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How Big-Time Sports Ate College Life

By LAURA PAPPANO

IT was a great day to be a Buckeye. Josh Samuels, a junior from Cincinnati, dates his decision to attend Ohio State to Nov. 10, 2007, and the chill he felt when the band took the field during a football game against Illinois. “I looked over at my brother and I said, ‘I’m going here. There is nowhere else I’d rather be.’ ” (Even though Illinois won, 28-21.)

Tim Collins, a junior who is president of Block O, the 2,500-member student fan organization, understands the rush. “It’s not something I usually admit to, that I applied to Ohio State 60 percent for the sports. But the more I do tell that to people, they’ll say it’s a big reason why they came, too.”

Ohio State boasts 17 members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, three Nobel laureates, eight Pulitzer Prize winners, 35 Guggenheim Fellows and a MacArthur winner. But sports rule.

“It’s not, ‘Oh, yeah, Ohio State, that wonderful physics department.’ It’s football,” said Gordon Aubrecht, an Ohio State physics professor.

Last month, Ohio State hired Urban Meyer to coach football for $4 million a year plus bonuses (playing in the B.C.S. National Championship game nets him an extra $250,000; a graduation rate over 80 percent would be worth $150,000). He has personal use of a private jet.

Dr. Aubrecht says he doesn’t have enough money in his own budget to cover attendance at conferences. “From a business perspective,” he can see why Coach Meyer was hired, but he calls the package just more evidence that the “tail is wagging the dog.”

Dr. Aubrecht is not just another cranky tenured professor. Hand-wringing seems to be universal these days over big-time sports, specifically football and men’s basketball. Sounding much like his colleague, James J. Duderstadt, former president of the University of Michigan and author of “Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University,” said this: “Nine of 10 people don’t understand what you are saying when you talk about research universities. But you say ‘Michigan’ and they understand those striped helmets running under the banner.”

For good or ill, big-time sports has become the public face of the university, the brand that admissions offices sell, a public-relations machine thanks to ESPN exposure. At

the same time, it has not been a good year for college athletics. Child abuse charges against a former Penn State assistant football coach brought down the program's legendary head coach and the university's president. Not long after, allegations of abuse came to light against an assistant basketball coach at Syracuse University. Combine that with the scandals over boosters showering players with cash and perks at Ohio State and, allegedly, the University of Miami and a glaring power gap becomes apparent between the programs and the institutions that house them.

"There is certainly a national conversation going on now that I can't ever recall taking place," said William E. Kirwan, chancellor of the University of Maryland system and co-director of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. "We've reached a point where big-time intercollegiate athletics is undermining the integrity of our institutions, diverting presidents and institutions from their main purpose."

The damage to reputation was clear in a November survey by Widmeyer Communications in which 83 percent of 1,000 respondents blamed the "culture of big money" in college sports for Penn State officials' failure to report suspected child abuse to local law enforcement; 40 percent said they would discourage their child from choosing a Division I institution "that places a strong emphasis on sports," and 72 percent said Division I sports has "too much influence over college life."

Has big-time sports hijacked the American campus? The word today is "balance," and the worry is how to achieve it.

The explosion in televised games has spread sports fever well beyond traditional hotbeds like Alabama and Ole Miss. Classes are canceled to accommodate broadcast schedules, and new research suggests that fandom can affect academic performance. Campus life itself revolves around not just going to games but lining up and camping out to get into them.

"It's become so important on the college campus that it's one of the only ways the student body knows how to come together," said Allen Sack, president-elect of the Drake Group, a faculty network that lobbies for academic integrity in college sports. "In China and other parts of the world, there are no gigantic stadiums in the middle of campus. There is a laser focus on education as being the major thing. In the United States, we play football."

Dr. Sack, interim dean of the University of New Haven's college of business, was sipping orange juice at a coffee shop a few blocks from the Yale Bowl. It was a fitting place to meet, given that when the Ivy League was formed in 1954, presidents of the eight member colleges saw where football was headed and sought to stop it. The pact they made, according to a contemporaneous account in The Harvard Crimson, aimed to ensure that players would "enjoy the game as participants in a form of recreational competition rather than as professional performers in public spectacles."

