
BOOK REVIEWS

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Pay for Play: A History of Big-Time College Athletic Reform

By Ronald A. Smith, University of Illinois Press, 2011, cloth (ISBN 978-0-252-03587-6) and paper (ISBN 978-0-252-07783-8).

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Among the latest entries in the University of Illinois Press's Sport and Society series is the latest of Ronald Smith's many books on the history of American intercollegiate sports. Following his co-authored broad history, *Saga of American Sport* (1978), then *Sports and Freedom* (1988) on the beginnings of intercollegiate sports, an edition of Harvard coach Bill Reid's diary (1994), and *Play-by-Play* (2001) on the history of college sports on radio and television, Smith has now produced a comprehensive history of big-time college athletics from the perspective of reform—a chronicle of reforms, or rather failed attempts at reform, that spans from 1852 to 2010. Smith's books are known for their grounding in archival research, and *Pay for Play* is no exception. The book's Preface lists no fewer than sixty-three archives from which Smith drew material—associations such as the NCAA and AIAW, athletic conferences, state historical societies, and dozens upon dozens of universities, from Mary Baldwin to Michigan.

In *Pay for Play* Smith weighs in on a topic—reform, and the scandals that have made reform necessary—that has not lacked for commentary, from books by John R. Tunis and Reed Harris in the 1920s and 1930s, to those by Murray Sperber, Andrew Zimbalist, Allen Sack and Ellen Staurowsky, and others in the 1980s and 1990s. John Thelin's *Games Colleges Play: Scandal and Reform in Intercollegiate Athletics* (1994) offered a history of the subject from the Carnegie Foundation Report in 1929 to the 1980s. John Watterson's comprehensive history of college football, published in 2000, included much discussion of the crises of 1905-06 and 1909-10, the Carnegie Foundation Report, the failure of the "Sanity Code" in the 1950s, and reform efforts from the 1970s through the 1980s. My own *Bowled Over* covered attempts at reform since the 1970s.

To enter such a crowded field of scholarship, a writer must bring something new to the discussion. Through its coverage of the pre-1905 era, all the way back to the 1850s, *Pay for Play* offers the most comprehensive overview that we have. And while it does not alter our basic understanding of efforts at reform since 1905, its archival grounding enriches and at times enlivens the story that is already known. From the papers of President Charles Eliot in the Harvard archives, for example, Smith can report that, in a two-year period in the late 1890s, more freshman football players received failing grades than As or Bs during the season, and "football players received almost ten times more Ds than As" (pp. 197-98). A seventeen-page transcript of a several-hour meeting in 1955 from the University of Tennessee archives describes in fascinating detail a "slush fund" run by a legendary football coach since the 1920s and a university president's inability to override his Board's support for that coach and his slush fund (pp. 126-27). Such

details provide indisputable documentation for what is often known only in more generalized or anecdotal ways.

No similar archival revelations illuminate Smith's account of the current situation in big-time college sports as it has emerged over the past two decades. It would be fascinating to know what presidents at BCS institutions really think, in their frankest moments, about their football (and basketball) programs. It may be too soon for papers to have reached the archives at many institutions, or Smith may not have visited them recently enough, but it also strikes me that awareness of constant scrutiny and public-records laws may mean that presidents have become more careful about what they commit to print, whether in paper or electronic form. Perhaps only in retirement can presidents (such as James Duderstadt) reveal what they really think about their athletic programs; for many programs perhaps we may never know. In any case, more archival gems are undoubtedly out there to be discovered by other scholars, but Ronald Smith has found enough of them to make *Pay for Play* a worthy addition to the wide shelf of books on scandal and reform in college sports.

Smith's twenty chapters (in a little over 200 pages) are organized chronologically, though with some doubling back. The first seven chapters cover the period before the 1920s; the next nine span the era (1920s-1980s) covered by Thelin in *Games People Play*. Three chapters on the reform efforts by organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE), the Knight Commission, CARE, COIA, and the Drake Group, as well as the NCAA's own reform legislation featuring the Academic Progress Rate (APR), are followed by a final chapter tracing the long history of freshman eligibility and ineligibility, the heart of Smith's own recommendations for reform. An unfortunately confusing bibliography, which divides works into categories and thus requires the reader to check sources in several different places, is offset by a very useful 23-page "Intercollegiate Athletic Reform Timeline."

