goal for the project of \$200,000, based on initial estimates from digitization vendors and the count of film reels in the collection. However, we stressed to donors that we were committed to converting as many reels as we possibly could with the amounts raised as we moved through the project, rather than waiting to raise the entire amount before proceeding. Time was of the essence, given the continuing deterioration of the footage.

There are a number of organizations who support athletics at the University of Maryland. Initially, the Archives team approached the three groups most likely to contribute to this project: the Terrapin Club Scholarship Fund, the M Club (Maryland's organization for letterwinners), and the Maryland Gridiron Network (our football booster program), and received \$10,000 donations from each of them. An anonymous donor matched this \$30,000, and we were well on our way to what we thought would be an easy push to our final goal, unaware of the major impact the economic downturn of 2008 would have on our work.

We fought hard for each dollar raised from then on and employed every fundraising tactic we could imagine. For a private funding-type approach to be successful, we needed to carefully target those most impacted by the potential gains of such a project—the players and boosters who feel so passionately about Maryland football. Once we explained and demonstrated the seriousness of the issue facing the records of their past endeavors, many of the players dug deep and gave what they could to move the project forward. Our development officer and the Archives staff participated in alumni events the football team hosted, including their annual player reunion for team alumni in the fall and golf outing in the spring. The Archives staff made direct appeals to former players and encouraged them to contact their teammates, providing them with talking points for conversations, and helping them prepare letters of support to send out; these player-to-player contacts turned out to be one of the most successful strategies for us. By the end of our campaign, in addition to the \$60,000 seed money, we raised \$49,883, of which 81% came from former players.

Our athletics department, facing its own budgetary issues, could not support the project financially, but was able to offer numerous kinds of other support. Our project team created a fundraising brochure for the project that we distributed widely at the football annual recruiting celebration, and a short commercial about the project ran on the Jumbotron in the football stadium during games. Terps' radio commentators promoted the project during game broadcasts. We issued press releases and worked to place stories about the project in on- and off-campus print and broadcast media. We even hosted a pre-game open house in the Archives for donors we felt had the strongest potential to contribute, and we shivered through a late-season, outdoor tailgate to highlight the results of the project. Some of these tactics worked better than others, but all raised visibility for the project.

One unexpected benefit of our fundraising and publicity efforts was the return of additional reels of film to the Archives. Over the years, the Athletic Department had maintained fairly loose control over the footage

generated by the football program. One head coach even hosted a meet-and-greet for alumni where he encouraged former players to take any cans of film they wanted from the piles around the room. Quite a number of players claimed pieces for their own that meant a lot to them, even editing some of them into personal highlight reels by clipping the original film. Once many of these former Terps learned about the project, they were willing to return reels in their possession to the University Archives, and in return we guaranteed they would receive a free DVD copy of their donation when the digital files were created. This was definitely a win-win for the Archives—we re-captured some fugitive university property, and the players acquired a personal copy of footage they had not been able to watch in years.

Selecting a Vendor

As our fundraising efforts continued, we began the process of identifying potential digitization vendors and soliciting proposals from those companies capable of handling the type of project we envisioned. This was no simple task, unfortunately, since our audio-visual archivist had left the university and had not been replaced. The University of Maryland College Park Foundation required a minimum of three proposals from vendors for a project of our size. We sent requests for quotes along with a project outline to a local vendor and other firms across the country that we identified through internet searches. It turned out to be quite challenging to find vendors who performed the type of work we needed. While we asked for very specific information from each firm, what we received from them varied in format and content, making comparisons difficult. A trip through the exhibitors hall at the 2009 Society of American Archivists annual meeting resulted in a conversation with representatives from the A/V preservation vendor SceneSavers who provided solid, easily comprehensible answers to all the questions we had asked other vendors, excellent references, and highly competitive pricing. A critical piece of the puzzle had been resolved.