There is nothing recreational about Division I football today, points out Dr. Sack, who played for Notre Dame in the 1960s. Since then, athletic departments have kicked the roof off their budgets, looking more like independent franchises than university departments.

It is that point — "this commercial thing" in the middle of academia, as Charles T. Clotfelter, a public policy professor at Duke, put it — that some believe has thrown the system out of kilter. In his recent book "Big-Time Sports in American Universities," Dr. Clotfelter notes that between 1985 and 2010, average salaries at public universities rose 32 percent for full professors, 90 percent for presidents and 650 percent for football coaches.

The same trend is apparent in a 2010 Knight Commission report that found the 10 highest-spending athletic departments spent a median of $98 million in 2009, compared with $69 million just four years earlier. Spending on high-profile sports grew at double to triple the pace of that on academics. For example, Big Ten colleges, including Penn State, spent a median of $111,620 per athlete on athletics and $18,406 per student on academics.

Division I football and basketball, of course, bring in millions of dollars a year in ticket sales, booster donations and cable deals. Penn State football is a money-maker: 2010 Department of Education figures show the team spending $19.5 million and bringing in almost $73 million, which helps support 29 varsity sports. Still, only about half of big-time programs end up in the black; many others have to draw from student fees or the general fund to cover expenses. And the gap between top programs and wannabes is only growing with colleges locked into an arms race to attract the best coaches and build the most luxurious venues in hopes of luring top athletes, and donations from happy alumni.

College sports doesn't just demand more and more money; it is demanding more attention from fans.

Glen R. Waddell, associate professor of economics at the University of Oregon, wanted to know how much. In a study published last month as part of the National Bureau of Education Research working paper series, Oregon researchers compared student grades with the performance of the Fighting Ducks, winner of this year's Rose Bowl and a crowd pleaser in their Nike uniforms in crazy color combinations and mirrored helmets.

"Here is evidence that suggests that when your football team does well, grades suffer," said Dr. Waddell, who compared transcripts of over 29,700 students from 1999 to 2007 against Oregon's win-loss record. For every three games won, grade-point average for men dropped 0.02, widening the G.P.A. gender gap by 9 percent. Women's grades didn't suffer. In a separate survey of 183 students, the success of the Ducks also seemed to cause slacking off: students reported studying less (24 percent

of men, 9 percent of women), consuming more alcohol (28 percent, 20 percent) and partying more (47 percent, 28 percent).

While acknowledging a need for more research, Dr. Waddell believes the results should give campus leaders pause: fandom can carry an academic price. “No longer can it be the case where we skip right over that inconvenience,” he said.

Dr. Clotfelter, too, wanted to examine study habits. He tracked articles downloaded from campus libraries during March Madness, the National Collegiate Athletic Association basketball tournament. Library patrons at universities with teams in the tournament viewed 6 percent fewer articles a day as long as their team was in contention. When a team won an upset or close game, article access fell 19 percent the day after the victory. Neither dip was made up later with increased downloads.

“Big-time sports,” Dr. Clotfelter said, “have a real effect on the way people in universities behave.”

AT Duke, one of the country’s top universities, men’s basketball sets the rhythms of campus life. Of 600 students who study abroad each year, only 100 do it in the spring. It probably doesn’t need to be said, but you don’t schedule anything opposite a basketball game. Ever. “If there’s a basketball game, you don’t hold the meeting, you don’t hold the event,” said Larry Moneta, vice president for student affairs.

Then there’s the annual campout of 1,000 at Krzyzewskiville, the patch of grass named for Coach Mike Krzyzewski outside the hulking Gothic-style gymnasium, to determine the order of the line into the game against the rival University of North Carolina, which the Blue Devils host on March 3. Dr. Moneta several years ago stepped in to ban tents before the first day of classes after winter break (some had started the day after Christmas), but he has mostly “let the students own this.” He was pleased when they decided tenting wouldn’t start this year until a week later, Jan. 15. Tenters can sleep indoors when it’s below 20 degrees or there is “more than two inches of accumulated snow.” The rest of the time, students must prove their devotion (extra points for game attendance) and their residency (middle-of-the-night tent checks by “line monitors” signaled by a bullhorn).