Smith defines "reform" broadly, in relation not just to issues of eligibility, subsidization, academic standards, and spending—the heart of current controversies—but also to the brutality that nearly derailed the game in its formative years, the civil rights legislation that opened college athletic participation to African Americans in the 1960s and to women in the 1970s, and the Supreme Court decision in 1984 that stripped the NCAA of its control of football television rights on antitrust grounds. "Reforms" that are forced upon the NCAA and its institutions by outside agencies are very different from those that members can debate and choose, but if some readers might prefer a narrower definition, Smith's broader one is an important reminder that future "reform" might well come from outside the NCAA rather than from within, due to the chronic inaction within the NCAA that Smith and others have described.

Smith's story is less about reform than about repeated failures to reform, and his overriding argument will not surprise readers who already know the history of American college athletics (in part through Smith's own previous books). Collegiate sports were initially student-run, but presidents, faculty, and boards increasingly took charge as football in particular became a revenue-producing and university-promoting popular entertainment. With the creation of athletic conferences (beginning in 1895 with what became the Big Ten) and in 1905-06 of what became the NCAA, oversight of athletics shifted to faculty representatives. Guided by a fundamental principle of "home rule," however, the NCAA did not assert regulatory powers

until after World War II. Over the first half of the twentieth century, conferences rather than the national organization dictated what little regulation there was, with the result that northern and western conferences charted a different course on key issues (such as scholarships for athletes) from that adopted by the conferences in the South; while the Big Three of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton slowly abandoned their insistence on absolute autonomy to merge into an Ivy Group. With the NCAA's assumption of regulatory powers in the 1950s, conferences did not readily surrender their prerogatives, nor individual institutions their claims to autonomy. And within the NCAA, power shifted from faculty representatives to athletic directors until the 1990s, when presidents gradually began to take control of the agenda.

With whoever has been nominally in charge over the past half-century of NCAA oversight, possibilities for reform have been consistently undermined by perceived economic necessities and needs for competitive equity, and by leaders unwilling or unable to oppose their own boards and external constituents. In Smith's telling (which generally echoes the views of other scholars who have addressed these issues), the need for reform is as great today as it has been throughout college sports' history. But in particular, and in opposition to the position regularly taken by organizations such as the American Council on Education and the Knight Commission, Smith emphasizes the inability of college presidents to bring about meaningful reform. Rather than pleading for more presidential control, Smith advocates for greater faculty involvement and oversight (though without explaining how that might be brought about). He also, somewhat surprisingly given the stories he tells about the behavior of trustees in the past, calls for more involvement by institutional boards. In line with what increasingly seems an emerging consensus, Smith warns that failure to reform from within may provoke reform from without—by Congress, the IRS, or a lawsuit. (This is my own expectation. In his attempt at comprehensiveness, Smith faced his own publishing deadline, but I wish that he had at least addressed the lawsuits currently working their way through the courts, specifically the O'Bannon suit against EA Sports, which raises the larger issue of compensation for the use of "amateur" college athletes' images for commercial purposes. The future of big-time college sports might be decided in this or another courtroom.)

Pay for Play is an opinionated, contentious book. Where archival evidence makes it possible, Smith names the presidents who were "cheerleaders" of athletics rather than stewards of academic missions, reminding readers that the development of big-time college sports has been a consequence not of impersonal forces but of decisions made (or avoided) by people in positions of power. Certain presidents, such as Thomas S. Gates at Penn, John Bowman at Pittsburgh, and Frank Graham at the University of North Carolina in the 1930s, emerge as heroes for their efforts, however finally unsuccessful, to reform their own athletic programs in the face of general opposition or indifference. Others such as William Atchley at Clemson, Paul Hardin at SMU, and John DiBiaggio at Michigan State in the 1980s and 1990s, who lost their jobs over their attempts at reform, are more like martyrs to the cause. Smith's archival research also adds an unfamiliar name to that list: John Abercrombie, President of the University of Alabama, who resigned in 1911 when his Board of Trustees refused to do anything about academic standards for athletes.