Packing, Tracking, and Shipping

By December 2009, we began preparing the films for shipment to SceneSavers. Prior to packing, we first had to determine which films would comprise the initial shipment, as we did not have sufficient funds to send all that we wanted to have digitized. We chose some of the oldest films (1940s and 1950s), the most fragile, films that documented notable games (such as Queen Elizabeth II's attendance at a football game in

1957), and color highlight films from the 1970s. These films were pulled from the shelves and boxed, with a spreadsheet inventory prepared for the entire shipment. The spreadsheet contained the following metadata fields that would be used throughout the course of the project: game date, opponent, number of reels, reel size, reel type (e.g. first quarter, highlights), collection accession number, and box location. We left the films in their original metal canisters, but purchased hundreds of chemically-neutral plastic containers and cores to ship along with the films for re-housing once the digitization work was completed.

SceneSavers picked up the first shipment in February 2010. They brought a van with them from their headquarters in Covington, Kentucky, and took possession of the films and replacement canisters and cores right at the library's loading dock. This decision saved both the Archives and SceneSavers the expense and worry of hiring outside shippers and ensured an unbroken chain of custody. SceneSavers drove the shipment straight to their facility for inspection and treatment without any consolidation or intermediate stops.

Arrival and Digitization at SceneSavers

Upon arrival at SceneSavers, the films were unboxed, checked against the inventory, and given a cursory inspection. The majority of films we sent were 16mm 400-foot reels, each running an average of 12 minutes. Some of the highlight films were larger reels of 1,200 feet, lasting approximately 30 minutes. The smaller films were mostly black and white, with no sound, while the highlight reels were color projection prints with sound. In total, the first shipment contained 1,037 reels of film for cleaning, repair, digitization, and new film-to-film transfers.

Many projects require adjustments mid-stream, often for a combination of factors: cost, time, staff, etc. One adjustment we made fairly quickly after SceneSavers received the films was to eliminate the production of the film-to-film transfers. The prohibitive cost to create the transfers, ranging from \$40,000 to \$70,000, would have eaten up an enormous part of our budget and forced us to scale back on our project. We quickly made the decision to have SceneSavers do scene-by-scene color correction to create top-quality digital files versus the film-to-film copies.

Ultimately, we chose two types of digital files, MPEG-2 master files and MPEG-4 access copies, as our final, desired product. These decisions were made in concert with SceneSavers and the UMD Libraries' Digital Systems and Stewardship (DSS) staff based on four factors: quality of

file, size of file, usability of the file, and long-term preservation concerns. Both formats can easily be viewed via a variety of platforms and devices. These files would be returned to us on portable external hard drives and eventually be delivered to DSS for loading onto the UMD Libraries' servers for preservation and access by the viewing public.

Before the film could be digitized, however, it had to be restored to a usable condition. The films we sent had been heavily used, no doubt due primarily to their creation as teaching film for the football coaching staffs. The heavy use left the films scratched, dirty, and faded, with projector burns and other damage. Many of the films also exhibited sprocket hole damage, which required painstaking work on behalf of the film technicians to repair the holes one at a time.

The cleaned and repaired films were digitized, re-cored, and placed in the chemically neutral canisters prior to being returned. The Archives received the first shipment of films in the summer of 2010, less than six months after they left the building. However, much work remained to make the films accessible and to organize the newly returned materials.

The Films (and Files) Return Home

The first steps upon the initial films' return were to verify the shipment's contents and shelve the reels. This was a tricky process, due to the fact that when the films first arrived at the Archives in the early 2000s, they were stored vertically. The re-coring and re-housing of the films now dictated that they should be stored horizontally, so they could not go back to their original locations. We successfully found a new space in the coldest room in our building for the returned films to reside, and then had to do the tedious work of consolidating our original accessions and updating our inventories to reflect the new locations. On the plus side, this resulted in the creation of additional space for newer accessions to occupy.

At the same time the films were received, we received the hard drives with the digital files and negotiated with DSS to purchase additional server space. We copied a handful of files onto our computers for publicity purposes and sent the drives to DSS. DSS staff employed the detailed inventory that we created for the project as the basis for the metadata used for searching and viewing the films through our online digital repository, University AlbUM (<http://digital.lib.umd.edu/album>), built using Fedora. Our team also made short-term arrangements for DSS to create DVD copies on demand, until we could obtain the requisite hardware and software to do so ourselves.