Even grad students hold their own campout, with 2,200 spending a weekend in tents and RVs to enter a lottery for season tickets; only 725 get lucky. It’s become such a big deal that a law professor said they “have to figure out when that is” so as not to invite law firms to campus for interviews that weekend.

While Dr. Moneta has “concerns about occasional alcohol use and abuse” among K-Ville undergrads (line monitors must intervene if they spot drinking games), he said students manage to camp out “for the most part without any negative effect on academics.”

Orin Starn, a Duke professor who is a longtime critic of its participation in Division I athletics, begs to differ. He objects to sports occupying "this gigantic place in the university landscape." He calls basketball "a strain of anti-intellectualism" that claims too much time and attention. But as an anthropologist — he teaches "Anthropology of Sports" — he understands why. "It's like going to the Metropolitan Opera or the New York City Ballet," he said. "It's a chance to see these incredible athletes and this legendary coach."

Dr. Starn put a scholarly spin on it: "Big-time sports have become a modern tribal religion for college students." There are sacred symbols (team logos), a high priest (Coach K) and shared rituals (chants and face painting). "This generation loves pageantry and tradition. School spirit is in right now. Now it's hip to be a joiner and it's hip to be a sports fan." Also, he observed, "these kids have grown up with the idea that sports are really a major part of American society and something they *should* care about."

Duke's game against North Carolina is special, but it doesn't take much to provoke a queue for men's basketball. At 8:50 a.m. one day last month, students gathered at K-Ville. It didn't matter that it was Wednesday, that the game wasn't for 10 hours, that it would rain (even pour), or that Daniel Carp and Matthew Grossman — first in line — had papers due (Mr. Carp on the religious indoctrination of children; Mr. Grossman about Kant and the boundaries of mere reason).

The matchup against Colorado State wasn't even a compelling out-of-conference game. But the point was not just to be at the game but to befirst to enter Cameron Indoor Stadium, thereby securing the best seats in the famed student section.

"Every time they swipe my card and I go in, I get this overwhelming enthusiasm. 'I'm here! It's game time!'" Mr. Grossman, a freshman from Atlanta, explained between bites of a burger topped with crumbled blue cheese after the game, blue and white paint still adorning his face.

The rise of near-professional college sports has fueled the rise of near-professional fans. Mr. Carp, a freshman from Philadelphia sporting a No. 2 jersey, said that being a fan was integral to college life. "You just learn really early on how to make going to basketball games part of your everyday routine."

K-Ville is legendary, but similar scenes play out at Oklahoma State, Texas A&M, North Carolina State, the University of Missouri, San Diego State and Xavier University, where students line up or camp out for days to get into games. At the University of Kentucky, they camp out for access to the official start of basketball *practice*.

For a Tuesday night game against Duke in Columbus (for which there were enough seats, according to Mr. Collins, the Block O president), Ohio State students pitched tents along the outside wall of Schottenstein Center starting at 5 p.m. on a Sunday.

“I can imagine they may have neglected a class or two on Monday and Tuesday,” Mr. Collins said. “But we are here for four years. What will you remember 10 years from now, that you decided to write that English paper, or you had front row seats at the Duke game?”

Worry about students making that sort of academic tradeoff led officials at Indiana University, Bloomington, to cut short “Camp Crean” (after Coach Tom Crean) last month when students started lining up four days in advance for the Hoosiers basketball game against Kentucky. “It’s the week before finals, and we didn’t want the kids camping out and staying up for days when it’s going to be in the 20s and — oh, by the way — it’s finals,” said the university spokesman, Mark Land.

While only “a small number” of students had started camping, Mr. Land noted, “if you get hundreds out there, it’s a party atmosphere.”

