Scandals in big-time college athletics have been making national headlines, but Syracuse continues to play strictly by the rules.
by Dana L. Cooke

This has not been a good year for intercollegiate athletics. Consider, for example:

- Point-shaving schemes and player payments at Tulane University, where coaches have resigned and President Eamon Kelly has suspended intercollegiate basketball indefinitely;
- Allegations of big-money bookmaking and racial discrimination at Memphis State University, where, according to the NAACP, only four black basketball players have graduated since 1972;
- Sanctions of unprecedented severity by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) against the University of Florida football program, cited by the NCAA for 59 rules violations and dubbed by sports writers “the best team money can buy”; and
- The recent discovery of 36 recruiting violations—including large cash inducements by boosters to athletes and their families—at Southern Methodist University (SMU), now one of 16 schools living in the shadow of NCAA disciplinary sanctions.

Only once in the 80-year history of the NCAA have more schools operated on probation at one time (the record of 17 was set earlier this decade). More important than the number of schools, however, is the extent of impropriety at any one of them. There are growing suspicions that the known cases of wrong-doing represent only an iceberg’s tip.

Are things really that sour in “big-time” intercollegiate athletics? According to Syracuse University officials, the answer is clear: “Yes and no.”

“To say that intercollegiate athletics is rotten to the core is incorrect,” insists John “Jake” Crouthamel, director of athletics at SU. “Ten percent of the schools out there, for one reason or another, feel that they have to avoid the rules.”

In these cases, he says, athletics has outgrown its foundation in academic life. Supporters have lost perspective, and, in many cases, presidents have lost control. At these institutions, says Crouthamel, things are about as bad as they seem.

For each of those institutions, however, there are probably ten others attempting to preserve the academic tenor of campus athletics and to abide by regulations, Crouthamel suggests. Some fail occasionally, only because of the magnitude of the task. Others, though, maintain programs that are more than simply adequate, and Crouthamel believes that Syracuse falls into this exemplary category.

Faculty member David Bennett, who chairs two athletic review boards on campus, concurs. “Our administrators are people who bring great sensitivity to these questions,” Bennett says. “Syracuse would be a good institution for other schools to emulate.”

There is strong evidence that Bennett and Crouthamel are justified in their beliefs. There are essentially four aspects of intercollegiate athletics prone to abuse—institutional responsibility, booster involvement, admission of student athletes, and academic eligibility and performance. SU has found ways to prevent the problems that frequently arise in each category.

Institutional Control

Anytime an institution’s athletic program is found corrupt, blame ultimately belongs to the chief executive officer—such is the growing consensus among college-level educators nationwide. Almost without exception, the colleges that get into trouble are those in which athletic departments are allowed to operate outside—or sometimes above—the direct supervision of a chancellor or president.

“The ills of college athletics will be cured,” wrote Chancellor Melvin A. Eggers in a USA Today editorial last February, “when senior administrators accept responsibility for managing their programs in a way that fosters accountability and adherence to both the letter and spirit of NCAA rules.”

This issue—institutional control—was the focus of a special NCAA convention held this past June in New Orleans, at which eight new NCAA regulations, most of them encouraging the direct supervision of athletics by chief executive officers, were passed by near-unanimous vote, Syracuse concurring. The new rules require, for example, an institutional self-study of athletic programs at least once every five years and the submission of athletic program funding to direct institutional control and normal budgeting procedures.

Another of the new rules demonstrates the extent to which Syracuse University policies have foreshadowed nationwide concerns. It requires each Division I institution to make an annual report to the NCAA, detailing the academic status of incoming freshmen and current student athletes and the graduation rates for recruited students compared with other students. This is known as the “academic audit,” and Syracuse established and con-
ducted one of its own last spring—a full four months before the NCAA vote. SU’s audit, much like that adopted at the convention, is designed to “ensure that each of our 700 student-athletes meets all NCAA admissibility, financial aid, and academic requirements,” Chancellor Eggers has written.

