The Real Price of College Sports

By Thomas G. Palaima

O n 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 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 athletic 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 collegiate program," the NCAA's licensing company put it in a news release. As former ITT President Joneses and no longer have any illusions about keeping up, Representative Thomas's letter states "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 had 62 of those private suites renting for $50,000 to $80,000 apiece and building more. Who 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 Chronicle 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 men's-athletics academic adviser, 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 intercollegiate 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 Group, 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. The report states that UT "is spending $100-million a year on a $390,000,000 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 sanctuary 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 of its class—according to the NCAA's 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 of 1205 and 1242. One out of five (20 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 age SAT's of 873.

UT athletics provides its students with tutors and academic advisers who help them choose courses and who carefully monitor their progress in classes. The program recruits a dedicated high-level body 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 classes and have to make such academic 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 impact on the academic experience 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 been helped to set. We can't exempt ourselves from blame. Thomas G. Palaima is a professor of classics and directs the program in Agreek Studies and prehistory at the University of Texas at Austin.