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How big is too big for college sports?

RICK BURTON

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Is college sports big business? For most readers of this publication, that's too easy a question.

So here's a two-parter for you: How big is college sports, and is it growing?

The reason I ask is because I was wandering around the University of North Carolina's Dean Smith Center the other day when I came upon a brochure created by the Tar Heel athletic department. It was a fund-raising brochure that suggested UNC was getting outspent by other schools competing for the Sears Directors' Cup.

That's the trophy for having the most athletic teams with the highest number of NCAA team championship points. Or something like that.

I thought that was pretty interesting so I asked Dennis Howard from our program how big the NCAA game is. Howard is one of the best teachers I've ever met. Knowing he was working with me as a journalist, he said: "Well, let's make this easy. If there are 100 Division I-A schools [most of the preseason football annuals rank 117] and the average athletic department budget is \$20 million, then you've easily got \$2 billion to start."

Hmmmm, I thought. That's pretty good coin.

"Now, if you factor in Division I-AA, Division II, Division III, NAIA, the junior colleges and community colleges," he continued, "I think you can get north of \$4 billion pretty quickly."

Howard's old school Ohio State has a budget of \$70 million-plus, so I figured he was rounding down to keep things conservative.

Had I asked him if the total amount was growing, I'm sure the answer would have been yes. Inflation, a strong economy (until the tragic events of Sept. 11) and multiple broadcasters like ESPN, Fox, ABC, CBS and others have helped drive NCAA and athletic department budgets to staggering heights.

Next question. Is that a good thing? Or, said another way, is the commercialization of college sports indicative of anything in our society?

This question makes a few folks uneasy. On one hand, there are factions that believe the college "arms race" is out of control. They see Heisman Trophy campaigns, stadium expansions and improved training facilities as the

cart before the horse. College is supposed to be about higher education. Classrooms. Teaching. Term papers. Computers. Laboratories.

Allocating \$70 million for 35 varsity teams or handing out million-dollar coaching contracts are perversions, regardless of outcome.

On the other shore we have athletic directors, numerous university presidents, rabid boosters and various business partners who see college sports as vital to the health of the university and the local economy.

They see tickets selling, networks broadcasting, newspapers reporting, advertisers creating, sponsors integrating, apparel manufacturers licensing, retailers merchandising and student athletes benefiting.

As my students would say, "It's all good."

For the capitalists, collegiate athletics is good business. And it's not an either/or discussion. Colleges need classrooms and labs as much as they need quarterbacks and point guards.

But it's not for me to tell you how to feel.

I should mention, though, that a graduate student's mother came to visit the other day. She had previously worked in marketing for a large Midwestern packaged-goods company and thought there should be a place where the rampant economics of sport were relaxed. Where they didn't burn white-hot.

You can't turn back the clock in college, she said, but are we concerned about what happens in our high schools? In our grade schools? Are the kids seeing the influence of money too early? Are we losing the innocence of amateur sport, like America's farms, at an alarming rate?

Already there are high school stadiums that are named for soda brands or hospitals. Local high school booster groups sell VIP Clubs with business, family and individual membership packages. You want better lights for Friday nights, you better bring your checkbook or Visa card.

She was very pleasant; she wanted to make sure her son got a good education from Oregon and carried away some positive human values before he entered the sports business.

Probably stuff like ethics, integrity, honesty and concern for the future.

I'd like to think we can teach those values, but the slippery slope is covered with the oil of many snakes.

You need look no further than youth sports. The Little League World Series is televised nationally and delivered complete with national sponsors and big-time advertisers. Twelve-year-olds (or 14-year-olds) were discussed earnestly with the precision of their collegiate and professional peers.

I didn't watch but if I had, I would have wanted the Fred Willard character from the movie "Best in Show" to start mocking the whole proceeding. But it didn't and won't happen.

Sport at every level is big business and growing with few restrictor plates.

Maybe we (as an industry) need the equivalent of whatever it is NASCAR puts on their coupes to slow them down when the fun gets out of control and cars start flying into the grandstands.

I'm not suggesting government intervention is the answer. In fact, I don't even have the answer. But I do think we need to start some independent think tanks (i.e., serious research) if the money and stakes keep growing.

If we don't decipher our industry's version of the "greed is good" thing soon, someone, somewhere is going to hit the wall. And the Sears Directors' Cup, which apparently holds the golden eggs, will shatter into a billion gooey pieces.

In light of Sept. 11, our newfound willingness to unify on a number of subjects might provide those of us who influence this business the impetus to start talking.

Rick Burton is executive director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center in the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business.

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