

REVIEW ESSAY

Big-Time Sports as Academic Prostitution

William C. Dowling

College Sports, Inc: The Athletic Department vs. The University, by Murray Sperber (Henry Holt and Company, 1990)

College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA's Amateur Myth, by Allen L. Sack and Ellen J. Staurowsky (Praeger, 1998)

Unpaid Professionals: Commercialism and Conflict in Big-Time College Sports, by Andrew Zimbalist (Princeton University Press, 1999)

Beer and Circus: How Big-Time Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education, by Murray Sperber (Henry Holt and Company, 2000)

Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University: A University President's Perspective, by James J. Duderstadt (University of Michigan Press, 2000)

The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values, by James L. Shulman and William G. Bowen (Princeton University Press, 2001)

A remarkable feature of the recent literature on college sports is its virtually unanimous agreement that commercialized athletics has been a destructive force in American higher education. Disagreement comes only in the various—and endless—proposals about what is to be done. Yet even here there is substantial agreement, with a majority of critics arguing that the solution is to make athletics in Division IA of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) openly professional—the school operates the franchise, the stadium is sold to shareholders, the players are hired on the same terms as those in the NBA or NFL, and the charade of trying to pass them off as “student athletes” is quietly put to rest. Allen Sack, coauthor of the hardhitting study *College Athletes for Hire*, has recently said that this is his own favored option.¹ Andrew Zimbalist, the Smith College economist whose *Unpaid Professionals* undertakes a sophisticated economic analysis of big-time college sports, argues that it would put an end to an intolerable hypocrisy: “Kids who have no academic talent and/or interest in attending college are compelled to be there.”

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Schools prostitute themselves by accepting 'special admits' and offering them phony curricula. There is no integrity in the process" (199).

What does it mean, though, to say that schools are prostituting themselves to commercialized athletics? As it happens, I finished Zimbalist's book on a recent Air France flight back from Lyon and, looking for something else to read, picked up a magazine from the seat next to me. Its lead article was entitled "*Faut-il légaliser la prostitution?*" ("Should we legalize prostitution?"). As I began to see within a paragraph or two, there was an eerie similarity between the arguments being made for the open professionalization of college athletics in America and the arguments for legalized prostitution in France: given a bad set of choices, and a problem that is insoluble on any other terms, it is best to end the hypocrisy and exert some measure of control by bringing everything into the open.

Though I left the magazine on the plane, one section of the article still haunts me. Since France does not have legalized prostitution and the Netherlands does, the magazine sent a reporter to Amsterdam. The part of her report I remember most vividly described the Toppelzone "sex park" outside Amsterdam, a bleak dirtscape in which prostitutes stand in simulated bus shelters while clients drive around a circular road making their choice. The Toppelzone is Amsterdam's means of keeping drug-addicted prostitutes away from the central city. Only prostitutes hooked on heroin are permitted to work there. When a client has made his choice, he signals and the prostitute climbs into his car. They drive to an open stall shielded on two sides by opaque plastic panels, service is rendered, payment is made, and the prostitute returns to her stand. It is all, says the reporter, in a phrase that I scribbled on the flyleaf of Zimbalist's book, *sordide mais pragmatique* (sordid but practical).

Pragmatique, yes, but why *sordide*? The traditional answer is that sex carries ancient associations with marriage and family, or, at a minimum, with romantic love—all forms of human union felt to transcend mere physical self-gratification—and that prostitution subverts these. But in a society daily bombarded with sexual images and grown cynical about the sexual behavior of celebrities and politicians, that sort of explanation no longer seems to carry much force. We have become so desensitized to even the most flagrant and unremitting ways modern culture undermines the values of home and hearth that prostitution, by comparison, seems almost quaint. Instead, the sordidness of Toppelzone sex most likely derives from our sense that sexual coupling with a paid partner threatens the very possibility of disinterested motives, and so subverts an entire category of things—friendship, reading Jane Austen or Nabokov, listening to Mozart, playing chess—that are only intelligible as ends in themselves. This, I suspect, is the moral intuition behind our sense that Toppelzone sex—the client interested in his partner solely as a sexual appliance, the prostitute interested in the client solely as a source of cash—is somehow sordid or debased.

