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Terry Bowden Gone: Coaches, Boosters and Trustees a Dealy Mix

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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The intercollegiate athletic forces are at it again and as usual the action comes from the king of college sport, football. At Auburn, one of the NCAA's more problematic programs, Terry Bowden is gone as the head football coach of Auburn's beloved Tigers. As we have come to expect there is nothing simple about the disappearance of a head coach in the heartland of college football.

It seems that Terry Bowden either (1) angered an influential booster, (2) lost his nerve in the face of criticism of his losing season or (3) is a believer in an ancient Japanese ritual whose name sounds like that of the late Chicago Cubs broadcaster. Ruling out the third option we can figure it is one of the other two or some combination thereof. Whichever it is it reeks of all that is wrong with intercollegiate athletics, and illustrates for the "nth" time the misplaced priorities of America's institutions of higher learning.

There are many around the Auburn campus who are pointing the finger at a booster named Bobby Lowder who is described as a major contributor and a member of the Auburn board of trustees. If this is the real explanation of what happened it confirms the power patterns of intercollegiate athletics. In this Auburn scenario the Athletic Director is depicted as the tool of the booster-trustee and the university president is seen as largely irrelevant in a major decision at the university.

Ron Smith in his excellent study of the origins and development of intercollegiate athletics in the late 19th century, Sports and Freedom, tells us that this practice of power politics by trustees is as old as sports on campus. Smith argues convincingly that the real power over intercollegiate athletics lies with Boards of Trustees and individual trustees who are often major fans and boosters. They are often leaders in promoting the win-at-all-cost mentality, and do the "wink and nod" in the face of the corruption of the university. They are the ones who control university presidents, athletic directors, and coaches.

In the second version the story is not all that much different. Terry Bowden may have lost his nerve in the face of campus and local criticism during his losing season, then could not find any support from the AD or the university president. So Bowden resigned after negotiating a financial severance package. In

this scenario the local power brokers still play a major role, as they are the ones who determine the attitudes of the major administrators, and they are the ones who bear the financial burden of the contract buyout. The only significant difference in this second scenario is that the crassness of "winning is the only thing" is a featured part of the package of corruption.

The fact that Bowden could have an overall winning record at Auburn, that this was his first losing season, and that no action against him resulted from the previous corruption at Auburn speaks volumes. The recruitment of unqualified students who failed admissions standards wasn't enough to let Bowden go, but losing was. Corruption of academic standards is only a minor ethical matter that can be transcended by winning. Losing can be overcome by nothing less than self-immolation or martyrdom.

So Terry Bowden is gone, the athletic director is in denial, and the President of Auburn University seems to have only a vague notion that anything was happening on his campus.

The events at Auburn once again illustrate the depths to which we have descended in American intercollegiate athletics in just a little over a century after the inception of intercollegiate competition. The landscape is littered with the bodies of coaches, athletic directors and university presidents who have made the mistake of crossing those who wield the power at good old alma mater.

And there is no hope of reformation.

Think back over the last several years at some of the amazing tales of athletic boosterism out of control on campus. A little over a decade ago at Clemson the President, Dr. James Atchley, tried valiantly to reign in the power of the boosters and restore some sense of legitimacy to the athletic program. What he got for his efforts was the wrath of the money machine. For them football was king, the football coach was a campus figure more important than the mere president of the university, and winning was much more important than institutional integrity. In short order the President of Clemson was no longer on campus because he failed to understand the importance of winning and over-estimated the significance of the academic mission of the university.

The University of Notre Dame, once a bastion of academic and athletic integrity, has sold its athletic soul to winning. The result has been the hiring of coaches without ethics, an

athletic department that has become the focal point of humor in the courts, and boosters tossing their dollars around the locker room. The only good thing that can be said about Notre Dame is that there are still some people associated with that University who are embarrassed by this sort of thing.

Even more intriguing were the activities of University of Florida boosters who last spring saved the job of the University President. Having made foolish and racist comments about the new Chancellor of the Florida System; it appeared that President John Lombardi was on his way out of Gainesville. Bull Gators (the highest level contributors to the UF athletic department) would not hear of such a thing. Lombardi liked football and was in the habit of defending the more insensitive activities of Gator football coach Steve Spurrier. So the Bull Gators got on the phones, fired up their FAX machines, and rallied the politicians who serve them. Even head football coach Steve Spurrier publicly supported the besieged university president. Within a matter of a few days Lombardi went from the ranks of the contrite to the triumphant, and the new Chancellor was made to accept the fact that he would not and could not control anyone supported by powerful UF boosters.

The Florida case is one of the more intriguing exercises of athletic booster power yet. Over the years around the nation boosters have fired all manner of official, but this may be the first time they saved the job of a university president. What sort of leverage they now have is not known, but it certainly puts them in a new and formidable position.

Could this be the future of intercollegiate athletics and Higher Education in America? I wouldn't bet against it.

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

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