In his broad view of the history of reform efforts in intercollegiate athletics, Smith takes a position that nothing much has changed since the late nineteenth

century, or even the 1850s when the first intercollegiate competitions provoked the first complaints over athletes' eligibility. Regarding freshman ineligibility, the single reform measure that Smith most passionately promotes, he traces the debates to the 1880s and 1890s, then through the subsequent decades into our current century. But changing circumstances make for very different issues. In the 1880s and 1890s, to make freshmen ineligible would help eliminate the problem of "tramp athletes." During World War II, making freshmen eligible was a way to compensate for the manpower shortage on college teams whose athletes were off fighting the war. The situation today is so different that this earlier history cannot offer much guidance. When the NCAA most recently made freshmen eligible again for varsity sports—first in the "minor" sports in 1968 and then in football and basketball in 1972—it exacerbated the long-standing conflict between economic and academic priorities, now compounded by "open admissions" policies and the belated end to racial segregation. By the 1990s and increasingly into our own time, a transformation of the sports media and broader sports culture by cable TV, the flourishing of the NFL, the drafting of underclassmen by the NBA, and other factors unanticipated in 1972 and often beyond colleges' control guaranteed that most recruited athletes at the highest levels would arrive at college thinking of themselves as athletes rather than students. In this new climate, as Smith argues, restoring freshmen ineligibility not only would give high school superstars a year to adjust to college academics but also would eliminate all of the racially-inflected controversy about initial eligibility with which university leaders have struggled since Proposition 48 in 1983. Any athlete who achieved sophomore academic standing would have proven his or her qualifications to do college work. Why this academically-beneficial, common-sense principle has not been adopted by the president-led NCAA's efforts at academic reform over the past two decades is fairly mystifying.

Bowled Over: Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era

By Michael Oriard. Published 2009 by the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. (334 pp.) ISBN: 978-0-8078-3329-2.

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What do people expect from a history of college football over the past half century? Schooled by Brent Musberger, SportsCenter, and Keith Jackson, most people would anticipate an account of key happenings on the field—who won what, when and why did they win it, and who were the compelling personalities and developments? Print media and television coverage concentrate on those bright-lights matters, and so college football and its historymaking are mostly conducted in a bubble, separated from the messy rough and tumble of daily life, from things like race and gender, money and power, wars and tax codes and federal regulations. But Michael Oriard flips the script completely in his latest book *Bowled Over* (something of a companion to his 2007 *Brand NFL*, a study of the progress of Pete Rozelle's NFL up to the cable television era). You won't find out who won and lost in this beautifully written book, you won't get another anecdote-driven tirade about academic

abuses, and you won't get profiles of famous coaches and memorable games. Instead Oriard takes football out of its sport-page bubble and sharply juxtaposes it with politics, race and gender in order to provide an authoritative history of the experience of playing the sport over the past half century.

Now a professor of American studies at Oregon State, Oriard played the sport himself, at Notre Dame in the late 1960s and later in the pros. And just as he did in *Brand NFL*, Oriard in *Bowled Over* uses his own experience as a continuing reference and data point, in the process proposing a method for reading the culture of sport: he offers personal testimony as evidence and in the way of perspective, but measures with and against that testimony a vast secondary literature, a consideration of primary archival sources, and an analysis of mountains of social science research data. His aim is to explain the changes that have occurred in the conduct of college football "not due to uncontrollable outside forces (with the possible exception of Title IX) but by internal responses to conditions" (276). What changes and what forces? Oriard's narrative details the particulars operating within an overarching stimulus-and-response mechanism that explains much of the experience of college football since 1960: when college football was desegregated in the 1960s, it caused all kinds of instability—and that instability in turn started the reaction, i.e., the institution in 1973 of the one-year-scholarship rule. It is that rule which has fundamentally affected the experience of those who "play the game" (or is it "work the job"?).

Part I of the book, "Football in the 1960s," recreates the culture of college football against the backdrop of 1960s activism. Oriard patiently traces the various experiences of athletes who were involved as big-time college football was being transformed from serious extra-curricular activity to fulltime pre-professional job. In the heyday of Bryant and Royal, Hayes and Wilkinson, football could be a quasi-military experience forced onto compliant, well barbered young white men; but it could also be an opportunity for football to contribute to a young man's complete college experience, as it was for Oriard under Ara Parseghian. Amid the crazy-quilt contradictions of 1960s college life (in 1969 I helped to construct a homecoming float at my college just days before riding a bus to a Washington, DC antiwar demonstration), "football could coexist with all kinds of countercultural and politically progressive values" (20), Oriard notes, just as it had done in the 1930s and 1940s. Oriard captures the full texture of the time in a way that fights current stereotypes about "The Sixties." Debunking a related stereotype, Oriard demonstrates persuasively that football is never in fact culturally reactionary, that it actually can serve any number of ideologies—as it did in the matter of race. If Southern state universities and their football programs resisted desegregation, so did college football also assist in desegregation.