TELEVISION has fed the popularity. The more professional big-time college sports has become, the more nonathletes have been drawn in, said Murray Sperber, author of “Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Has Crippled Undergraduate Education.” “Media coverage gets into kids’ heads,” he said, “and by the time they are ready to choose a college, it becomes a much bigger factor than it was historically.”

In the last 10 years, the number of college football and basketball games on ESPN channels rose to 1,320 from 491. This doesn’t include games shown by competitors: the Big 10 Network, Fox, CBS/Turner, Versus and NBC. All that programming means big games scheduled during the week and television crews, gridlock and tailgating on campus during the school day.

“How can you have a Wednesday night football game without shutting down the university for a day or two?” asked Dr. Sack of the Drake Group with a twinge of sarcasm. He’s not exactly wrong, though. Last semester, the University of Central Florida canceled afternoon classes before the televised game against the University of Tulsa. Mississippi State canceled a day of classes before a Thursday night broadcast of a football game against Louisiana State, creating an online skirmish between Bulldog fans and a blogger who suggested parents should get their tuition back.

Even Boston College bowed, canceling afternoon classes because the football game against Florida State was on ESPN at 8 p.m. Janine Hanrahan, a Boston College senior, was so outraged at missing her political science class, “Immigration, Processes and Policies,” that she wrote an opinion piece headlined “B.C.’s Backwards Priorities” in the campus newspaper. “It was an indication that football was superseding

academics," she explained. ("We are the national role model," a university spokesman, Jack Dunn, responded. "We are the school everyone calls to say, 'Where do you find the balance?' ")

Universities make scheduling sacrifices not just for the lucrative contracts but also because few visuals build the brand better than an appearance on ESPN's road show "College GameDay." (In November, it had John L. Hennessey, president of Stanford, out on the Oval at daybreak working the crowd.) The school spirit conveyed by cheering thousands — there were 18,000 on Francis Quadrangle at the University of Missouri, Columbia, on Oct. 23, 2010, for "GameDay" — is a selling point to students choosing colleges. When Missouri first started recruiting in Chicago a decade ago, few prospective students had ever heard the university's nickname, "Mizzou," according to the admissions director, Barbara Rupp. "Now they know us by 'Mizzou,' " thanks in part to "GameDay." "I can't deny that," she said.

Universities play the sports card, encouraging students to think of themselves as fans. A Vanderbilt admissions blog last fall featured "My Vandy Fanatic Weekend" describing the thrill of attending a basketball game and football game back to back. "One of the things we hear in the admissions office is that students these days who are serious about academics are still interested in sports," said John Gaines, director of undergraduate admissions. Mr. Gaines slipped in that its academic competitor Washington University in St. Louis is only Division III. "We always make sure we throw in a few crowd shots of people wearing black and gold" during presentations. Imagine, he is saying, "calling yourself a Commodore."

Or calling yourself a Cornhusker. A few years ago, the "Big Red Welcome" for new University of Nebraska students began including a special treat: the chance to replicate the football team's famed "tunnel walk," jogging along the snaking red carpet below Memorial Stadium, then crashing through the double doors onto the field (though without the 86,000 fans).

When Kirk Kluver, assistant dean for admissions at Nebraska's College of Law, set up his information table at recruiting fairs last year, a student in Minnesota let him know he would "check out Nebraska now that you are part of the Big 10." He got the same reaction in Arizona. Mr. Kluver said applications last fall were up 20 percent, while law school applications nationally fell 10 percent.

PENN STATE'S new president, Rodney Erickson, announced last month that he wanted to lower the football program's profile. How is unclear. A Penn State spokeswoman declined to make anyone available to discuss the future besides releasing a statement from Dr. Erickson about seeking "balance."

What would balance really look like?

Duke officials pride themselves in offering both an excellent education and a stellar sports program.

Six years ago this spring, Duke experienced its own national scandal when three lacrosse players were accused of rape by a stripper hired for a party at the "lacrosse house" — a bungalow since torn down. The charges were found to be false, but the episode prompted university leaders to think hard about the relationship between academics and athletics.

