

From the Sidelines



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Leaders failing college athletics

“THERE’S NOTHING IN THE WORLD SO DEMORALIZING AS MONEY,” Sophocles wrote long ago, words that could serve as a subtitle to every fresh, tumultuous report of big-boy college football conference hopping and cheating scandal. As I write Pittsburgh and Syracuse have joined the Atlantic Coast Conference, which isn’t quite the geographical stretch their former brethren in the Big East Conference made last year when inviting Texas Christian to join it.

But heck, Colorado is in the Pacific 12 And Looking for More Conference, Texas A&M is the new western front for the Southeastern Conference (SEC), and Oklahoma and Texas are available to the highest bidder. Who wants Boise State and their fluorescent cleats?

University presidents are scrambling in their game of musical conferences and the quiet kid in the room, representing the Soul of College Athletics, is heading for a long stand in the corner. No president can afford to miss out on television deal dollars or other revenue produced by college football and basketball. Last year the SEC cleared \$1 billion in athletic revenue and some schools e.g., Florida, Michigan, Penn State, Texas and others earn \$40-\$80 million in profits a year.

These presidents hide behind the NCAA’s amateurism principle (no legal definition of “amateur” exists) to justify their actions; they don’t want a college football playoff because of concern for “student athletes” (a purposely ambiguous term invented by the NCAA) when in reality they just don’t want to share the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) revenue. A recent report from an athletes’ advocacy group calculated that if college sports shared their revenues the way pro sports do, the average BCS player would be worth \$121,000 per year, while the average basketball player at that level would be worth \$265,000.

Historically the NCAA has controlled, and I use that term loosely, college sports only because the controlees, the schools, have allowed it and they receive lots of money. Then in the mid-1980s the NCAA lost its TV-money cartel in a court case, and Big-Time Football schools no longer had to share revenue with smaller schools. (March Madness basketball money kept the NCAA afloat.)

And whatever authority that organization once had is pretty much history as well, as story after story emerges of “cheating” (as defined by the 250-page rulebook that is enforced selectively and subjectively) followed by a charge of “lack of institutional control,” a slap on the wrist and then it’s back to making dough.

I’ve ridden the “scholarship should be payment enough” bandwagon for a long time but now that the schools are making it clear they are money-obsessed, hiking donor club dues and ticket prices, creating personal seat licenses, and making horrible fashion choices for money (here’s looking at you, Terrapins), I now say you have to pay the players something.

Tradition may be too important to me; tailgating is just as fun no matter who your team is playing, after all. But something is ailing the soul of college athletics and there is no leadership from college presidents or the NCAA. Everyone’s too busy counting their money.

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