

College Football Today: AN EXPOSÉ OF EXPOSÉS

By DAN ENDSLEY

A calm appraisal of the myths and realities of America's most popular outdoor sport

EVERYBODY KNOWS IT. As a means of gaining access to the college graduate's wallet, America's educators have developed a highly effective pocket-picking technique. They simply anesthetize old Joe Alumnus. The narcotic is a game called football—a game which at the college level features systematic brain scrambling by oversized, subsidized neanderthals whose only noticeable involvement in college life occurs on autumn Saturday afternoons. Right?

Wrong. As incredible as it may seem to a generation so often told otherwise, there is relatively little money obtained from college football—either directly in gate receipts or indirectly in gifts from hot-blooded old grads who parade their team's victories as proof of their own virility. And most players are bona fide students making normal progress toward graduation, without benefit of under-the-table aid, either academic or financial.

Muckraking gridiron exposés, from which we get most of our "knowledge" about football as an insidiously corrupting influence in college life, actually date from the 1920's, and most of the "information" is just about that old. Writing exposés has become a major sport in itself, and its most successful participants have been far better remunerated than even the most demanding of All-American quarterbacks. But whether the work of big-timer or small potato, most of these exposés are several college generations behind the times.

Probably the two most persistent

myths are these: (1) "Everybody does it" (whatever "it" is); and (2) college administrators, putting money before morality, look the other way as the cash rolls in.

"Everybody" does *not* do it. More than 600 American colleges and universities have football teams. No more than 10 percent of these—half a dozen conferences and half a dozen independents—can, in football terms, be considered "big time." Perhaps another tenth play follow-the-leader in recruiting, aid and scheduling policies. *But four out of five do not.* They conduct low-pressure, honest, economical, student-oriented athletic programs. Football has not corrupted them, nor will it. As to the charge of greed-inspired administrative hypocrisy—naive indeed is the college official who still believes (if he ever did) that there is any significant relationship between alumni giving habits and a school's won-and-lost record on the gridiron. There is even less correlation between football and the really substantial gifts and grants from individuals, industry, foundations and government. Nor does much money pour directly into the coffers from football itself. There is hardly an administrator in the land who is not painfully aware of these realities. Even the most successful of bigtime operators hopes, at best, to cover the costs of athletic competition in all sports and maybe that of the institution's physical education program, and still be able to meet the mortgage payments on the field house. The era of building dormi-

tories and laboratories with football money ended nearly a quarter of a century ago.

Yet football goes on. Even though nearly a hundred schools have abandoned the sport since World War II began, more than 600 others still play the game. Why? The answer is almost too simple to credit: football is a sport which young men like to play and which Americans of all ages like to watch. That was the game's strength back in the days when President Andrew Dickson White refused to let a Cornell team travel a thousand miles "to agitate a bag of wind," and that's still what keeps it going today.

It isn't the character- or body-building values, the public relations aspects, the money or even the vested interest of large platoons of professional coaches and athletic directors. It's the fun. This fall approximately 2,000 college football games will be played. At each of these games, whether admission is free or six dollars a seat, there will be spectators. Why such an inherently static and stereotyped spectacle as American football, which puts the rest of the world to sleep, continues to grip the interest and imagination of U. S. manhood is a question for the psychologists; perhaps one must grow up with it to appreciate it. But one thing is certain: it's only a game, and thus is in no way responsible for the asinities which sometimes accompany it.

Asinities there are, but virtually all of them occur at the one out of five schools which is "big time" or hopes

It isn't how you play the game, it's whether you win or lose

to become so. Here are a few things which have actually happened:

An All-American halfback, after signing his first professional contract, admitted (tongue only partly in cheek) that he "took a pay cut."

A noted coach, when one of his players made a damaging mistake in a pressure-packed game, gave the culprit a punt in the posterior right in full view of 60,000 spectators.

A rugged lineman who seriously injured an opponent *after the play was over* was defended by his coach with the argument that a winner must be aggressive.

These warts on the pigskin are typical of the things minimized by the Establishment sportswriters of the daily press, then blown up and flaunted as proof of incurable venality by mavericks writing for popular magazines and some few newspapers. Actually such examples are only a minuscule fraction of the list which could be compiled and verified with only minimal research effort. But even if the list cited 10,000 sins it would prove nothing against the game itself, or against the four out of five "football schools" to which such practices are completely alien. Nor would it necessarily reveal much about the real sins and policies of the other one in five. About all it would prove for sure is that in football as in other pursuits there are people who will seek advantage by cutting corners.