For a very long time, universities have been the object of a similar moral intuition, to precisely the degree that their societies were able to perceive them as centers of disinterested learning. For though universities since the Middle Ages have engaged in a complex negotiation with the world of power and economic competition lying just outside their walls, the university as an institution has always been understood to retain, as Ann Matthews puts it in *Bright College Years*, “a core of transcendent purpose.” Ultimately, this is what people concerned about college sports corruption are really disturbed about, a tacitly held ideal that comes a little closer to extinction every time a major institution sends its basketball team to the NCAA playoffs or its football team to a postseason bowl game. It is what moves critics of college sports corruption to talk about the prostitution of higher education to commercialized sports. It is also an ideal that would become extinct at the moment proposals for the open professionalization of college sports were adopted. The strength of recent writing on sports corruption is that it has been entirely clear-sighted about big time college sports as commercialized spectacle. Its weakness is that it has been driven by this to a counsel of despair.

A decade or so ago, awareness of sports corruption in American higher education tended to focus on the scandals that regularly come to light in the NCAA’s Division IA programs. So, for instance, a brief flutter of national attention surrounded the news that an athletics tutor at the University of Minnesota had written over 400 pieces of work for 20 basketball players over a 5-year period, while Coach Clem Haskins was building a program that regularly took the Golden Gophers to the TV extravaganza promoted as “March Madness.” In the same way, the news that Virginia Tech had built a nationally ranked football program by importing individuals with remarkable physical skills but dubious intellectual ability or moral character—in 1997, some 19 Virginia Tech players were under criminal indictment for crimes ranging from assault to burglary to rape—got its moment of national coverage. But big-time college sports as they now exist are a creation of TV advertising revenue, targeted at an audience in whose lives televised sports play as central a part as do the weekly episodes of *Survivor*. Television encourages, notoriously, a short attention span. So the scandals fade quickly, along with fleeting memories of last year’s Liberty Bowl or Peach Bowl.

There is, nonetheless, a bizarre aspect to all this. In the age of spin and counter-spin, it is not surprising that Division IA athletics boosters respond to mention of any recent scandal with various established mantras: “The program has been cleaned up,” “We’ve put the past behind us,” “That was then, this is now.” What is bizarre is that they so obviously believe it. Virginia Tech, for instance, finished last season ranked No. 6 in the Associated Press football poll. From the publicity put out by the school, or from the talk on Virginia Tech boosters’ boards, no one would have guessed that only a short time ago the school had 19 football players under criminal indictment. At Rutgers

University, where I teach, students recently protested when the Athletic Director hired a new coach out of the University of Miami, another football program that rose to the top through flagrant corruption—boosters paying players \$500 per touchdown, positive drug results repeatedly “lost” or covered up, an employee who went to the penitentiary for illegally steering nearly \$700,000 in government student loans to recruited athletes. The response of Rutgers athletics boosters? The corruption was ancient history. The most recent scandal occurred several years before their newly hired coach had joined the Miami staff.

More recently, as the literature on college sports corruption has grown in both volume and sophistication, emphasis has tended to shift to what might be called structural corruption—the soul-destroying compromises that even selective institutions are compelled to make to sustain Division IA programs in football or basketball, the so-called revenue sports. Yet such institutions do not like to be told that they are doing anything wrong. Thus Sol Gittleman, Provost of Tufts University, a school that plays at the Division III non-athletic-scholarship level, caused a small storm of controversy recently when he published in the *Wall Street Journal* a letter that mentioned a few prestigious institutions by name. “Does anyone actually believe that a freshman varsity basketball player at Duke, Stanford, or Georgetown,” asked Gittleman, “can handle a normal first-year curriculum at these rigorously academic institutions?” Division I-A college athletics, he went on to say, “has nothing to do with education. The billions of dollars of NCAA contracts with the media have nothing to do with education. The sneaker contracts and deals with basketball and football coaches in Division I-A programs have nothing to do with education.”²