In his second and third chapters, Oriard explains how the experience of playing was affected by the civil rights movement. During desegregation, "the black pioneers in the South and the black protesters in the North and West transformed college football for everyone and forever altered the relationship between coaches and athletes [so that] never again could coaches deal with their players, black or white, simply as 'boys'" (58). In the South, segregation broke down only fitfully, university by university and football team by football team, and Oriard in chapter 2 explains the particulars of each Southeastern Conference university's desegregation story, concentrating as much on the isolation

and accomplishments of the pioneer players as on the barriers they faced. For example, he explodes the widely promulgated myth that Bear Bryant was in the forefront of desegregation by using Sam Cunningham's performance against his team in Birmingham as a lever to encourage integration, and recounts the bizarre farce that occurred at Mississippi, when a black player was somehow selected to impersonate Colonel Reb.

In the North, the subject of chapter 3, the revolution took place via a series of rebellions by black athletes. By the late 1960s an athletic revolution was marching in sync with the social revolution. As Muhammad Ali was fighting the justice system and U. S. Marines the Viet Cong, as Tommie Smith and George Foreman were at opposite ends of the patriotic spectrum during the Mexico City Olympics, black football players at Kansas, Cal, Iowa, Wyoming, Michigan State, Washington State, Wisconsin, and elsewhere were following a recurring script: in Act 1, players were dismissed for violating rules; in Act 2 the players charged discrimination, then were supported and/or condemned by local constituencies as administrators sought compromise amid the tension; and finally in Act 3 both the players and coaches found themselves losing their places in college athletics. Oriard examines particularly closely the uprisings at Oregon State, Wyoming, Washington, and Indiana, when facial hair, all-white coaching staffs, and even Mormon priesthood customs became the occasion for boycotts, petitions, campus polarization, black armbands, lawsuits, and changes in Mormon theology. "Like the black pioneers of the Southeastern Conference, most of the black protesters [in the North] seem to have been reluctant revolutionaries, forced to make decisions . . . or caught up in consequences not anticipated in the initial act of defiance. The world was no more simply black and white for them than it was for me. . . . The young black athletes caught up in protests wrestled with the conflicting desires and demands of the age" (123-24).

On the one hand, the black protesters won greater personal freedom for all college athletes: the age of the drill-sergeant-as-coach was over (as events at Texas Tech demonstrated in December 2009). But in a larger sense the results were disastrous, when the NCAA as a direct result of the turmoil passed legislation in 1973 that decisively undermined that freedom: the NCAA voted to make athletic scholarships into one-year rather than multi-year grants—in the process giving coaches "more control of their players' lives than they had ever had" (125). This transition and this consequence is the subject of Oriard's Part II. In an "Interlude" between Part I and Part II that serves as the book's fulcrum, Oriard lays out his case that the 1973 legislation was both the result of the racial protests of the late 1960s and the cause (albeit unintended) of the changed experience that has since characterized college athletes. In effort to save scholarship dollars and discourage student-athlete activism, the NCAA legislation changed the contract between player and university in a way that relegitimized the authority of the coach and transformed student-athletes into athlete-students. By giving coaches the power to rescind the scholarship of any athlete who quit the team (or proved to be unskilled), the legislation opened the door to the gradual but sustained professionalization of athlete-students, who are now expected to devote their most serious efforts to athletic self-improvement even if it means subordinating academic goals. "By making renewal of scholarships contingent on athletic performance, [the one-year scholarship] put to the lie all pretenses about the primary importance of *student-*

athletes. How can academics be the highest priority if a scholarship is contingent on satisfying the football coach?" (140).