“The new audit hasn’t uncovered much that we didn’t already know,” Crouthamel says, “but it does force us to be even more careful about maintaining records and will alert other departments within the University to the importance of their maintaining records properly and in a timely fashion.”

The internal audit represents only one aspect of Chancellor Eggers’ ongoing, direct interest in SU athletics. In addition, all major policy decisions in the Athletic Department are reviewed by the Chancellor in consultation with Crouthamel. Each time an NCAA convention approaches, for example, Chancellor Eggers meets with Crouthamel, Bennett, and other SU representatives who will attend the convention.

“I discuss the issues carefully with the Chancellor,” says Crouthamel. “I want to cast his vote [at NCAA conventions].”

While the Chancellor’s review of athletic policy is of primary importance, the University also provides mechanisms by which all other members of the University community monitor and judge SU sports programs. Two committees—the Athletic Policy Board (APB) and the Athletic Policy Committee of the University Senate—meet formally at least once a month throughout the academic year, ordinarily in joint session, to discuss all aspects of the athletic programs.

The committees’ members represent the faculty, staff, administration, trustees, alumni, and students. Consequently, peer review of athletics at SU is probably stronger than at any other private, Division I university.

“The athletic boards vote on the positions that Syracuse takes each year at the NCAA convention,” says Bennett, who chairs both committees. “The boards vote on the inauguration or discontinuation of any intercollegiate sport, for example, and they voted on the decision to unify the women’s and men’s athletic programs five years ago.”

The boards also meet annually with the head coaches of football and men’s and women’s basketball—the major revenue-producing sports—to review the current recruiting season, and they meet somewhat less often with other coaches. (The special emphasis on football and basketball is common because those sports bring television and turnstile revenues and offer potential professional careers. Women’s sports, in general, are plagued by few of the headline-grabbing maladies of football and basketball.)

The most important meeting of the two boards, though, is its annual meeting with Richard Witham, chief academic counselor in the athletic department. Witham gives the boards exhaustive, statistical summaries of the grade-point averages and graduation-rate performances of all student athletes. This meeting alone provides a strong indication of the importance of broadly based, institutional control in athletics.

“The first thing you learn, if nothing else, is what a clean program Syracuse University has,” says Marilyn Giancola, one of two Alumni Association representatives to the APB. “You know where the funding comes from. You hear the reports and understand the financial structure of the University.”

“I have a real sense that the University is very responsible and attentive to the special concerns of athletes at SU,” says James Wiggins, religion department chairman and a member of both boards. “There has been absolutely no equivocation from the Chancellor that the University intends to maintain a responsible athletics program.”

**Booster Enthusiasm and Recruiting**

One of the most problem-plagued aspects of college athletics is recruiting—a vast, cost- and time-intensive cir-
cus. Coaches and administrators bemoan its extremity, and yet each school must keep pace or programs fall behind.

The most ominous aspect of recruiting, by far, is booster involvement. Some of the most serious violations in intercollegiate athletics during recent years occurred when alumni and other fans gave money or made promises that the NCAA strictly forbids. In October, for example, a wealthy friend of Texas Christian University admitted his part in the signing of almost 30 football players—signings that were encouraged by payments of $10,000-$25,000 down, $1,000 a month, and a new car.

It doesn't have to be that way. Friends of an athletic department can be important, for both their moral and financial support, without breaking rules. But because they are not athletic department staff members or students, they are always a source of concern.

"It is the one thing that is the least controllable among all the improprieties that may arise," Crouthamel concedes. "We're relying on somebody out there whom we really have no control of."

At SU, the best way to address those concerns has proven to be an umbrella organization of athletic-program supporters called the Orange Pack—a contemporary, sophisticated version of the onetime "booster club." Any individual who gives $25 or more to SU athletic programs is automatically a member of the Orange Pack; there are about 6,700 such members, who come from throughout the community. Many are alumni. Many are not.