The impression most readers get from such stories is that college football—the bigtime practitioners directly and the others through association—is nothing but a vast cattle market where avid buyers bid for choice beef on the hoof. Since in specific provable cases this impression is right, it's hard for many to understand that it can't be extended very far without grave error. Lapses of virtue still occur, but these days they're actually more typical of basketball than of football. Ever since college football began drawing large crowds in the '20's there have been abuses which make the game seem less a student activity than a great circus for the public—abuses which obscure the fact that long-range trends in bigtime college football point

in a different direction altogether. If these trends had to be summed up in one word, that word would be "quantitative" or "collective"—take your pick.

Since there is still plenty of need for honest debate over the *real* trends in bigtime college football, the purpose of this article is merely to identify some of them—not attack or defend. Here are a few which tell far more about the State of the Pigskin than the most comprehensive list of violations can ever reveal:

1. *Quantitative Recruiting*: Because a factor called "desire" means as much as strength, speed or agility and is impossible to spot for certain in even the most brilliant of prep school sparklers, football recruiters seek the largest possible group of promising prospects. Football coaches at top institutions have a hundred or more grants-in-aid to hand out; if all goes well, a solid 40-man squad will shake down from the larger group.

2. *Standardization of Reward*: "Carrying" a large group of grid hopefuls is an expensive business, even at a large state school where the gate receipts are big and tuition is relatively low; therefore, there is strong sentiment for a standard work-aid scale with individual need the governing

factor. Occasionally it turns out that a particularly desirable star has been slipped something extra on the side, but most get no more than tuition, books, non-taxing part-time jobs that barely cover other basic expenses, and usually summer jobs at which they must work hard.

3. *Exchange of Information*: While a coach might prefer to keep his dealings with his own players a secret from his competitors, the only way he can find out what the other fellows are doing is to trade reports. At the recruiting stage everyone knows the educational and other qualifications of all the prospects (and thus who, if anyone, is cheating on admissions standards), but it doesn't stop there any more; in several conferences each school now makes regular reports on every player—the aid he receives, if any, and his record of educational progress. Doctoring these reports is possible, no doubt, but perilous. Nowadays coaches actually get *fired* for unethical practices, and there are quieter and less drastic penalties which aren't very agreeable either.

4. *Insulation of Athletes*: Just as skyrocketing enrollments have made it more difficult to obtain admission of boys with high gridiron but low scholastic attainment, they have also exerted a very different kind of pressure on those who are accepted. Today's students have a broader range of values, and while football is still popular, it's several slots down from the top of the list. Since football players are students too, they are often influenced by the attitudes of their peer group—to the detriment of athletic performance; a boy who doesn't consider football all-important isn't likely to play as well as one who does. So coaches seek ways of screening their players off from the rest of the student body.

5. *Quantitative Coaching*: Years ago, any team that had eleven good men and three or four capable substitutes had a chance for a successful season. Now only the "three deep" schools have much likelihood of becoming big winners, and injuries have become so common that even some of the most powerful squads are decimated by midseason. Hence a coach



One myth has college administrators turning their backs while the money rolls in.

DRAWINGS BY MIKE DIRHAM

wants enough depth to withstand attrition and still be strong enough to wear down the opposition in the third quarter and flatten it in the fourth. The 60-minute player, formerly a common species, is now about as rare as the whooping crane because a fresh reserve is a better risk than a tired star. This dictates a collective approach to coaching. Many more players must be given the kind of attention only the first eleven used to get; thus several different types of drills are conducted simultaneously by assistant coaches who are specialists. The head man supervises, plans, delegates, coordinates. He can't be as directly and personally involved as he used to be.

6. *Mass Tactics*: Even the most casual glance at a sports page will verify that there are still individual stars, but it's stardom with a difference. The payoff goes to the team that can concentrate its strength and hit hardest as a unit, the greatest proportion of the time. This requires greater interchangeability of personnel, so the star is likely to be a specialist who plays half or less of the game rather than an all-around man. Success requires waves of fresh men ready to belt with abandon. Hitting hard has always been an important element of football, but emphasis in post-war years has been so heavy that tactics which once would have drawn penalties for roughness or piling on are now admired as "good, hard, clean football." Coaches are no longer thrilled by good individual tackles; they want to know where "the pursuit" was (i.e., why everyone else didn't catch up and pile on); if they can see the ball carrier's jersey under the pile, something went wrong. As the size and ferocity of players has increased, so has the incidence of injury. (Strangely enough this kind of jungle warfare seems to evoke more respect than resentment from opponents. When talking football, today's player seems to understand gridgers at a rival school better than he understands adults or sportswriters or his non-athlete classmates—or even players of a previous era. Try to talk to him about the other team's inexcusably rough tactics and he'll probably think you're a square.)