We were overjoyed by our first look at the films—SceneSavers had

done an outstanding job, and seeing the university's football heritage come alive before our eyes was a huge thrill. One major discovery was footage of the first football game in UMD's current stadium, from September 1950, spliced onto a reel containing another game. We leveraged this tremendous find to garner a wealth of publicity and to appeal for further funding to support the project. The University Archivist appeared on local morning news to discuss the find and the project, and we were featured in several campus print and web venues as well. Everything seemed ripe for the project to take off, and we anticipated that soon everyone would be able to view the films online.

Fumble!

Unfortunately, we would have to wait an entire year, from summer 2010 to summer 2011, before any of our newly digitized football films were viewable online. Multiple delays hampered the project's progress, many of which were related to staffing shortages in our DSS unit. At one point, the unit went several months without a director, which meant that there was no one with whom we could connect who would agree to move the project forward. The project also encountered technical issues, as the UMD Libraries switched video streaming services in spring 2011, a change that was also delayed due to staffing issues.

By this time, any impetus we accumulated through the publicity from the summer 2010 blitz evaporated. Worse, some donors and supporters expressed their frustration at the lack of tangible progress, and an entire football season came and went without the Archives being able to show off the results of the project to raise new funds. We struggled to get any information about the status of the files or to get copies of DVDs for donors. It was not until a new director for DSS arrived in late spring 2011 that the project regained some of its former momentum. In May 2011, we were able to work with our DSS unit to create a written work plan and timeline to describe the files and mount them online and provide the Archives with access to all digital files as well as the equipment to make DVDs for patrons. Finally, in August 2011, the first 447 digital files were loaded into University AlbUM.

Delivering the Goods

Fall 2011 found the Archives in a much better position to capitalize on football season. By this point, we had several hundred files available for viewing online, and we had the capability to make DVD copies of games for former players, fans, and alumni. We created instruction sheets for

locating and searching the film database that we took to various football-related events to hand out to anyone who wished to view the films. Immediately, we began filling orders for films, primarily for former players who had not seen themselves on film in decades and whose families had not seen them play at all. We were ready to push for more funds and were still adding files to what had previously been mounted online, for a total of nearly 800 videos. The films have become some of the most frequently viewed items in our digital collections repository. Having them readily accessible has also allowed us to rapidly fill requests from a variety of media outlets, where doing so before was impossible.

Initiating a Second Phase

The football film project continued in the same vein for the next two years: accepting additional film reels from alumni and former players, filling orders for DVDs of the digitized games, and promoting the fundraising initiative at various campus and athletic events. In February 2014, the University Archives hired a much-needed Athletics Archivist to oversee collections and projects in this subject area. With nearly \$32,000 left in the Football Footage Preservation Fund, the UMD Archives staff planned for a second batch of films to be sent to SceneSavers later that year.

The new Athletics Archivist took on the immediate task of surveying the remaining football films and selecting candidates for the second batch. Part of this work included creating a spreadsheet containing data for every football film that had not been digitized. After a complete survey, we identified 1,089 additional football film reels in the Archives' collections. Due to the limited funds remaining in the project account, Archives staff was forced to reduce this total to approximately 160 reels for digitization. All game films donated by alumni and former football players were automatically included in the second phase. We then devised several criteria to determine which films should fill the remaining portion of the shipment: (a) reels that completed a partially digitized game, (b) reels from conference championship seasons or from seasons with very few games on film, and (c) winning games against conference opponents. Once we finalized our selection, the Athletics Archivist prepared the final spreadsheet and packed the batch for transfer.

