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College Sport

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It's been some time since I sat down and watched as much as a half of a college football game. Last fall I was in London, a city not infected by intercollegiate athletics, and this fall I simply never got enough time or interest to watch. Then a few weeks ago I did see several games. Florida and Florida State always draws my interest, and the Notre Dame run has been an interesting one.

One of the reasons I have neglected college football is that I've been preoccupied with the NFL, in part because of the concussion issue and what it might mean for both the NFL and for football generally. What surprised me most about the college games I saw was the fact that for all the talk of concussions and helmet to helmet hits, the college games I watched seem to feature helmet to helmet contact, as well as defensive players and blockers leading with their helmets resulting in a rash of spearing. These seldom resulted in penalties.

I wondered if somehow the colleges had missed the discussion. Could it be that coaching is just very poor from the pee wee leagues on up through the college game, or do coaches not care and players consider themselves invincible and too macho to care? Or is it something else? Whatever it might be, I saw more head banging in these college games than I have seen recently in the NFL game.

Also in the category of ignoring the evidence, a recent study published in the Social Science Quarterly (The Sporting News of Social Science) three political scientists studied the impact of replacing football coaches on performance at the college level: E. Scott Adler and Michael J. Berry at the University of Colorado and David Doherty, a political scientist at Loyola University (Chicago). One of their findings is of considerable interest given recent developments on the college football coaching front:

"We find that for particularly poorly performing teams, coach replacements have little effect on team performance as measured against comparable teams that did not replace their coach. However, for teams with middling records—that is, teams where entry conditions for a new coach appear to be more favorable—replacing the head coach appears to

result in worse performance over subsequent years than comparable teams who retained their coach."

In the past few weeks the University of Tennessee has given \$9M in buyouts to clean out their football coaching staff. The head coach picked up \$5M as he was kicked out the door. This led the Tennessee Athletic Department to announce they would not be making the planned \$18M in scholarship and fellowship contributions to the University. Across the state line at Auburn head football coach Gene Chizik was fired. His staff will take away \$3.5M, and among Chizik's departing gifts will be \$7.5M. This will work out to \$208.334 per month for the next 36 months, which should be enough to feed his family. The beauty of it all is that Chizik led Auburn to a BCS Championship just two seasons ago.

Similar buyouts occurred across the land as college coaches were fired by athletic directors and University presidents under pressure to produce a winning football team. It is not just winning more than losing that is required, but winning, as in conference championships and BCS Bowl Games. Apparently no one connected with college football has any interest in the effectiveness of firing, only in the need to feed the booster and alumni mob demanding a national championship. The pressure is massive and growing as college football and basketball continues to bloat the budgets of college athletics.

If you have any doubts about the primacy of money in intercollegiate athletics, doubt no more. It is now a major entertainment enterprise with little or no connection to the educational mission of the university. Higher Education, now more than ever, deserves Thorstein Veblen's description as "a study in total depravity."

Two weeks ago the annual IMG Intercollegiate Athletics Forum was held in New York City. IMG, for the uninitiated, is the International Management Group, the largest sports management company in the world. It dominates globally and in recent years has taken near monopoly control of College Athletic marketing. Among the topics at the Forum were the new college football playoff system and the avalanche of conference realignment.

The major subject of course was money. How will the \$407M annual rights fee for the football playoff be divided? Will

all schools get a cut as is the case in the NCAA basketball tourney, or will some get more than others? It should be as much fun to watch this struggle as the one on the field.

The high cost of hiring and firing coaches was bemoaned but then written off as the price of doing business. The growing budget demands inflated by the intercollegiate arms race were lamented as well. The talk of money drowned out any talk of the mythical "student athlete," so there was one positive. As the New York Times reported the more common vocabulary featured "product," "distribution channels," and "brand loyalty."

All of this goes a long way to explain the most recent outbreak of conference jumping and reorganization. The Big Ten is now the Big Fourteen, the Big Twelve is now the Big Ten, The Big East is now the Shrinking East, The Pac Ten is now the Pac Twelve, the ACC is up and down, while the Southeast Conference having grown to fourteen has spread to the Southwest.

My own institution, the University of Central Florida, paid a sum estimated at \$5M to \$7M to leave Conference USA and another \$2.5M to join the Big East. Now the shrinking Big East seems on its way either to oblivion or to a conference profile that will look a lot like Conference USA. Musical chairs can be costly when a move up turns out to be a lateral arabesque or worse.

Nor is it over. Traditional rivalries and sensible geography have been cast aside. The demand for dollars is insatiable and nothing else seems to matter.

Where will it all end? Only Pushkin knows.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you a Happy Holiday Season and reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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