These are half a dozen of the more obvious current trends in bigtime college football. Whether one approves

of them or not, they point in a direction quite different from that so often decried by the writers of exposés: standardization of recruiting tactics and aid policies, conservatism, bureaucracy, orthodoxy—and *less* rugged individualism.

Of course many old-time college football fans find the game less interesting than it used to be, perhaps because coaches have worked so diligently to achieve perfection: i.e., to eliminate the element of chance. They seek to recruit a manpower advantage and



Football may have its occasional warts, but the game today is essentially clean.

then play it conservatively, grinding it out slowly in "four yards and a cloud of dust." They leave the pyrotechnics to the professionals. Only winning pays off; the crowds in the home stadium will gladly accept dullness if it means victory—and will reject "interesting" football when it's only a synonym for losing. It isn't how you play the game, it's whether you win or lose.

Perhaps for all time, the balance of football power has tipped in favor of the large tax-supported institutions—especially those which have not yet had to face the problem of selective admissions. Private colleges and universities that still consistently rank among the grid elite can be counted on the fingers of one hand, for perfectly valid, natural and legitimate reasons. Since football squads are larger, the much lower tuition charged by state schools is a bigger advantage than ever

before. Since these massive state schools have far larger student bodies, they can accept many talented athletes who, though they may meet listed standards of the "prestige" private institutions, are turned down because there are so many other applicants with even higher academic qualifications. And since the public institutions *are* public, representing entire states, they have far larger constituencies to support them at all levels.

That doesn't mean, though, that college football will eventually be played only by the mastodons. While much is said about upgrading the caliber of play, to all but the most frenzied rooters the element of doubt is more important. There might not be much doubt if Ohio State played Princeton, so they won't meet. But Ohio State will play Iowa and Wisconsin, Princeton will play Dartmouth and Yale—yes, and Pomona will play Occidental and Redlands. In each instance there will be people who are interested not just in the outcome but in the contest itself—because the outcome will not be a foregone conclusion. Occasionally even a Northwestern or Tulane or Stanford will enjoy a brief moment in the sun between longer eclipses, and the moment will be all the pleasanter for its rarity. College football attendance is at an all-time high, leading some to contend that competition from televised professional sports events need no longer be feared. Actually the gains have been spotty, going primarily to the perennial bigtime contenders—which also have the heaviest expenses. Many schools which once relied on football to finance the entire physical education plant and program are now faced with growing gaps in the phys-ed budget which must be plugged in other ways. But at most of them football still supports itself, and more—and apparently it will continue to do so at all institutions where ambition for gridiron glory doesn't outrace reality. (Most of the schools that dropped football could easily have substituted a program geared to their own resources, but they apparently felt they had to be bigtime or nothing. Football will probably lose some more of those.)

The people who enjoy football will continue to do so, and will not apologize for their interest. To the intima-

Continued on page 32

College Football Today

Continued from page 15

tion that a schoolboy game is beneath the notice of an educated man they will counter that recreation is a basic need for all; that some people find it in football—and others, perhaps, in their neighbors.

As to the perennial charge that alumni pressure is to blame for all of football's sins, remember that the season-long sellouts which create pressure to win at all costs are not possible when interest is confined to alumni—and that schools where *only* the alumni are interested usually have a pretty safe and sane football program.

But whether college football is big-time or penny ante, critics there are and will continue to be—many garbed in colorful academic hoods. For every professor or administrator who hates the sport, however, there is at least one who loves it. Says Frederick G. Marcham, Goldwin Smith Professor of English History at Cornell and that institution's representative on an Ivy League committee to study and report on sports problems: "Athletics have been a big part of Cornell. The athletes have contributed much to student life. More and more of them go on to careers in graduate schools.

"We need athletics. If Cornell did not have its large and diversified athletic program and its fine intramural program, the character of the undergraduate group would change decisively. What it would be like in this secluded community, I can't imagine."

On every campus where college football is played one can find lots of scholars who agree with Professor Marcham. Of course each program must be individually tailored to fit the needs and resources of its own institution (including the interest level of the school's constituency); no college has any obligation to divert educational funds to the support of fun and games for the alumni and general public. But as long as football can support itself, as long as students retain interest in it as a valued extracurricular activity, and as long as it doesn't become too perilous to the participants—none of which will happen with proper management—college football will survive.

The author, a former sportswriter, is editor of the Stanford Review.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .0686 in Bizzell Memorial Library.