SceneSavers arrived in May 2014 to pick up the second shipment of 162 reels. As with the first phase of this project, we provided chemically-neutral film canisters and cores for re-housing. The technical specifications also remained the same, with the vendor creating MPEG-2 and MPEG-4 files. An updated metadata template detailing essential

fields requested by the library's DSS unit accompanied the reels. The second shipment of films returned to the UMD Archives in April 2015. We will likely again experience some delay in uploading the video files to our digital collections site, due to an imminent update to UMD's Fedora management system, but this will be unavoidable. In the interim, the UMD Archives staff will begin creating complementary DVDs for the alumni who donated films to the collection.

Moving Forward

While we consider the football film project to be a great success, we continue to face additional challenges and look for ways to improve the process. After the first two rounds of preservation and digitization, the Archives still has close to 930 original football film reels in the collection that need attention. Of that total, 750 reels represent game footage from 122 individual contests, with the remainder of the reels covering practice, drill, and scrimmage footage or JV games. Following six years of outreach and promotion, the fundraising initiative is now at a halt, facing project fatigue. We must determine when to resume soliciting the additional funds needed to complete this initiative. Meanwhile, digitization can continue on a small-scale, on-demand basis whereby alumni or other interested parties can work with the Archives to digitize individual reels. However, the costs can be prohibitively expensive for the average person, with one 7-15 minute reel of 16mm film costing \$150-\$200 to preserve and digitize.

Future work for the football film preservation and digitization project includes the continued monitoring of the condition of the film. PH strips have been placed in almost all of the football film canisters, allowing us to check on the status of the film on a regular basis and take action to preserve reels that show signs of further deterioration. It remains to be seen whether we will be able to raise funds necessary to digitize all of the film before time runs out.

In the meantime, the Archives staff has been frequently asked if we will be undertaking a similar program for our basketball film, and we do plan to proceed with such a project, as that film also faces the same problems. As with the football films, we will target and heavily rely on the individuals and groups most emotionally tied to the outcome—former players, boosters, and the athletic department. More alarmingly, a recent digitization project consisting of 16 videotapes (Betacam, VHS, and U-Matic) spanning from 1986 to 2002 revealed the serious problems with magnetic tape formats—10 of the 16 tapes exhibited irreparable video or sound deterioration. We are now hoping to target high priority video

footage, in addition to film, through future digitization initiatives.

As a cultural institution charged with preserving and maintaining fragile audio-visual resources, it is imperative that the UMD Archives staff find innovative ways to save our collections before they become unplayable. Most grant opportunities focus specifically on the arts and humanities or other moving image collections with a broad educational appeal, thus excluding most sports-related film, so we may have to turn to private funding or seek other collaborators like university athletics departments or booster organizations to raise the necessary funds. If the huge problem of deteriorating athletic film can be folded into a library-wide preservation survey of audio-visual materials, perhaps this approach could lead to a preservation grant for all materials at risk. Thinking of creative funding strategies such as these may be essential to care for these enormous segments of a university's athletic heritage, which may soon be lost without quick action.

Our project was a "Hail Mary," but not one without significant planning and determination. We gathered irrefutable evidence of a serious problem with a potentially devastating impact and carefully targeted key stakeholders to garner early support. Our team approached the individuals and organizations most likely to be affected by this impending disaster and acquired a number of supporters who gave time, money, and endorsements without which the project would not have succeeded. We took advantage of every break that came our way and never lost focus when the project lagged or ran into obstacles. Additionally, we promoted ourselves relentlessly and chose materials to save based on specific criteria. To complete a Hail Mary, then, takes the right play call, proper execution, and the ability to capitalize on one's good fortune.

In addition to the preservation of a critical part of the university's athletic heritage, another positive end result of this project was the increased accessibility to the films. Seeing football players from the 1960s tear up because they had never seen themselves play, or watching them show the footage to their grandchildren, is something the Archives staff will never forget. We forged alliances with people previously unfamiliar with the Archives and created new relationships we can utilize going forward. We now know that we can accomplish such a project, and also know exactly what kind of effort a project of this magnitude entails. The ability to click a link and see some of Maryland's greatest games and players is truly a victory in which all participants can take great pride.