Though its members are external to the University, the Orange Pack is an Athletic Department function, directed by Joseph Szombathy, associate director of athletics. According to Szombathy, this integration of supporters into the athletic department office is crucial, assuring that money given to athletics is systematically recorded and credited.

"At many other schools," Szombathy says, "the Orange Pack-type organizations have operated outside of the university, and that's where problems arise."

The Orange Pack's activities and newsletter help SU inform boosters about the strict NCAA regulations against their direct involvement in recruiting. Simply put, an alumnus claiming to represent his alma mater may write or phone a high school student athlete as often as he wishes, but face-to-face contact is a violation of NCAA regulations and may subject the institution to punitive action.

"An alumnus might call me," says Szombathy, "and say, 'Jesus, there's a great player in my area. I tell him 'Please write me. Gather any information you can get on the kid, and I'll pass it on to the coaches. Go watch him play and let me know what you think of him. But don't—don't—talk to him.'"

NCAA regulations also address the activities of legitimate recruiters—coaches and other university representatives. During the official recruiting period of December-February, for example, coaches are allowed by the NCAA to meet recruits six times—three times in the high school and three times in the home. And they may provide one expense-paid visit to campus for the student. This is the only time that direct contact is allowed.

Syracuse abides by these rules strictly, but other recruiting activities—such as mailings and phone calls—are not regulated at all. "The marketplace sets the tone," Crouthamel explains. "If one school is going to call a student 20 times, then everybody else who's equally interested had better call him 20 times. If one coach is going to watch an athlete play 20 times, then all coaches who are interested had better do the same. And that's unfortunate."

Admissions

Next fall, an NCAA minimum admission requirement for student athletes goes into effect; it requires that incoming students, if they are to play sports as freshmen must possess a 2.0 grade-point average in a high school core curriculum of 11 courses, and must have scored at least 700 on the combined Scholastic Aptitude Tests or 15 on the American College Testing Program exam.

Those are extremely modest standards for most major universities, and yet, according to Crouthamel, "Some of the conferences across the country have done studies to determine how many of their student athletes would have been eligible under this new standard, and the percentages are astounding. Roughly 50 percent of the athletes [in some conferences] would have been ineligible."

By contrast, every student athlete who entered SU during at least the past decade would have met those requirements. In fact, according to David Smith, dean of admissions and financial aid, roughly 90 percent of SU's student athletes would qualify for admission under the University's regular criteria.

Why make an exception for this 10-percent group at all? According to Thomas Cummings Jr., vice president for enrollment management and continuing education, an accomplished student athlete—even if his academic credentials are less impressive—has a proven potential for success. According to Cummings, studies have repeatedly proven that individuals who excel in athletics are more likely to succeed in college. Cummings and Smith refer to this as a "talent base" factor in gauging a student's potential success. They point out that the same factor is used in the admission of future drama, art, and music majors in the College of Visual and Performing Arts.

"There is a special admission requirement for a talented athlete, artist, or oboist," Cummings says. "They have been successful at something, and it is our experience that their determination and intensity are transferable to the academic context."

Academic Eligibility and Performance

The ultimate test of an athletic program's worth is its record of producing successful students—students who not only maintain their eligibility, but actually graduate with a sound, applicable degree.

The NCAA monitors only "normal progress toward degree"—standards stipulating that a student enroll in at least 12 credit hours per semester and successfully complete 24 credit hours each year. Beyond those rules, individual universities are allowed to set their own standards. Bennett, for one, describes institutions where special, slack degree programs allow athletes to complete four years of eligibility, after which they emerge with—or probably without—a meaningless degree.

"We don't have a school or college at Syracuse where a student can be stored," Bennett says. "Most of our athletes are in the College of Arts and Sciences, just as most of our other students are. There's no place to store students in the College of Arts and Sciences."

