

Bobby Bowden departs

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Bobby Bowden departs
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When is the right time to leave? Some wait too long, others leave too soon. Some go out on top. Some tarnish their legacy before letting go.

For those who have followed Florida State University football over the past three decades, the last few years have been painful. One of the great football coaches and entertaining personalities of the coaching world, Bobby Bowden, joined the long list of those who stayed too long. In the last five years it became increasingly apparent that Bowden had relinquished day to day control of the football program. He seemed to have lost almost all interest in that aspect of coaching and perhaps most of the other obligations of a college football coach.

The result has been a decline in the football fortunes of FSU and a growing number of fans and boosters calling for Bowden's retirement. As the voices became louder and more insistent Bowden himself has become defensive and most recently resembled a wounded animal. His defense of his son Jeff as inept offensive coordinator took a toll on both Bowden and his reputation. Certainly it should never have come to this. And of course it didn't need to come to this.

Retirement is often a difficult choice. For the professional athlete it is particularly difficult, as it signals the end of what is likely to be the most significant part of their lives. Willie Mays stayed on too long, Joe Namath and Johnny Unitas went out as near empty shells, and there are any number of athletes who make one too many comebacks. It is the rare case, such as that of Sandy Koufax, when the athlete leaves on top.

There was a young man who worked in the History Department here years ago as an adjunct faculty member. He had an M.A. in history and was also a professional boxer. He was a marginal fighter but he was able to keep fighting as long as he wanted because at that point in boxing history promoters were looking for white guys to put in the ring. He was clearly beyond his prime, he knew that he should retire, but emotionally he could not let go. I watched him get hammered in the first round of a fight in Orlando, and thought surely that would end his career. Unfortunately it did not. He fought one more fight about six months later, an undercard fight in the Bahamas on New Year's

Eve. He came to see me a few days later and we talked, as we often had, about retirement. He finally was ready, but at least two fights too late. He simply could not let go of what he had done for most of his young life, even though he knew he was washed up.

For coaches it is no doubt much the same. Indeed for coaches and professors it is much the same. Bobby Bowden was not the first case of a coaching giant who couldn't let go. At Ohio State Woody Hayes was long past his prime. Members of the athletic department and athletic committee there knew this and didn't know what to do. In the end Woody gave them an opening when he punched an opposing player on a nationally televised game. He was relieved of his duties within a matter of seconds and a great sigh of relief could be heard around the OSU campus.

Bobby Bowden didn't punch anyone, didn't engage in any outrageous behavior, and so the athletic authorities and the university president could not, would not, and did not move to make a timely change. So Bobby Bowden departed yesterday with little fanfare and a sense of relief from those around the FSU campus.

Bobby Bowden is no different than the rest of us. One wonders if he asked that question: When is the right time to leave? I know this is a question asked in every academic department in any university that does not have mandatory retirement. How do you know when you should go? It was simple when there was mandatory retirement. You left when you reached that age. For many, especially as life expectancies have extended in the last few decades, leaving at age 65 was too soon and that was tragic in many cases and a loss to the academic community.

We have all seen colleagues who have stayed too long. They don't have the energy. They have lost interest in teaching, in students, in research. But the campus is a congenial place and the routines of the academic year are comforting, and create the illusion of a meaningful life. Who will tell them they need to go? It is likely that no one will, just as no one was willing to tell Bobby Bowden it was time to go, until it was too late.

As I am beyond the age of what once was the time of mandatory retirement, I think about this issue. When will I know and how will I know that it is time to go? Well the body may tell me as it finally tells the athlete and ultimately tells us all. On the other hand I have known many in academic life and outside of it who have continued to contribute well into their eighties. They

have not lost interest and remain a vital force within the academic community. So there is no number that will say, "Enough, it's over." Just as there is no one among colleagues who is likely to say, "It's time to go."

I feel badly watching the way in which Bobby Bowden left, but also feel strongly that he should have gone about a decade ago. I hope I can avoid his fate, knowing that it will be very difficult to do so. We learn the lesson illustrated in the Bowden case nearly every day, within the world of sport and outside of it. Unfortunately to apply the lesson personally remains very difficult indeed, whether on the playing field or beyond the white lines.

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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