



Miami vs. Colorado, Orange Bowl, September 24, 2005

Agony of Defeat

Division I beats scholarship. BY ROBERT WHITCOMB

William Dowling, professor of English at Rutgers, seems to be an angry man who has, willingly or not, transformed his public persona from literary scholar to a national leader in the still-losing war against the commercialization of college sports. He notes that he edited the Dartmouth humor magazine (where I, too, briefly toiled) in the last two years of his undergraduate career, but there is little lightness here, if from time to time a bit of mordant humor.

It is, mostly, a well-argued diatribe, and a very useful one—perhaps the best overview of college-sports corruption published. It should be required reading for education and sports writers, not to mention high school students pondering their college choices along with their financially fearful parents.

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The narrative spine is the effort by Professor Dowling, other Rutgers scholars, and bright and brave students in a group called Rutgers 1000, to try to stem the state university of New Jersey's slide into big-time college-sports corruption and associated academic mediocrity after this distinguished institution joined the Big East conference in 1994 and jettisoned much of the old-fashioned sports amateurism that it had when the school, chartered in 1766, competed with the likes of Princeton.

Professor Dowling, it should be emphasized, does not dislike sports; he is an avid supporter of such old-fashioned, non-athletic-scholarship sportsmen as the Rutgers lightweight crew, and speaks fondly of attending Ivy League football games in the 1960s.

Rutgers 1000, the group he helped form to fight the takeover of the university by Division I sports, fights a valiant battle, seems to win, and then loses

Confessions of a Spoilsport
My Life and Hard Times
Fighting Sports Corruption at an
Old Eastern University
by William C. Dowling
Penn State, 208 pp., \$23.95

as mammon and media triumph—for now, anyway. But that they fought such a good, gutsy fight gives hope to others. Meanwhile, their story reads like a pretty good novel, in which of course William Dowling is the valiant defender of Western Civilization against the forces of proud ignorance, thuggery, exhibitionism, and greed.

Real life, even on Division I campuses, is a tad more complicated than that. But the fact is that college sports has, at many campuses, become a particularly obscene reflection of the worst of American materialism, libertinism, and celebrity-chasing. And so powerful has become the practice of hiring semi-professional, some soon-to-become *professional*, athletes to play on such teams, particularly the biggies (football and basketball), that their very role as centers of intellectual life must be challenged.

Dowling goes into the sordid detail of Division I universities recruiting virtual illiterates to play on their teams. To help hire and keep them, these institutions offer prostitutes, booze, and other amusements, provide special tutors, and put these bogus “scholar-athletes” in such preposterous courses as “Coaching Principles and Strategies of Basketball,” taught by Jim Harrick Jr. (son of Coach Jim Harrick Sr.) at the University of Georgia, whose exams include such questions as: “How many halves are in a college basketball game?” (Incidentally, it doesn’t matter at some of these schools if the young scholars miss most of their classes; they get A’s anyway!)

Then there are the rapes, other assaults, and assorted criminal activities by scholar-athletes at such Division I schools as Virginia Tech, which seems a particularly rank cesspool of sports corruption. Permeating all this, as Dowling eloquently details, is the money that flows into many bloated Division I athletic departments, wherein media exposure, and the associated bucks, trump all, and coaches are paid ten times professors’ wages.

The cosseted scholar-athletes, the rapacious con-men coaches, and Barnum-style athletic directors drag down these institutions to such an extent that serious faculty and students avoid them, or do everything they can to escape them

when they discover the sleaze wherein they reside.

As Dowling says, after a reference to Ohio State:

When the only thing that matters at a university is big-time sports, the symbolic center of the institution has shifted profoundly. . . . When the athletes recognize that they are virtual demigods on campus, real students come to regard themselves as marginally important, less real to the life of the school. When every institutional resource is dedicated—and known to be dedicated—to the support and celebration of specialized physical skills, intellectual talent and the pursuit of learning come to be disregarded and displaced, even at many schools, despised.

Of course, even at bad schools individuals can push themselves to get a good education, and serious scholars can pursue their interests, albeit without much praise, and in obscurity. But Dowling is correct to fear this cancer on our culture. Still, and thank God, America has *many* colleges and universities to which real students can flee from the corruption manifest at many Division I schools. The richness of choice is one of the wonders of America.

At one point, Rutgers 1000 recruits the great economist Milton Friedman (Rutgers '32) to write a statement of support, which includes these thoughts:

Universities exist to transmit knowledge and understanding of ideas and values to students, and to add to the body of intellectual knowledge, not to provide entertainment for spectators or employment for athletes. . . . The proper role of athletic activity at a university is to foster healthy minds and healthy bodies, not to produce spectacles.

Oh yeah? It doesn't take much newspaper reading or TV watching to show that much of the public has quite a different idea, even those citizens who want their own kids to go to Yale. Still, the Republic will survive. When organizations get a reputation for not providing a service—in this case, education—the best students and faculty will take their business elsewhere, and the worst of the institutions will ultimately perish or be reformed. ♦