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Palaima: The 'me-firstism' of UT athletics

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On the advice of a colleague, I watched the 30-second Bevo commercial online for the new Longhorn Network.

Then I watched the network's opening sequence. He added, "Even you, cynical as you might be, will be amazed at what this University has become." I am in fact dumbfounded.

The Bevo commercial for the network proves the old adage "seeing is believing." It should have a disclaimer saying that no intelligent minds were abused in filming this commercial involving bovine and human animals.

We see a high-dollar flat-screen television installed in a livestock trailer so that Bevo, typecast as the mindless, inarticulate ruminant that he is, can gaze helplessly and blankly at ESPN sporting events pictured on the screen.

What a metaphor for what the network will do to further dumb down what is now known as the Longhorn nation. And this mindlessness is being promoted by the flagship institution of higher education in our state.

President William Powers Jr. declared in his State of the University Address that we were working hard to obtain the "widest possible distribution" for the Longhorn Network. He added that "everyone in the UT family can help the effort by contacting their providers and requesting the network." He has been spending much of his time, according to news reports, flying to other schools to try to work out suitable arrangements for our sports programs.

Meanwhile, The Daily Texan reports, "The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board directed UT to eliminate its degree in Greek studies following this academic year. The board has suggested colleges cut certain degree programs with low enrollment in order to ease state-wide budget cuts to education." The fact of the matter is that elimination of this degree option will not save a penny, and it comes at a time when our active religious studies programs in ancient religion are creating greater need for ancient Greek to be offered.

UT's unilateral and single-minded greed in creating a major single-school sports network while a member of a conference that should be united in maintaining fair levels of competition among cooperating members hardly constitutes a lesson in the kind of good citizenship that the values and goals laid out for higher education on the Forty Acres are intended to instill.

The "me-firstism" of UT athletics has even led to our athletics director and upper administrators being satirized on YouTube as Adolf Hitler and spineless Wehrmacht officers. The video's dialogue offers an uncanny analysis of how things have gone. One classic line in der Fuehrer's rant is "OU is now gonna demand more money, and we have to find a replacement school we can win against." Regardless of whether you think Hitler parodies are funny, the clip unfortunately gets across how far the spirit of sportsmanship has declined because of the inequality of resources among schools in the Big 12.

Finally, lost in all the discussion of which schools are bolting to escape UT athletics' fanatical grasping at cable Lebensraum and other commercial revenues is what must be the worst perversion of American higher education caused by big-time sports madness. The academic side of UT will end up affiliated with whatever schools the sports program decides to form a conference with.

Texas A&M, Nebraska and the University of Colorado were the next three highest-ranked schools academically, after UT, in the Big 12. When schools like them leave, the faculty fellowship exchanges with them become defunct.

Cooperation in research and teaching among institutions depends on maintaining long-term relationships. This can be seen in the Big 10. These relationships are especially crucial as diminishing resources everywhere make schools more dependent on cooperative arrangements. Right now at UT, they are subject to the whims of the empire of about 500 student athletes and their opulently rewarded coaches and administrators.

Palaima is a classics professor and served for three years as a UT representative on the national Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics.