



BRIAN TAYLOR FOR THE CHRONICLE

The Real Price of College Sports

By Thomas G. Palaima

ON OCTOBER 2, 2006, House Ways and Means Committee Chairman William M. Thomas sent National Collegiate Athletic Association President Myles Brand a letter asking whether “major intercollegiate athletics further the exempt purpose of the NCAA and, more generally, educational institutions.” The syndicated columnist George F. Will followed up with an intelligent piece that restated the question in plain English: “What is the place of high-stakes football in higher education?” And an NCAA task force—responding to concerns about escalating coaches’ salaries and increased bond debt to build new athletics facilities—suggested that college-sports programs release detailed spending data as a condition for NCAA membership.

Will and Thomas both refer to the University of Texas at Austin. The university is the NCAA Division I-A football champion and ranked third nationally for its performance in all varsity sports. UT’s Rose Bowl victory helped its athletics program make “collegiate licensing history by generating the most royalties ever by a college or university,” as the Collegiate Licensing Company put it in a news release. Those royalties were expected to push the university’s total annual sports revenue well over \$90-million. Of that, \$1.2-million is transferred to the academic program through an “administrative auxiliary transfer fee.” In their post-Rose Bowl euphoria, the system regents increased head football coach Mack Brown’s annual salary by \$390,000, to \$2.55-million. Its head basketball coach received a \$40,000 bonus because his players exceeded a team grade-point-average target of 2.45.

In 2002 *Sports Illustrated* conferred on UT the title “America’s best sports college.” As <http://texassports.com>, the official university athletics Web site, puts it: “One of Athletics Director DeLoss Dodds’s favorite expressions with regard to the Uni-

versity of Texas’s spot in the world of intercollegiate athletics is: ‘We are the Joneses.’”

UT athletics and academics are separate worlds. Professors and coaches mean different things when they use words like “education” and “student.” To faculty members at UT, who live right next to the Joneses and no longer have any illusions about keeping up, Representative Thomas’s 25 questions relating to the NCAA’s educational mission and financing were, so to speak, right on the money.

For example, seven years ago the IRS turned down a challenge that would have eliminated the tax deduction on college-skybox rental fees, ruling that the mandatory fees were voluntary contributions to the educational missions of colleges and universities. UT football has 62 of those private suites renting for \$50,000 to \$80,000 apiece and is building more.

Would big-time-sports colleges be seriously affected if Congress eliminated this Enron-like tax write-off? One UT skybox renter told me that he hadn’t even known about the deduction when he rented his suite.

THE UNIVERSITY is the standard-bearer for big-time sports. A look at its athletics spending and educational practices might help interpret the forthcoming NCAA response to Representative Thomas. Over the last seven years, I have written occasionally in the *Austin American-Statesman* about problems with our athletics programs. In the faculty council, I have also submitted formal questions to the university’s president, William Powers Jr. During that period, I have also had serious discussions with the university’s athletics directors, the provost, the vice president in charge of NCAA matters, and past presidents. When confronted with problems, they have always sought to bring the university into

compliance. But compliance in the alternative universe of NCAA athletics is often not satisfactory.

Locally, UT’s faculty council appointed an ad hoc committee on academics and athletics in 1993. It found that 65 percent of our faculty members thought athletics received too much emphasis.

From 1997 to 1999, another ad hoc panel on intercollegiate athletics, known as the Wright Committee, was convened to review the mission of athletics and evaluate its policies and practices. Its online report gives a good snapshot of how things looked then—substantially the same as now, only less so. The issue then was a \$100-million stadium-renovation project that was put on a fast track by regents and completed by 1998. The university is now spending an additional \$150-million to make the same stadium still bigger.

These issues date back many decades. The Wright Committee report quoted a 1929 report from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which sounds uncomfortably contemporary. “The football contest . . . is not a student’s game, as it once was,” that report stated. “It is a highly organized commercial enterprise. The athletes who take part in it have come up through years of training; they are commanded by professional coaches; little if any personal initiative of ordinary play is left to the player. The great matches are highly profitable enterprises. Sometimes the profits go to finance college sports, sometimes to pay the cost of the sport amphitheater.”