There are no special allowances for
student athletes at SU. Like all SU students, they must maintain a cumulative grade-point average of 2.0 or risk probation and eventual expulsion. In addition, the individual undergraduate schools at Syracuse add specific, more stringent progress requirements relevant to their programs.

The demands on an athlete's time and attention are special, though, and for that reason the Athletic Department created the Office of Academic Counseling, one of the first of its kind a decade ago and still one of the strongest. The Office of Academic Counseling monitors the course scheduling and degree progress of every student athlete at SU, ensuring that each of them stays on track. The director of the office, Dick Witham, serves as a personal and/or academic counselor to students who sometimes need specific assistance beyond that provided on campus. He also coordinates study tables and schedules tutors.

"We are essentially a back-up system," Witham says. "Student athletes are placed in the mainstream; they all have regular academic advisors. But sometimes those on-campus advisors don't fully recognize the commitment to practice time and travel time that these students make. That's where we come in."

Witham's work begins in the summer, when he reviews the high school records of incoming students. He meets with many of them prior to September and also participates in team meetings prior to the start of practice seasons. During course registration, about half of the student athletes are likely to show up in Witham's office, looking for advice. Thereafter, Witham simply stays on the lookout for potential problems.

Study table attendance four or five nights a week is mandatory for all major-sport players beginning their SU careers; through good grades, they eventually may earn at least partial clemency. All scholarship players are also required to have class-attendance vouchers signed by instructors. If a student is missing classes or study tables, Witham informs the coaches, who have by far the greatest influence on athletes. "The kids don't like to be in trouble with the coaches," says head football coach Dick MacPherson.

Bernie Fine, assistant basketball coach, has the syllabuses of all the courses that players are taking and knows when their exams and deadlines are coming up. "If I find out a player's late with an assignment, they don't do anything else until it's done. No basketball. No nothing."

Academic performance is one aspect of intercollegiate athletics that concerns the women's programs as much as the men's—maybe more. "The guys in the basketball and football programs have opportunities to go to the pros," says women's basketball coach Barbara Jacobs. "The women don't have that. It's important for them to get a degree, so they can pursue a career when they get out."

In sum, there is no group of students whose fates are so closely monitored and supported, because there is no group of students for whom extracurricular activity is so time-consuming and potentially distracting.

"There's no doubt in my mind that we do very well," Witham concludes. "Our goals and our staffing are all directed at the importance of our effort. . . . If we took a random sample of athletes and a random sample of nonathletes, I think you would find that athletes do at least as well as other students."

The evidence backs Witham up.

"Of the student athletes completing their athletic eligibility, the graduation rate is over 91 percent," said the Senate Athletic Policy Committee's final report last year. "The dropout rate for all student athletes (including those who transfer to other institutions) is lower than that for the student body in general."

Matters of Priority

During the past year, it has become increasingly popular to propose radical changes for college sports. Some have proposed that athletic programs be made semi-professional. Others suggest their abolition. According to most observers at SU, though, there is little cause for such radical reactions.

"It is a sorry tale that too many institutions do not abide by the rules, but hopefully they will," says Bennett. "If they are presented with the kind of draconian sanctions that the eight [NCAA reform] measures provide, we hope and trust that they can bring their own people under control."

Bennett casts intercollegiate athletics in a sociological perspective.

"Intercollegiate athletics provides a special kind of experience for the student athletes," he says. "For the larger university, though, it also has special values. It helps to create community and a sense of common interest. . . . It's colorful. It's exciting. It's part of the collegial ambience."

"The sole reason for going to college is not just to go to class and read books," Crutchamel concurs. "It's a maturing process, a cultural process, and a social process. Within the umbrella of this experience, everyone is given the opportunity to compete at a level of excellence. Whether it's magna cum laude, Rhodes Scholarship, fraternity president, elected member of the Senate—everyone has the opportunity to reach a potential."

"And that doesn't exclude anything, especially athletics."

Intercollegiate athletics provides a special kind of experience for the student athlete.

—David Bennett