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The NCAA and its "control" of bowl games.

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The NCAA and its "control" of bowl games.
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It was more than a bit amusing to read that the Knight Commission has called on the NCAA to retake control of the bowl games from the television networks and the conferences. This is akin to telling the U.S. Senate to retake control of American Foreign Policy from the Executive Branch. It is not going to happen and even if it did it wouldn't make any real difference. The die is cast, the damage is done, and a reversal of history is not possible.

When the NCAA lost control of the bowls and television in the 1980s, it was simply one more step in the process of turning intercollegiate football over to the entertainment industry. The lure of enhanced revenue streams was more than anyone in the halls of academe could resist, and it was one more of life's lessons taught through the medium of football.

Many of those associated with Division One football will no doubt resist this attempt to reverse history. The President of the University of Michigan seemed to express a view that will be shared by many when she said that the University of Michigan was quite pleased with the revenues that are produced under the current arrangements. These revenues support the Michigan athletics program and there is no compelling reason to change the arrangement. The Goose that lays the golden eggs is not to be put at risk.

A report to the Knight Commission on the bowl system indicated that the six richest leagues -- the Atlantic Coast, Big East, Big Ten, Big 12, Pacific-10, and Southeastern Conferences -- split a profit of \$119.2-million from bowl games last year among their 63 members. The five other Division I-A leagues -- Conference USA and the Mid-American, Mountain West, Sun Belt, and Western Athletic Conference's -- split a profit of \$7.4-million among their 56 members.

This affirms the notion by the President of the University of Michigan that no change is needed in the bowl and television picture for BCS members. The average big conference pay out was nearly \$2M per school, while the average pay out for the Division I also-rans was a paltry \$110,000.

The Commission was told that although the objective of educating football players was admirable, winning was the primary necessity. Coaches are rewarded for winning, not for educating or graduating players. In the end the television networks, the alumni, the boosters, and the students do not turn out to watch football teams that have good graduation rates. The crowds appear to watch winners, in stadiums and on television sets, and the revenues accumulate where there are winners.

This is a very simple fact that has been true since before television and before radio. Football programs that win attract dollars, although not always enough dollars. Football programs that lose do not attract dollars. Football is good advertising for a university as long as it is winning football. Support for losers is rare.

This is a simple truth that makes the reform of college athletics one of the longest shots in all the world of sport.

A small example from my own institution illustrates the problem. The University of Central Florida is seeking to upgrade its football and athletic programs and has chosen to move up in the Conference hierarchy from the Atlantic Sun to Conference-USA. The figures above indicate just how minor a move this really is.

Much has been made by the UCF President and Athletic Director over their commitment to upgrade not only the level of competition but also their commitment to upgrade academics. No doubt there is a modicum of sincerity in this statement of intent. Indeed, a number of football players were sent away from spring practice to work on their classes and upgrade their academic standing. All well and good.

This past week at the meetings of Conference-USA, ESPN officials reported that they were pleased with the TV ratings from Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday night football. As a result, C-USA could expect to be playing more mid-week games in the seasons ahead. Football players traveling to mid-week games are going to miss even more class time than those who travel to weekend games. One is tempted to ask how this might affect the academic side of the equation.

This question of course cannot be asked at UCF because moving up to the next level of conference participation is motivated by the desire for more television revenue and television exposure. This in turn generates more winning football and more television

appearances in those mid-week games. The result? More time away from the classroom for the players.

Some might find this a vicious circle, but in fact it is only the simple reality of intercollegiate football. It is about money and exposure, not about educating students. Academic concerns have always been secondary to monetary concerns. Intercollegiate athletics is a corrupting influence in higher education.

Is there a way around this? Well, yes! Change the university calendar so that the weekend comes on Tuesday and Wednesday and classes are held on Saturday and Sunday. This would be inconvenient for some students, but then it would simultaneously state the priorities of the institution and display a commitment to the academic wellbeing of the football players.

Wouldn't that be charming?

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

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