

Commentary

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Learning vs. sports at UT: Guess which is winning?

After watching the Longhorns squeak past underdog University of Michigan in the Rose Bowl, I resolved that in 2005 I would leave the doings of University of Texas men's football to the sports pages. I would spare Athletics Director DeLoss Dodds and head Coach Mack Brown my advice on how to run their estimated \$55 million-a-year enterprise.

How was I to know, then, that the big three divisions within the UT sports corporation — men's football, basketball and baseball — would make front-page headlines because of

problems with the minor subsidiary known as academics? So I am breaking my resolution, just this once.

The difficulties facing UT sports pervade big-time Division I athletics. When criticized for ethical lapses or challenged on their basic operating principles, athletics directors and head coaches point to their competitors and say, "We have to stay ahead of them." None of them has the courage of Richard Nixon, who saw the madness of the nuclear arms race and pursued detente.

Let's start at the top, or rather what is not at the top. In all the controversy surrounding the academic problems of UT's star sophomore basketball forward, three key football players, star baseball pitcher and four other baseball players, I have not read any statements from the university's chief officers, President Larry Faulkner and Provost Sheldon Ekland-Olson. UT men's athletics is such a freelance operation that reporters apparently don't even bother with the leaders who are supposed to provide oversight and moral direction for the entire university.

No wonder Brown can view academics as an annoyance. Recruiting, he says, "continually is getting tougher because of the school." Dodds says of our would-be student-athletes, "They've got a full-time job in athletics." Is participating in college sports supposed to be full-time unpaid work with academic moonlighting?

Dodds even believes that the treacherous NCAA set a trap in permitting student-athletes with strong high school GPAs to be admitted with lower standardized test results. I wonder who lobbied for that provision?

Still, if \$1.6 million per year of academic assistance for athletes cannot keep entering high achievers at a minimum academic survival level, isn't something seriously wrong at UT?

Before the Rose Bowl, Brown received a contract that will pay him a minimum of \$26 million over the next 10 years. The long-term contract is a good move, since Dodds has attributed the Longhorns' abysmal graduation rate, the lowest in the Big 12, to the last change in head coaches.

But there was no comment from UT's president or provost as to how

this compensation fit with the priorities of budget-strapped teaching, research and student facilities. Nor was there any move to increase the pitiful benefits our football players receive for their "full-time jobs" generating \$50 million per year. However, two assistant football coaches received salary increases to nearly \$300,000 per year, more than triple the average full professor's salary.

University leaders speak publicly about disgraceful athletic practices only when they have, or will soon have, an "ex" in front of their title. University of Notre Dame's president, the Rev. Edward Malloy, will retire in July. He was hailed as courageous last fall for criticizing the early firing of his school's head football coach, Tyrone Willingham. But he took no action to stop it. Can you imagine President Bush publicly criticizing an action taken by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld but saying he was powerless to do anything about it?

Malloy washed his hands of responsibility by pointing to the "strong presence of the board of trustees." UT has similar powerful sports boosters who keep the big-time sports machine well-lubricated with high salaries for coaches, lavish facilities and even nice tax write-off scams, in the form of mandatory "voluntary contributions to an institution of higher learning" in return for the right to rent sky boxes or purchase season tickets.

Mary Sue Coleman, president of UT's Rose Bowl opponent, is the exception who proves the rule. After a University of Michigan basketball scandal where four basketball players received a total of \$616,000 in improper "loans" plus "other benefits in violation of NCAA rules," Coleman turned down a deal from SBC that would have paid her school \$500,000 over two years to sponsor the SBC Michigan-Ohio State Classic.

Did rabid fans want her deposed? Quite the contrary. More than 80 percent of Michigan alumni supported her decision because they dislike the commercialization of college athletics.

No such scruples exist on the Forty Acres. SBC sponsors the Oklahoma-UT Red River Shootout. Read about it on espn.com in an article headlined "Selling out the mascots."

University presidents and provosts are responsible for letting athletics operate in a moral vacuum. Big-sports' student athletes should receive payment for their "full-time jobs." The money is there. Start by disarming coaches' salaries.

Big sports' scholarship athletes should take half-time academic loads — and legitimate courses — during their four years of athletic eligibility. Then give them two years of additional scholarship support to finish up their education as full-time, regular students.

These student athletes generate the millions that go into coaches' salaries. They should have the chance to be real students and earn a real education.

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