Myles Brand Address to NCAA: He is for All that is Good Except … …

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Intercollegiate athletics is one of the few stable and reliable forces in the universe. It can be relied upon to provide an endless parade of stories and controversies generally casting a dark shadow across the sporting landscape. This past week was no exception, although at the very end of the week there was one tiny little glimmer of hope on the horizon, at least for positive thinkers.

Myles Brand, who will forever be known as the man who fired Bobby Knight, made his first major address to an NCAA National Convention since taking over the helm of that much maligned organization. What he had to say can only be characterized as business as usual, even though he offered it in the name of serious reform.

First he addressed the source of most of the problems facing intercollegiate athletics, commercialism, and let it be known that in his view there is a place for "common sense" commercialism in college sport. That is like saying there is room for moderate sex in the practice of celibacy. Haggling over the price of one's soul strikes me as a strange definition of reform.

On the other hand Brand struck at the heart of a basic truth about intercollegiate athletics. They are expensive and becoming more so, they are primarily a commercial endeavor and always have been, and they show no sign of any kind of sense being exercised in relation to them, be it common or uncommon. Reformers have been trying to change intercollegiate athletics for over a century.

The fact that Ohio State won the national football championship is one more sign that only those who deal in excess will be rewarded. The Buckeyes are the New York Yankees of intercollegiate athletics bragging that they have the largest athletic budget of any school in America. Singing quaint songs about the old alma mater while misty eyed at mid-field after the national championship game may be a nice television moment, but it cannot hide the cost of such Main Street sentimentality.

Warming to his subject Brand said that presidents of the institutions of higher spending should control reforms.
A nice thought, but who will be the first to put a lid on spending? The answer. It will be the same president who is the first to be fired by his board of trustees under pressure from the boosters. Those who try to de-emphasize sports or control sports find themselves out of work. Presidents know this and like many in power prefer to work from within than from without.

Finally arriving at a truism Brand decried the lack of black football coaches noting there are only four African-American head coaches in all of Division I football. This is even a weaker showing than the NFL. What the NCAA can do about this is difficult to imagine, but perhaps boosters and boards of trustees can help him with this problem.

On Title IX Brand was to the point, he favors it. He then added one caveat: "I think we have to find ways in which we implement Title IX that do not detract from men's opportunities." Is he suggesting that men's programs have suffered because of the growth of women's programs? Perhaps he should take a closer look and see that men's programs have suffered at the hands of the massive growth of football. Just this week at Florida International University in Miami men's soccer fell victim to the budget strains that have appeared with the beginning of a football program and its insatiable appetite for budget dollars.

So is it business as usual or is something significant about to happen?

Just at the end of the week a report in the New York Times indicated that a significant reform movement might be afoot in the land. The basic problem, as I indicated, is that any attempt at reform has run up against Boards of Trustees who generally love big-time athletics. Presidents seeking reform have commonly found themselves at odds with Trustees and that has generally proven to be a mismatch.

Now comes word that the Association of Governing Boards, a national association of college boards of trustees, representing governing bodies whose authority includes the power of the purse, is ready to endorse a reform movement that began among faculty groups on the West Coast and spread to the Big Ten and a number of BCS member schools.

The basic targets of this movement are familiar: academic standards and what is now called "the athletic arms race."
The former is as old as intercollegiate sport and probably will never be solved but may someday be contained. As for the "athletic arms race," this is a relatively new issue. Over the past two decades the budgets of big time athletics have skyrocketed as demands for more coaches with higher salaries, more training facilities, better stadia, more perks, and more wins have driven spending through the roof. The sky is no longer the limit.

Even the infusion of corporate money into these programs has not been enough, and indeed may be one of the major contributing factors to the runaway budgets, the trashing of academic standards, and the willingness to tolerate lower standards of ethics and behavior.

Where winning is the only thing one should not look for reform. The fact that Boards of Trustees are beginning to have doubts is encouraging, but don't forget the countervailing power of the boosters and all those others who have developed a vested interest in the perpetuation of intercollegiate athletics-television, sponsors, agents, and professional sports-to name but a few of the more obvious.

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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