Even a glance at the statistics available in the 1997 graduation-rates report published by the NCAA will show that Gittleman was doing little more than stating obvious truths. At Duke, for instance, entering students had a combined SAT of 1392. The average for basketball players was 887.³ On the face of it, the 500-plus point gap between Duke basketball players and “real” Duke students permits only one of two conclusions. Neither is entirely complimentary to the university. Either Duke is a place where students with a combined SAT under 900 are legitimately able to meet the demands of their courses, in which case the educational level at Duke is little above the average community college, or it is a school whose courses present its bright and well-prepared “real” students with a genuine intellectual challenge. In the latter case, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some means—most likely what Murray Sperber in *College Sports, Inc* calls a “hideaway curriculum”—is being found to keep these low-SAT basketball players eligible. The same picture emerges at every other selective institution that pursues big time or “professionalized” college sports—at Northwestern, for instance, where entering students average 1344 on the SAT and basketball players 974, or Virginia, where “real”

students come in with an SAT of 1293 and basketball players with 854, or Michigan, where students have an average score of 1271 and members of the football team 834.

On the face of it, such statistics ought to be an embarrassment to schools that are among the most selective in the nation. Isn't operating what amounts to a semi-pro franchise in football or basketball at odds with the image of the university as an institution of higher learning? Doesn't doing so make Duke and Stanford and Michigan essentially sports factories, similar except for their higher-SAT students to schools like Nebraska or Tennessee or Kentucky, whose partisans are unapologetic about the absolute centrality of the football or basketball team to their support of the institution? The point missed by such questions is that the tiny handful of schools in the Duke-Stanford-Michigan category enjoy their special prominence precisely because they serve the purpose of legitimizing the otherwise corrupt world of NCAA Division IA athletics. So long as a few such institutions are there to point to, trustees and administrators at places like Nebraska and Tennessee are able to avoid answering the charge that they have prostituted their own state universities to commercialized college sports. One does not have to choose, they will confidently assert, between big time athletics and academic or intellectual values. Their evidence? Look at Duke. Look at Stanford. Look at Michigan.

Even at sports factory schools, however, many of which are open admissions universities increasingly devoted to remedial education, how is it possible to establish any connection between professionalized athletics and academic decline? One standard answer is that a big-time football or basketball program inevitably shifts the symbolic center of values at an institution away from the pursuit of knowledge and toward sports as commercial spectacle. By putting a national spotlight on a few semi-literate running backs or slamdunkers, the argument goes, or by granting a strong institutional voice to Boosters Club members, or by filling the college bookstore with sports paraphernalia rather than books, the school is sending a message to every bright and intellectually serious high school student in the state—if you're brilliant at math or philosophy or Greek, we don't value what you have to offer. But if you can throw something or catch something or slam dunk something in a way that will get the school's name on TV, the taxpayers will swoon in adulation. If their families are wealthy enough, bright students in this situation quietly leave for a good private university elsewhere. Those unfortunate enough to be from more modest backgrounds are stranded at a remedial-level institution.

Murray Sperber's *Beer and Circus* provides a more complex analysis. With the emergence of higher education as what Rutgers sociologist Jackson Toby calls a "new entitlement" has come, as is widely recognized, a general lowering of standards for college-level performance. As undergraduate teaching has moved more and more toward remedial instruction, Sperber argues, professors in high-powered departments have increasingly withdrawn into their re-

search. But then the institution—the model here would be schools like Florida State in football or Kentucky in basketball—is left with what amounts to a problem of potential student unrest. Like so many large American high schools, the university becomes a place where thousands of adolescents have been herded together but given almost nothing to do. (I recall one survey, undertaken at a lower-tier state university, showing that students there did less than three hours of homework per week for all their classes combined.) The solution? It has been, says Sperber, to give them a school year centering on sports as spectacle, a football team or basketball team that gives them something to talk about, lets them paint their faces and blow off steam, and provides plenty of occasions for drinking at post-game parties.

