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The NCAA winter meetings

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The NCAA winter meetings
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Early January following the conclusion of the money collection phase of college football season comes the time when the NCAA holds its annual meetings. This invariably results in a deluge of unreality from the President of the benighted organization and some futile gestures of reform flowing from the meeting halls. Meanwhile in the corridors and backrooms the real work of protecting and expanding the revenue streams proceeds unimpeded.

This year will without doubt prove to be no exception although some will never give up hope. Remember though that Ben Franklin once wrote, "He who lives on hope, dies farting."

Opening the festivities was Myles Brand, NCAA president and former scourge of Bobby Knight. According to Brand there is much to be optimistic about in intercollegiate athletics. Graduation rates for student athletes are up, academic reforms are being implemented at many institutions, and the "vast majority of the association's 360,000 athletes play for a love of the game. . .not because they have aspirations to be professional athletes."

Brand also noted that athletic spending is rising "at an unsustainable pace," although on the bright side athletic expenditures are only a small fraction of total university budgets. I am puzzled by the term "unsustainable." What could that mean? How has Brand arrived at such a judgment? As to the claim that spending is only a small part of total budgets, what does that tell us? Nothing, or perhaps less. A more meaningful figure might be the cost of fielding a Division I football or basketball scholarship player over and above the per student expenditures on the average student. This no doubt is a figure Mr. Brand would not enjoy seeing.

As to the soaring expenditures Brand admits that the NCAA can do nothing about it. Capping expenditures, he says, would be tantamount to declaring "collegiate martial law." I assume he finds that an unconscionable act, something just too horrible to contemplate. And so we can expect to see a continuation of the trend in which athletic budgets rise faster than university budgets, football coaches' salaries reach the three million dollar threshold, and assistant coaches' salaries move inexorably to the seven figure level.

A better feel for where this is all headed can be discerned from the actions of the NCAA Management Council as it voted to add a twelfth regular season game. This will presumably give more strength to the argument that a college football playoff is not possible because it would prolong the schedule and interfere with the education of the student athlete. If this isn't enough a thirteenth and fourteenth game could be added later thus clinching the argument. At this point twelve games can be scheduled only in years with fourteen Saturdays on the football calendar. Such an injustice cannot be allowed to continue. Oh those wonderful revenue streams!

Tommy Tuberville, the miracle survivor of Auburn University boosters and trustees, says that he would support twelve games if the NCAA increases the number of football scholarships from 85 up to 88 or 89. The change in the number of games will be presented to the NCAA Executive Council. Tuberville argues that because football is the cash cow of athletic programs, "we need to get a little back. . . ." Cost containment is not a word in active use in Coach Tuberville's vocabulary who, after all, only seeks a fair share for football.

One of the most startling developments was the appearance of a call for significant reforms by the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics a group of faculty representing 24 institutions with Division I athletic programs. The notion that faculty suggestions or views might carry any weight with television producers, NCAA executives, university presidents, boosters, or university trustees is both quaint and mildly amusing. For over a century there is little evidence to support such a notion and there appears to be no reason for that to change.

Among the reforms suggested are many of merit including limiting the amount of time a student spends on athletics, eliminating midweek games and travel, and closer monitoring and tracking of special admits. Forty faculty senates have voted to join the Coalition and only one of those 29 institutions represented at this meeting voted against the academic integrity plan. That one was Mississippi State whose representative felt that the plan would put that institution at a competitive disadvantage with other members of its athletic conference. Therein lies the rub, or at any rate one of them. Such will always be the case in the intercollegiate arms race; the same race that is driving the escalating costs noted by Myles Brand.

Finally there was a bit of news with the potential for real reform. The NCAA has accepted a plan to punish those

institutions whose athletic graduation rate falls below fifty percent charted over a five-year period. For each athlete on a team who flunks out or leaves school in poor academic standing, the school will not be allowed to re-award his or her scholarship to another athlete for one year. Scholarship losses will be capped, however, to ensure that no football team loses more than nine scholarships and no basketball team loses more than two scholarships in a given year. Longer term penalties will include loss of post-season play and even NCAA membership.

This plan will be implemented in 2006 and in the first year will result only in a warning. This should give everyone enough time to figure out how to either kill the reform or cook the books so that major damage will not be done to those major programs of the BCS kind.

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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