Chapters 4 and 5 recount the consequences of the change. Even though most scholarship athletes in fact continue to be funded for four or five years, coaches have come "to make increasing demands on athletes' time, while the athletes [are] essentially powerless to object" (141). Both off the field and on, the change has been profound. Improvements in the quality of play since 1975 and in competitive balance among teams have generated tremendous increases in interest and in television revenue, but those improvements have also created longer seasons, increasing expectations on students during the "off" season, stresses on academic performance (as well as the creation of pricey academic support systems to keep students eligible), and a general regulation of players' lives. "With one-year scholarships, their primary responsibility [is] to please their coaches, not their professors," Oriard summarizes (145). Oriard catalogues the NCAA's efforts to ameliorate these changes through regulations—regulations on recruitment excesses, on admissions practices (via mechanisms like Proposition 48 and 42 in the 1980s), on the number of hours that players may be required to practice (though they can "volunteer" additional hours), and on graduation rates. Whether intended or not, the regulations ironically have continued to regulate African American athletes, since their rate of participation has increased. They have also permitted the creation of "a made-for-TV football world" (157), the emergence of an "entitlement culture," millionaire coaches, and the BCS system, which effectively funnels TV and bowl revenues into the coffers of the wealthiest conferences.

Oriard writes mainly as a historian. He is not out to defame the current situation or to hearken back to good old days. There are no good old days in his history. And yet there are also clearly definable reformist moments in the book that prepare the ground for Chapter 6, "Thinking about Reform." After demonstrating in Chapters 4 and 5 that tensions are inevitable when the NCAA and its members at once try to maximize revenues and achieve academic credibility, Oriard concludes his book by reviewing recent developments in college football and prospects for future reform. The transition to the made-for-TV football world, filled with "intensified commercialization" (166), began with the creation of the College Football Association, continued with the subsequent spike in television revenues, and concluded with the BCS, which has "increased the disparity between the payouts for top bowls and all the others" (163) and consequently made some universities richer than others.

This disparity in revenues doesn't concern me too much, for some universities are always richer than others; I would offer that television contracts reinforce subclasses within and between conferences, not that "television contracts create subclasses" (177). Nor do I share the nearly universal concern with the "fact" that universities "lose money" on athletics programs because I'm convinced that the losses are mainly the result of paper (not real) expenses resulting from the "costs" of scholarships: it just isn't true that "millions of dollars . . . could be allocated to classroom instructors, new science labs, deferred maintenance on buildings, or on any number of other institutional needs" (175) if athletic departments were somehow eliminated. In short, the data does not seem to me to support the conclusion that universities overall have been undermined by their high stakes football programs (though the reputations of some individual universities—e.g., Michigan, Minnesota, Auburn, Tennessee, Miami, and now Ohio State—have undeniably

been undermined by athletic scandals). Over the period covered by Oriard's book, the academic fortunes of Southeastern Conference universities in particular have certainly improved even as football mania has continued in the region. But Oriard's larger point seems irrefutable: the lives of individual student-athletes have become substantially different, and their academic aspirations compromised, over the past half century.

Consequently it would make eminent sense to honor several of the proposals Oriard offers for consideration: the elimination of the one-year scholarship for student-athletes making normal academic progress, the restoration of freshman ineligibility, the right of athletes to change universities without having to sit out a year. In his final pages Oriard challenges us to "imagine the unthinkable." If "systemwide reforms inevitably fall short . . . [and] if unilateral reforms are simply too risky" (277), as Oriard shows, "multilateral reform" remains thinkable, in which universities could "identify their true peers with whom to compete in athletics [and] trust those peers to conduct their football programs in like manner" (277). I agree. The Big Ten conference, for example, with its revenues now assured by the Big Ten television network, could exert leadership by instituting its own rules—prohibiting post-season play to its teams with less than a 75% graduation rate, for example, or discarding the one-year scholarship.

In any event, Oriard is surely correct that universities now want to have it both ways: they want to have profitable professional minor league franchises loosely associated with the university, and they want student-athletes to have opportunities to develop as whole persons. Oriard calls it "the sport's fundamental contradiction of being, at one and the same time a commercial spectacle and an extra curricular activity" (2). Trying to mix the two makes for a highly combustible concoction, controllable by the NCAA only temporarily and in limited ways, and so we can expect the current contradictions to persist until the unimaginable indeed becomes thinkable.