In the background of Sperber's account lies the specter of big time athletics as a billion-dollar TV-revenue-driven behemoth that has penetrated to the heart of American higher education, leaving many Division IA schools little more than hollowed out shells. Sperber's earlier *College Sports, Inc* was a pioneering study of the ways in which commercialized college sports have shrunk the institutional identity of many universities to little more than the images running back and forth on the TV screen during "March madness," or the name blazoned on the players' jerseys during televised bowl games. The very names of such bowl games—the Culligan Holiday Bowl, the FedEx Orange Bowl, the Chic-fil-A Peach Bowl, the Tostitos Corn Chips Fiesta Bowl—suggest who really owns the universities who play in them. This is the ultimate reality that lies behind the more visible symptoms usually talked about in this connection: the Nike summer camps, the million-dollar coaches, the expensive new automobiles that "blue chip" recruits are likely to be driving around campus, the payments to parents or—as recently happened at my own university—the discovery that the parent of a highly recruited player would make an excellent addition to the coaching staff.

It is frequently said by those familiar with big-time college athletics that presidents at sports factory schools are likely to be little more than lackeys of the athletics department, hired to issue soothing pronouncements about "academic excellence" while the football or basketball program gets on with the business of going to the Tostitos Bowl or the NCAA playoffs. The truth of the observation comes most obviously to light on the rare occasions when the president of a Division IA institution attempts to thwart the boosters and their allies on the Board of Trustees on some issue they see as essential to a winning program. The bitterness of the conflict that inevitably results simmers just beneath the surface of James Duderstadt's *Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University*, which provides an administrator's view of the current situation in commercialized college sports. Duderstadt was president of the University of Michigan during a period when the Wolverines had a number of highly ranked teams and went to the Rose Bowl, but at a certain point he made the mistake of assuming that he, rather than the athletics boosters, ran the univer-

sity. The outcome was predictable: Duderstadt was replaced as president in 1995. The book is a product of his new-found leisure.

The boosters win because they have behind them the potent social and economic forces that generate March Madness and the Chic-fil-A Peach Bowl. Allen Sack and Ellen Staurowsky's *College Athletes for Hire* is an excellent account of how the NCAA, ostensibly the body through which universities deliberate on athletics policy, has become the marketing arm of the TV networks and their advertisers, an enormously powerful lobby for commercialized sports. (The NCAA engineered a major propaganda coup many years ago by insinuating the term "student athlete" into national discourse, though critics pointed out that no one on any college campus ever talks about "student actors" or "student musicians." The degree to which the term has recently been discredited is a mark of the impact that books like *College Athletes for Hire* are having.) Andrew Zimbalist's *Unpaid Professionals* drives home the same point through detailed economic analysis. Yet clear-sightedness can also encourage defeatism. It is the sheer size and power of the commercial juggernaut that has led critics like Sack and Zimbalist to argue resignedly that open professionalization is the only way out.

What is the alternative? The most promising possibility, I think, is to be glimpsed in James L. Shulman and William G. Bowen's *The Game of Life*. Not that Shulman and Bowen are concerned with Division IA sports corruption. Indeed, their book is noteworthy for showing that commercialized college sports have penetrated into institutions previously thought to be exempt, such as the Ivies and selective liberal arts colleges like Williams and Swarthmore. Their crucial point is that a place in the freshman class at Princeton or Williams, as a commodity highly valued in the larger society, has come to serve much the same purpose as the gold chains and expensive cars lavished on recruited athletes at open-admissions institutions. As sports down to the Little League level have become so specialized that younger athletes hold themselves up to professional standards of performance, selective institutions have been able to remain competitive only by granting set-aside slots to varsity coaches. But recruited athletes have tended to be far lower in intellectual ability than other entering students. As the practice has grown—at a school like Princeton, the set-asides may amount to 20 or 25 percent of the freshman class—the result has been a serious dilution of intellectual quality.

