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Pat Dye and The Raincoat Theory of Education

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

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Several years ago a friend from East Carolina University told me that it was believed that Pat Dye would never leave his position as head football coach at East Carolina because he would never be able to find a university with lower academic standards. But then he did, and so he left for Auburn.

It was one of those jokes that makes the rounds about football coaches which reflects the dumb jock syndrome. In this case however there was a feeling that the joke contained an element of truth, a feeling that was confirmed while doing a study of academic standards for athletes at various universities around the country. Both East Carolina and Auburn turned up in the sample, and while East Carolina's standards for academic eligibility for athletes were low, those at Auburn were an embarrassment. There was not even a pretense to academic standards for the athletes at Auburn.

This is not to pick on Auburn. Institutionally it is no worse than many schools across America, some of which pretend to have high academic standards. I have seen the college transcripts of athletes who although they used up four years of eligibility at so called respectable institutions are no closer to graduation than the average first semester freshman.

But to return to the Auburn, where Pat Dye is now both head football coach and athletic director. In the last several weeks a story has broken of cash payments to Auburn players by coaches and boosters, possibly involving Pat Dye. The story has come largely from the tape-recorded conversations between one player, Eric Ramsey, who played at Auburn from 1987 to 1990, and several boosters and coaches. Ramsey and other players have also accused Coach Dye of racism, while others have confirmed Ramsey's charges of payoffs. These tapes were recorded secretly, some over the telephone, which by itself raises serious legal and ethical questions. The word "extortion" comes readily to mind. I

would expect that Eric Ramsey will at some point have to deal with those questions.

In the meantime the NCAA has announced an official inquiry into the Auburn football program while already conducting investigations of the men's basketball and women's tennis programs. This past Monday the basketball program was placed on two years probation. There seems to be the makings of a major landslide here.

As Eric Ramsey's tapes have been published in The Montgomery Advertiser and The Birmingham News Pat Dye has developed a siege mentality. Dye denounced the messenger and called for Auburn fans to boycott the newspapers. In addition he has forbidden his players from speaking with the press, and of course he denies any wrongdoing in his program. Auburn's sports information department has also come into the damage control process, operating like the well known spin doctors of Washington D.C. Predictably there have been numerous threats on the life of Eric Ramsey and his wife.

All in all it is an ugly, and all too familiar scene.

Just a little over a month ago Dye was featured in a lengthily Sports Illustrated story comparing him to the legendary Bear Bryant. It was a tour de force of football coach legend writing. Sports Illustrated painted a portrait of a man who grew up on a farm and still loves the farm, a man who loves to sweat, a man who works hard and plays hard, a man who loves America and loves the South. For some reason football coaches are always portrayed as great patriots, and in Alabama that means loyalty to both nation and region.

Dye emerges as a larger than life figure towering over a region in which college football has become a quasi-religion with Pat Dye as its Pope, following in the line of succession from Bear Bryant, the deity. He is a football coach who drives his players beyond human limits, who knows that there is nothing more

important in life than football. He is a coach who has been in the forefront among those criticizing the NCAA and the President's Council for their attempts to reform intercollegiate athletics. He can not believe that anyone would try to do away with Athletic Dormitories, or that anyone would deny a young man the right to attend college and play football because their SAT scores were too low.

Pat Dye believes in what I call the raincoat theory of education. Just because some young person may not be college material, the argument goes, and even though they may not have a snowball's change in hell of ever actually graduating, at least they will have been exposed to college. Exposed! What exactly does that mean? They will have a chance to move around the same campus as actual students, and perhaps some learning will rub off on these young gladiators. Maybe someday while walking in the general vicinity of the library some learning might ooze out from the building and infiltrate their heads. And I have heard this raincoat theory expounded by many more coaches than just Pat Dye.

Dye has created a winning football program at Auburn. In the process he has developed close ties to the Board of Trustees of the university. As both Athletic Director and Head Football Coach he has been reporting to himself, and responsible to himself. No one at Auburn would have even thought about the possibility that Pat Dye's future might be in doubt. But now with the release of the tapes, and the subsequent collapse of the football team, there are beginning to be some questions about the future. Could it be that Pat Dye's reign as successor to the Bear is about to be cut short? Is it true that football teaches us valuable lessons in life?

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