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The Golden Football: The University of Texas' Bad Example."

Tom Palaima | March 5, 2010 | Cover Story

In 1928, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* published an article by John R. Tunis critical of college football. At the time, Tunis was widely regarded as the best author of sports fiction for 10-to-14 year-olds. While his essay, "The Great God Football," was nonfiction, it addressed the same social and moral questions that informed his novels. Tunis was fed up with excessive commercialization of college football. He felt it was corrupting universities across the United States, including what he called "vast state educational factor[ies]" like the University of Texas at Austin.

In 1928, money that could go to academics instead financed stadiums and paid exorbitant salaries of athletics staff and intercollegiate bureaucrats. Players were virtually full-time athletes in "a regular profession of football," Tunis complained. "Their degrees are rendered to them at the proper moment-which is to say when their football usefulness to the university is at an end." The few college and university presidents with some moral backbone claimed that they had "very limited authority" to exert any control because of the "well-organized, powerful, articulate faction" of students, athletic directors, influential alumni, board members, committee chairmen, state legislators, sportswriters and a "football-mad nation." Tunis vividly called big-time college football a "first-class octopus strangling the legitimate pursuits of educational institution[s]."

The problems it causes are still with us, bigger and more intractable than ever.

Professor Nathan Tublitz studies octopuses. A biologist at the University of Oregon, he has been a leader of the reform-minded alliance of faculty senates known as the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics. Tublitz recently showed me videos that demonstrate how intelligent, resourceful, deceptive, shrewd and cunning the octopus is. Tunis' metaphor was more apt than he could have imagined.

The first-class octopuses at the 120 schools now known as the Football Bowl Subdivision have long resisted the criticisms of education-minded faculty, students and concerned citizens. They brush off reports and policy papers drafted by independent foundations, watchdog groups and congressional investigators. Attempts at moral persuasion by secretaries of education and U.S. presidents fall on deaf ears. They coerce the National Collegiate Athletics Association to water down academic standards for athletes. Not even the recent economic meltdown will bring big-time college sports schools to true crisis. But it does exacerbate their negative impact on higher education.

The NCAA program at the University of Texas at Austin generated \$138 million in revenue last year, \$87 million from football. Yet its profit margin is less than \$2 million. The program's cumulative debt and debt service are in the high-risk neighborhood.

Longhorns Inc. has wrapped its tentacles around the now-hemorrhaging academic budget. The athletics department gave a \$2 million raise to head football coach Mack Brown as colleges

across the university are laying off staff. In foreign languages alone, \$1.6 million was cut. The head of the student union recently announced the closure of the Cactus Café, a historic music venue, to save just \$66,000 over two years.

Worse, the university has ceded trademark and royalty revenues. Longhorns Inc. keeps 90 percent of this income, roughly \$10.6 million last year. The yearly debt payment on building bonds for the nearly \$300 million in stadium expansions since 1998 is \$15 million. The debt run up by the athletics department has risen from \$64.4 million in 2004-05 to a staggering \$222.5 million in 2008-09.

UT's actions have a ripple effect across the country, forcing every other university into an arms race of sorts, in which schools assume more and more debt to compete for the best coaches and players. The core mission of these schools, education, is held hostage to football program success. If a university fails to recruit the highest-quality athletes, meet ever-escalating coaching salaries, or fails to court wealthy donors, it risks a losing season. A losing season means lower revenue and a deficit that has to be covered from the academic budget, which has already been slashed to the bone.

If Mack Brown's football team drops out of the Top Ten, the English department could end up paying for the football stadium from a budget already under attack.

Last month, the state of Texas mandated that UT-Austin cut a further 5 percent (\$29 million) from its operating budget. UT-Austin is looking at the equivalent of laying off 225 professors. That would be like shutting down the entire McCombs School of Business and the College of Architecture. To save money, only 36 percent of UT-Austin faculty received raises in the past year.

Ninety-eight staff members were laid off.

Meanwhile, Longhorns Inc. spent and spent. Assistant football coaches were paid 9 percent bonuses plus \$3,000 to \$5,000 for winning the Big 12 championship, roughly \$30,000 total. That's on top of their average salary of \$327,000, four times the average assistant professor's salary of \$81,800. Their bonuses nearly double what teaching assistants are paid for a year's work.

Longhorns Inc. sets national trends, so these actions have national repercussions. Between 1986 and 2007, the average full professor's salary nationally rose 30 percent in real terms; the average college president's salary went up 100 percent; and the average head football coach's salary went up 600 percent.

This is a moral issue. Not long ago, UT-Austin adopted the motto that "What starts here changes the world." Its core purpose is "to transform lives for the benefit of society." Yet recently a former Rhodes scholar who played baseball for the Longhorns in the 1990s wrote that "raising the highest-paid employee's salary by 66 percent in a time of scarcity might improve next year's recruiting class for the gratification of fans and donors, but it does not transform lives for the benefit of society."

Where is the money coming from? Why is it being used this way? What are the consequences?

At UT, the sports budget and management are run separately from the university as an auxiliary enterprise. Longhorns Inc. CFO Ed Goble has said, "We eat what we kill." This means that head and assistant coaches and all manner of directors and assistant directors eat very well. In contrast, a battery of regulations prevents the players, whose hard work generates all these revenues, from earning what they deserve from their own athletic prowess. What could be better than to have 85 workers producing tens of millions of dollars in revenues while earning a minimum wage?

Plenty. Television networks and fans in stadium club seats and skyboxes have paid large sums for the privilege of seeing a good quality product. So do college students who contribute over \$800 million in identifiable student fees and subsidies that prop up top sports programs nationally. Who cares whether players can pass basic calculus, master a foreign language, or even read a college-level textbook? And the profits in this scramble for sports entertainment dollars go to a small set of winners. Only 25 of 119 bowl series programs made money in 2007-08, averaging about \$4 million in profit. The 94 schools that lost money were about \$10 million in the red. The debt of the losers is increasing.

So schools must recruit the best athletes rather than student athletes. Recently at UT-Austin, the average SAT score for all male students was 1265, for male athletes 1029 and for football players 948. For male basketball players SATs were 797, a staggering 468-point difference.

Institutions that desperately need athletic talent have lobbied for relaxation of admissions requirements. And the NCAA has given them a sliding scale and no specified minimum SAT score. A school gets a passing score now from the NCAA if 35 percent of its student athletes graduate after six years.

What starts with the sports octopus at UT-Austin is changing the world, even at institutions of the highest academic rank. The University of California at Berkeley sports department wants to return to national prominence, so it ran up a \$31.4 million debt that university leaders repaid from academic coffers in 2007. Now, after UC Berkeley has furloughed faculty and staff (but not football coaches) and proposed a whopping 30-percent tuition increase, its athletics program reported an additional \$12.2 million debt this year and expects a similar figure next year. The athletics director announced with a straight face that these amounts "will be repaid in the future from external sources of revenue."

Even if such wishful thinking comes true, why should external revenue sources during a fiscal crisis be directed at obscenely uncontrolled expenditures by college athletics programs? In times like these, it is hard to tell which creatures are more predaceous, the real sea invertebrates that Tublitz studies or the metaphorical college athletics species that John R. Tunis identified in 1928.

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