Nonetheless, *The Game of Life* does seem to me to suggest—though it is no part of the authors' intention—a compelling alternative to the open professionalization of college sports. The data base chosen by Shulman and Bowen includes a category that has almost gone unnoticed in discussions of college athletics: major universities with Division III athletics programs. The NCAA's Division III consists of institutions that do not grant athletic scholarships—indeed, it is a non-athletic-scholarship policy that makes a school a member of Division III—and is normally thought of as the home of small

liberal arts colleges and other institutions without the resources to support highly competitive football or basketball programs. It is Division III that comes closest to fulfilling what Brian Porto has called the “participation model” of college athletics, where sports are played simply by students who have gone out for the team. Yet *The Game of Life* demonstrates that the Division III model has been successful at a number of major universities as well. Shulman and Bowen include in their sample Emory University, Tufts University, and Washington University in St. Louis. All are highly regarded academically. Each pursues athletics at the Division III level.

In public policy debates, the most persuasive argument that something can be done is very often the demonstration that it is being done, though in a venue—a workman’s compensation plan in Denmark, a high-speed rail system in France or Japan—that has so far escaped notice. At major universities like Emory and Tufts, the Division III model is obviously working splendidly, and is exerting a due influence on other private institutions. When Boston University a few years ago abolished a football program that had existed since 1884, for instance, there was a brief cry of anguish from alumni and some students. Today, there is little evidence that anyone at BU misses football. When Swarthmore recently abolished football on what might be called Shulman-Bowen grounds—that set-asides by varsity coaches were inevitably lowering the intellectual quality of Swarthmore’s entering classes—one member of the board of trustees reacted violently, but most students and alumni were happy to see the program put to rest. In New York, with an undergraduate body of over 15,000 students, NYU has been rising steadily in academic reputation over the last thirty years without giving a thought to pursuing athletics at the commercialized Division IA level.

At Rutgers, the one major public institution at which alumni and students have mounted serious resistance to the encroachment of professionalized college athletics, there has been much speculation about what would happen if the anti-sports-corruption struggle were to succeed, making Rutgers the first state school to adopt the major-university-Division III model represented by Emory and Tufts and NYU in the private sphere. My own guess is that the first major public university to move to Division III would very soon be followed by others. As studies like Sperber’s *College Sports, Inc* and Zimbalist’s *Unpaid Professionals* amply demonstrate, college athletics for most of the several hundred members of the NCAA’s Division IA are an endless will-o’-the-wisp pursuit of the glory imagined to come from TV appearances in postseason bowl games or “March Madness.” Only a tiny handful of programs consistently turn out winners, and an even tinier percentage make a profit while doing so. For the others, once the Division III model was seen to be working at even one major public university, the prospect of getting out of Division IA sports, of devoting the entirety of the institution’s resources to building academic distinction and a sense of intellectual community, might well prove to be irresistible.

If more and more public institutions were breaking free of the tyranny of commercialized athletics, a final question is what would happen to the small number of sports factories that have “succeeded” at Division IA level—the Nebraskas and Florida States and Kentuckys and Indianas, whose partisans live for the next postseason bowl game or NCAA basketball playoffs. Would they, in response to booster and taxpayer pressure, take the path of open professionalization, paying a wage to football and basketball players, eliminating any requirement that recruits purport to be “college students,” and, having formed conferences with similar teams, making the most lucrative possible deals with the TV networks? An even more intriguing question is whether, under these circumstances, anyone would see any value in continuing to operate the non-athletic sector of the university, the unnecessary expenditure on libraries and classrooms and faculty salaries. Would it not be more practical, in such a situation, simply to use some of the revenue generated by TV contracts to send in-state students to out-of-state universities? Such a possibility at this point sounds far-fetched, but it may not sound that way in five years or a decade. It has, after all, worked elsewhere, in other contexts. It is the logic of the Tappelzone.

Notes

1. Allen L. Sack, “Big-Time Athletics vs. Academic Values: It’s a Rout,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 January 2001.
2. “Letters to the Editor,” *Wall Street Journal*, 6 April 2001.
3. The figures given are for athletes in the period 1993-1996.