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The arms race in college football

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Watching the BCS crash and burn again this year brings to mind a number of developments in intercollegiate athletics that have been accumulating in my memory for the past month or so. Before turning to those less significant topics-as who is number one is always the most important question in intercollegiate athletics-I would like to offer a modest proposal to solve the BCS Championship Game quandary. Given the Ohio State dominance and perfect record, and given the fact that they have already hammered Michigan, the Buckeyes should be awarded the BCS championship outright. No one is close to their level. There is no point in having a game.

The cancellation of the BCS Championship game would have the added benefit of allowing the scholar athletes from Ohio State and one other institution of higher learning to concentrate on their studies, something highly valued by the NCAA and the University Presidents. I am certain this would be endorsed by NCAA President Myles Brand.

Just over a month ago, while commenting on the report of the Presidential Task Force on the Future of Division I Intercollegiate Athletics, Brand called for fiscal responsibility in athletics and a greater integration of athletics within the campus environment. The growth of spending on athletics, as the report noted, has clearly outstripped the growth of university educational spending. What has been called the "arms race" by athletic departments has been a major factor in this unfortunate development. Facilities growth, salary explosions, and staff proliferation are among those items adding to the spending spree and the growing spending gap.

Brand's usual misguided call for reform from University Presidents, who have little power over athletics in general and football in particular, was compounded when the NCAA President called on faculty to help get athletics under control. Faculty has had virtually no influence of this kind for over a century, and it is not likely it will magically acquire any such powers. In a line that should become his epithet, Brand said: "It takes the entire campus to run intercollegiate athletics properly."

As for Brand calling on athletic directors to practice fiscal restraint and moderate their appetites, this flies in the face of their basic job responsibility in intercollegiate athletics. Growth is good! Revenue is life!

In search of any evidence of fiscal restraint and moderation, I have been following the annual ritual of football coaches being fired, new ones being hired, and others extorting their employers for increased salaries for not breaking their contracts. Contract buyouts can be quite expensive. In firing their head football coach, the University of Miami dished out an estimated $3M to Larry Coker, undoubtedly a reward for his poor performance. At Florida State University, the offensive coordinator Jeff Bowden, the national poster boy for nepotism, will receive over a half-million dollars for agreeing to leave his position. Mike Shula's buyout as head football coach at Alabama is estimated to be in the $4M range. John L. Smith at Michigan will collect $3.5M in a buyout of his contract, while at Arizona State, Dirk Koetter will take away $2.8M on his way out the door. USA Today estimates that this fall alone $13M in buyouts have already been racked up in football alone. So much for Brand's call for fiscal restraint. If incompetence is rewarded in this manner, what will be the price for competence?

Other coaches have already benefited from the vacancies. Saturday, South Carolina announced that Steve Spurrier will get an increase of a half-million dollars to stay as head coach of the Gamecocks, where his new salary will be $1.75M. Others are sure to experience similar windfalls. Spurrier, in fact, is not even among the elite in salary as the top football coaches are being paid well over $2M and untold amounts in perks. Most likely to benefit by staying on the job are coaches at Rutgers, West Virginia, and Louisville.

As to new hires and coaches' salaries, the one million dollar salary is no longer a rarity. Forty-two of the Division I football coaches are being paid at that level, nearly double the number two years ago. Nine coaches are making over $2M and that number will soon increase. In addition, each new signing of a coach at a huge salary has ripple effects across the college coaching pool.

Additional income beyond salary is substantial, and in some cases astounding. The most lucrative salary supplements come from percentages of ticket sales, bonuses for bowl appearances, and massive retirement benefits. Urban Meyer receives $100,000 for family educational expenses, and Bob Stoops will get $3M from Oklahoma if he is still at the university at the end of the 2008 calendar year. Smaller perks include houses or housing allowances, cars, country club memberships, and a range of others tied to individual preferences and peccadilloes.

This fiscal madness has been in runaway mode in the last decade or so and has been fueled by the escalating television and bowl money. The leveraging of the bowls by the BCS, with its monopoly control of the major football programs and the major bowls, has added considerable fuel to the fiscal explosion. In addition, the corporate underwriting and sponsorship has expanded greatly, and individual booster contributions have flowed freely into athletic programs at the major powers. The growth of March Madness has made its mark as well with a corporate, booster, and television revenue explosion.

The major programs are awash in money and seem to have no limit on their spending appetites. The University of Florida recently raised $5M in one night via a $50,000 a plate dinner enhancing its athletic department endowment which now exceeds $1B. Meanwhile the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at UF is in a hiring freeze and under strict spending controls trying to deal with a deficit that could easily be retired by the receipts from the dinner.

So much for the balance of athletic and educational spending.

If Miles Brand truly believes that this runaway train can be stopped, he is not simply an NCAA pitchman, but a fool as well.

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.