

# from the sidelines

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**F**ootball season is coming. The Street and Smith's are in the stores, season tickets are in the mail, and college presidents are huddling with their accountants. Only the Pollyannas still believe that money is not the driving force behind most decisions that relate to college football programs—not only with the “evil cabal” of schools eligible for the Bowl Championship Series (BCS), but with schools at the mid-major level and in Division III. Just look at the effort the University of Connecticut is making to become a major player in big-time football, to the extent that it is building a new stadium to help it compete in the Big East.

Of course, the Huskies were “counting” on filling that new stadium with games against—among others—the soon-to-be former Big East members Miami and Virginia Tech. Since the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) bumbled its way into inviting those schools to join it, and they greedily accepted, fans more likely will be seeing Louisville or Tulane or Kent State or Toledo. There is nothing wrong with those schools, of course, but they are just not a part of the Big East as we have come to know that conference. (Yes, saying Notre Dame is “east” is stretching the imagination about as far as the stretch of Interstate 80 from New York to South Bend, Indiana.) Change can be good, but this is one change that is not.

Virginia Tech president Charles W. Steger gets my vote for “Fish on the Dock” for 2003. First, he joins in a suit with other Big East schools against the ACC, then when Tech is invited to join “the club,” he flops and takes the money.

It may be that the Big East blew it 20 years ago, when Penn State's Joe Paterno urged Syracuse, West Virginia, Boston College, Pittsburgh, and other major Eastern schools to form their own conference. They said “No.”

The BCS, and the television money associated with it, accelerated this grab for dollars. (The BCS was the brainchild of ACC commissioner Jim Swofford.) There is plenty of money to be had in college sports these days and, yes, some of it is used to pay for better salaries, benefits, and working conditions for turf managers. This is as it should be. But there is also enough money so that the charade of “student-athletes” should be abandoned and the players—especially those at BCS schools—should be paid.

The presidents of the BCS schools should admit that a commitment to earn a degree is just not there for too many players. (To confirm this, check the schools' graduation rates of their athletes.) The universities should use some of the money they are making to pay the players for their efforts, then spread some of the remainder to less affluent schools so that, perhaps, legitimate students could benefit.

My complaint about “progress” will, of course, not be remembered this fall at tail-gate parties, when the brats are hot and the beer is cold. College football, no matter at what level, is competitive, colorful, and wonderful, and no matter what else they do, college presidents can't change that.



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