

Optimist spreads a wealth of good works

Published Monday, March 2, 2009

A charter school shares its surname with former Bucs linebacker Derrick Brooks.

A group of kids, some whose costs were covered, enhanced their skills over the weekend at a football festival he sponsored.

And revelers will come together Friday for his family foundation's gala.

Clearly the philanthropic reach of Eddie DeBartolo Jr. has not been shortened by the difficult economic climate. The Tampa developer and former San Francisco 49ers owner refuses to let a gloomy recession rain on his efforts.

"Sometimes it can be challenging getting out of bed in these times," DeBartolo joked Monday. "We're going through a tough time, but we've gone through them before. Obama is going to be a great president, but I think he needs some time.

"Hopefully, we can get through this thing and the country will get back on track."

DeBartolo's upbeat tone may clash with the outlook of others, but he believes a positive approach is just what the doctor is ordering. He noted that he didn't like reading the bleak predictions of financier Warren Buffet.

"People listen to a man like this great investor," DeBartolo said. "Why tell someone, even if you believe it, that the economy is going to be in shambles for another year-plus?

"I just think the public needs to be more optimistic."

The commitments he has made certainly indicate a tone of optimism.

Start with Friday's gala at A La Carte Event Pavilion. Paul Anka, a friend DeBartolo has known for 40 years, will be the headline entertainer. A mix of celebrities and athletes — including Brooks, Joey Fattone, boxer Antonio Tarver, Kip Winger, Hall of Famer Wade Boggs, Gen. Tommy Franks, Boyz II Men, Olympic gymnast Dominique Dawes, Sandy "Pep" Denton from Salt-n-Pepa and former 49er great Jerry Rice — are expected to attend.

Sadly, someone out there is saying, "Jerry Rice? You mean the guy from *Dancing With the Stars*."

Yes, that Jerry Rice.

Those in attendance will have the chance to bid on silent and live auction items, including a four-night trip to Super Bowl XLIV in Miami, and a four-night July 4 vacation at the DeBartolo Montana ranch.

But what makes DeBartolo beam the most is the job daughters Lisa and Nikki have done in sparking the foundation, which annually awards \$300,000 to local nonprofits.

"It's really a wonderful affair," DeBartolo said. "We try to keep it fun. My daughters have done a great job and certainly enjoy what they're doing"

On Saturday night, the fun continues for the family as Lisa's husband, Don Miggs, performs with his rock band Miggs at Skipper's Smokehouse. This past weekend, the three-day DeBartolo Football Festival made its Tampa debut. More than 400 hopefuls attended to take lessons from current and former NFL players. DeBartolo also remains involved with the upstart Brooks-DeBartolo Collegiate Academy, the county's only charter high school.

"If you look around, there's always someone who's way, way worse off than you are," DeBartolo said. "You can't solve all the world's ills, but you have to help whoever you can who is less fortunate."

Forbes magazine routinely ranks DeBartolo as one of the world's wealthiest, and his name should stay on the list even if he lost everything.

That's all I'm saying.