Kevin M. White, the athletic director, now reports directly to the president of Duke. It was part of structural changes to more healthily integrate athletics into university life, said James E. Coleman Jr., a law professor who is chairman of the faculty athletics council and was chairman of the committee that investigated the athletes' behavior. (Vanderbilt made an even stronger move in 2008, disbanding the athletics department and folding it into the student life division.) Sitting in his office on Duke's Durham, N.C., campus, Dr. Coleman set his lunch tray on a mountain of papers and explained the challenges. He calls sports "a public square for universities" but also acknowledges how rising commercialism comes with strings that "have become spider webs."

A 2008 report by the athletics department, "Unrivaled Ambition: A Strategic Plan for Duke Athletics," praises the K-Ville bonding experience and the "identity and cohesion" of the rivalry with U.N.C. as it describes in stressful language the facilities arms race, skyrocketing coach salaries and the downside of television deals.

"We no longer determine at what time we will play our games, because they are scheduled by TV executives," it laments, going on to complain about away games at 9 p.m. "Students are required to board a flight at 2 a.m., arriving back at their dorms at 4 or 5 a.m., and then are expected to go to class, study and otherwise act as if it were a normal school day." And: "our amateur student-athletes take the field with a corporate logo displayed on their uniform beside 'Duke.' "

"The key thing is to control the things you can control and make sure the athletic program doesn't trump the rest of the university, as it has in some places," Dr. Coleman said. "These presidents have to do more than pay lip service to this notion of balance between athletics and academics." He suggests that elevating academic standards for athletes is one way to assert university — not athletic department — control over programs.

He has also tried to foster rapport between faculty members and the athletic department. "The difficulty is having faculty understand athletics," he said. "Both sides need to cross lines. Otherwise, it becomes these two silos with no connection." Last month, Dr. Coleman hosted a lunch that brought together Mr. White, athletics staff members and professors on his committee. He's also revamping a program to

match faculty members with coaches, and sends them sports-related articles to bone up on issues.

Pointed questions about oversight of its athletic program were raised at Penn State's faculty senate meeting last month, and faculty involvement is the subject of a national meeting of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Tulsa this weekend. John S. Nichols, the group's co-chairman and professor emeritus at Penn State, says professors typically ignore the many issues that swirl around sports and influence the classroom. His list includes decisions about recruiting and admissions, and even conference realignments. Starting in 2013, the Big East will stretch over seven states, meaning not just football and basketball players but all student athletes — and some fans — will be making longer trips to away games. Dr. Nichols says it is time to "put some checks in place" on uncontrolled growth of athletics "or consider a different model."

To be sure, efforts to rehabilitate major college sports are not new. Amid much debate, an N.C.A.A. plan to raise scholarship awards by $2,000 was being reviewed this month. Some have seen it as the athletes' due, for the money they bring in, and others as pay for play; some colleges have complained they can't afford it.

Many are skeptical that reining in college sports is even possible; the dollars are simply too attractive, the pressures from outside too great. Mr. White said that it was naïve "to think we will ever put the toothpaste back in the tube." He added, "There is an oversized, insatiable interest in sports, and college sports is part of that."

But some decisions are in university hands.

Despite Duke's ascent to basketball royalty, Cameron Indoor Stadium — built in 1940, renovated in the 1980s and at 9,300 seats one of the smallest venues for a big-time program — still gives thousands of the best seats to students. At many large programs, courtside seats and luxury boxes go to boosters. But "outsiders with money," Dr. Coleman said, can make demands and change the way the team fits in with a university. "We could easily double the size of our basketball stadium and sell it out," he said. "That will never happen. If it does, you will know Duke has gone over to the dark side."

Laura Pappano is co-author with Eileen McDonagh of "Playing With the Boys: Why Separate Is Not Equal in Sports."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 29, 2012

An article last Sunday about the effect of big-time sports on college life misstated part of the name of an honor society that has 17 members from Ohio State. It is the

American Academy of Arts and Sciences, not the National Academy of Arts and Sciences.