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80 years of trade-offs in college sports

Charles Clotfelter; For the AJC

American college athletics, a report says, is "a highly organized commercial enterprise. The athletes who take part in it have come up through years of training; they are commanded by professional coaches; little if any personal initiative of ordinary play is left to the player.

"The great matches are highly profitable enterprises."

Although these words well describe big-time college sports in 2009, they were written 80 years ago.

On Oct. 23, 1929, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching issued a 350-page report that was based on three years of work and site visits to more than 100 campuses.

Titled simply "American College Athletics," it received front-page coverage the next day in The New York Times.

What is most striking about the Carnegie Foundation report is how contemporary its findings sound today.

Despite the dramatic changes that have transformed college athletics into a major part of the American entertainment industry --- including television and the influx of billions of advertising dollars --- the descriptions it gives of conditions in 1929 provide an eerily accurate picture of 2009.

From the earliest days of intercollegiate competition, college sports had been criticized for allowing commercial interests and over-emphasis on winning to undermine academic values.

Before 1900, Harvard's president Charles Eliot called these tendencies a "great evil." In 1922, muckraker Upton Sinclair opined that college athletics had become "a monstrous cancer."

To investigate the basis for these criticisms, the Carnegie Foundation gathered information on such aspects as recruiting, payments to athletes, academic standards, administrative control over athletics, and the status and pay of college coaches.

Among the report's most heralded findings at the time were the use of aggressive recruiting tactics, the widespread existence of "slush funds" and subsidies to athletes, often by alumni boosters.

Because critics had often cited the high salaries of coaches as evidence of misplaced priorities, the report surveyed universities to determine the salaries of both the head football coach and the highest-paid full professor.

The authors found that coaches earned an average of 10 percent more than top professors.

The report concluded that the abuses associated with big-time college athletics were the result of "commercialism, and a negligent attitude toward the educational opportunities for which the college exists."

Today, the landscape remains very much the same, this despite an elaborate NCAA enforcement regime and mountains of evidence detailing recruiting violations, academic compromises, spiraling expenditures and growing commercialism.

Coaches' salaries are now higher than ever. At 45 public universities with big-time athletic programs in 2007, football coaches earned three times what the university president did and 20 times the salary of full professors.

To pay these salaries and the other rising costs of big-time sports programs, universities are building luxury suites atop football stadiums and auctioning off such things as the chance to run onto the field with the football team.

Television has rapidly turned coaches into media stars, and postseason bowls and tournaments into prodigious money makers.

At the same time, graduation rates for football and basketball players remain well below those of other students, despite new sanctions designed to encourage athletes to obtain degrees.

Reformers over the decades have called on university leaders to affirm the values of the academy and put their athletic houses in order.

But reform from within has not worked because the conditions that need reforming are a direct consequence of deliberate and clear-eyed decisions by universities themselves.

Those in charge of universities with big-time programs yearn for winning teams, and achieving athletic success requires a cadre of specialized professionals quite unlike those who run universities' educational operations.

Thus, two dissimilar enterprises have grown up within these universities, locked in a reluctant but necessary symbiotic embrace.

Given the tremendous popularity of college sports competition, the winner-take-all nature of competition and the reluctance of the academic side of universities to subsidize the athletic side, don't expect universities to suddenly stop exploiting the commercial opportunities before them.

The pressures to win, and to do so with as little athletic subsidy as possible, produces the conditions that have characterized big-time athletics for these last 80 years.

What universities could do, however, is admit they are in the entertainment business and be more candid about the trade-offs involved in running a big-time sports enterprise.

Being a source of pride for state residents or alumni is not a bad thing, but being disingenuous about it hurts the credibility of higher education and its larger mission.

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