Representative Thomas’s letter states that “the defending Division I-A national champion in football graduated 29 percent”—or 40 percent, according to NCAA methods of calculation—“of its players compared to 74 percent of the university’s student body for the class entering in 1998.” Thomas then asks, “How well is the NCAA accomplishing its tax-exempt purpose of maintaining the athlete as an integral part of the student body?”

You be the judge. Over the last 10 years, UT’s student body has had average SAT’s ranging between 1205 and 1242. One out of two (52 percent) students participating in major sports in 2005-6 had SAT’s below 1005, compared with one out of 16 (6 percent) incoming freshmen. The men’s basketball team last year had average SAT’s of 873.

UT athletics provides their students with tutors and academic advisers who help them choose courses and who carefully monitor their progress in classes. The program recently built a deluxe high-tech study facility dedicated to athletes. A main donor to that project said, “They are asked to knock themselves out at what just about amounts to a full-time job. Then they also go to school and have to make their grades.”

That’s true, although separate study facilities, tutors, and academic advisers might not be the most logical antidote.

College students are at what the ancient Greeks called the ephobic stage of transition to adulthood. They should be setting their own courses, literally and metaphorically. UT’s athlete-students have full-time jobs as athletes. They have limited opportunity for the self-motivated intellectual exploration that would make them student-athletes. As former UT President Peter T. Flawn wrote bluntly in 1990, “Academic performance is a consideration only because a minimum level of performance is necessary for the athlete to stay in

school to continue to be eligible in the athletic program.” To be fair, some do succeed at “making their grades,” and more. I advised baseball player Sean Braswell’s senior honors thesis in 1998-99. He went to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar.

George Will brings us back to our current stadium expansion, or, as he casts it, the federal subsidy to add 10,000 seats and more luxury suites to the university’s 85,123-seat stadium. But there are other opportunity costs he didn’t mention.

The 1996-98 stadium expansion converted a multipurpose stadium, usable for football, track, high-school athletics events, and even band practice, into a single-purpose luxury shrine for five football games a year. By domino effect, premium space on or near the campus was then used for a new track-and-field stadium, an air-conditioned football practice field, and a soccer field. Science faculty members, who have to commute between our main campus and a distant research facility, complain that this same space could have been used for laboratories.

Then there is diverted financial support that Congress cannot even touch. Our University Federal Credit Union has pledged \$13.1-million dollars over the next 15 years to renovation of the university’s baseball field. That “donation” comes in the form of advertising fees. The credit union likewise “donates” \$50,000 per year to our Central Libraries, which have seriously declined in national rankings over the last 15 years. What does it say about our priorities that a not-for-profit organization gives 16 times more money yearly to big-time sports than it gives to education?

Everything is in place at UT for athletics and academics to be closely linked. We have men’s and women’s athletics councils with representatives from the faculty and the board of regents. We have a budget advisory committee that meets with our provost to set fiscal priorities. Recent presidents have served on national athletics-reform committees and written clearheadedly about athletics and academics.

How then did we get here? Why is Congress doing our work for us? Whatever the disease, one symptom is that for the last six years the provost and the faculty budget-advisory committee never even looked at the athletics budget. The regents, chancellors, and presidents have either actively supported or silently approved the enormous increases in coaches’ salaries and colossal sports building projects that have made us Joneses whom our Congress wants to get to know better.

We are in a double bind. If we accept a larger share of athletics revenue for academic purposes, we buy into sports programs that employ students at full-time jobs as athletes and construct for them an alternative educational experience that is not an integral part of serious academic life at our university. If Congress were to eliminate tax exemptions for big-time sports programs, on the other hand, the minimal influence we exert by setting compliance standards would be further diminished.

Either way the values we see at the University of Texas at Austin and elsewhere in big-time college sports are the values faculty committees have helped to set. We can’t exempt ourselves from blame.

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