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Reality Check

The Enemy Is Us: Cost Reduction in College Sports

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

You have to love university people. Their leaders meet, wring their hands over the high cost of big-time football, and form a committee of themselves to consider how to deal with this problem; as if there were new as yet undiscovered solutions. Their trade organization for sports, the NCAA, issues ringing statements about the high cost of superstar coaches and endorses a committee composed of those who hire superstar coaches to address the issue. It is a spectacle worthy of admiration.

We who watch all this as participants or observers recognize the activity as a spectator sport itself; designed to entertain, amuse and confuse. Here is our mini-FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions on big money college sports (based on our experience and the analysis of the research university sports enterprise in [The Sports Imperative](#) (*TheCenter*, 2003).

Q: How did coaches' salaries get so high?

A: About a dozen or maybe a few more big-time basketball and football coaches have exceptionally high salaries in the range of \$1 million a year. The rest of them work for about half as much or less in Division I-A, have long hours, and enjoy relatively little job security. For all of these coaches, if they don't win, they get fired.

Q: Who is responsible for the super coach salaries in basketball and football?

A: The run-up of superstar salaries began with basketball coaches who were the first to hit the \$1 million mark. The superstar football coaches wanted to be paid as much as their basketball colleagues, so the race was on.

Q: Why don't universities pay superstar coaches less and put the money into teaching?

A: Most big-money coaches have a base salary in the \$200K to \$300K range, and the additional \$900K to \$1M comes from income earned through shoe contracts, television shows, endorsements and booster contributions, all funds generated outside the university based on the coach's fame and success. The companies and boosters who pay for these salaries have no interest in supporting teaching.

Q: Are these Division I-A football programs making lots of money?

A: Maybe five in the country make money (if you could get them to report their income and expenses honestly and fully). The other 112 or so lose money; some lose a great deal of money.

Q: What can the universities do to reduce the cost of football?

A: Reduce the number of football scholarships awarded for each team from 85 to 65.

Q: Why don't university presidents do that?

A: There are not enough high talent football players to fill 85 spots on the 119 teams struggling to compete in Division I-A. The schools with the most money to spend on coaches, stadiums, and amenities can attract 85 super players with the scholarships, leaving the poor schools unable to recruit as many superb players. Talent is what matters in sports, and with 85 scholarships, the top schools can monopolize much of the talent leaving less for their competitors.

This is good news for the top schools. If the top schools only had 65 scholarships, 20 superb players who might have gone to each of the top schools would have to go to a lesser Division I-A university. Some of these lesser Division I-A institutions, with the help of the 20 talented players, would then field competitive football teams, threatening the dominance of the institutions currently at the top. The presidents of the top schools, whose football programs please their alumni and trustees, do not vote to save money by reducing the number of scholarships from 85 to 65. A further benefit of this scholarship reduction would be an improvement in the opportunities for men's sports previously eliminated to meet gender equity requirements. If there are 20 fewer scholarships in football, men's wrestling and gymnastics could now have scholarships without any need to eliminate women's sports.

Q. Who is responsible for the high cost, high visibility nature of intercollegiate sports?

A: You are. Every time you or your family or friends watch a college game on television, buy college apparel with logos, purchase a ticket to the game, or otherwise participate in a college sports activity, you vote for the current system because the current system reflects the active and engaged enthusiasm of Americans for their college sports.

Q: Why don't trustees bring this expensive waste of money in big-time football and basketball into line?

A: Trustees generally like sports, know people who like sports, talk to alumni and students who like sports, and believe it is their duty to insist that their institutions have strong sports programs.

Q: Why don't university presidents speak out against the superstar coaching salaries?

A: They often speak out, but only after they are no longer president. Then they join commissions and speak against the behaviors they supported and endorsed as president. Private university presidential total compensation now approaches that of superstar coaches. If the president is closing in on this salary level, it becomes difficult to object to well-paid coaches. Presidents of many universities with two or three expensive coaches also endorse the payment of faculty physicians in their medical schools whose total compensation exceeds \$800,000 to \$1 million per year. Like the coaches, these physicians have to earn most of the revenue that supports their high compensation.

Q: Should we worry about this?

A: Most of the time, no. College sports are a mirror into our own expectations and wishes. College sports are *very* popular among parents, students, alumni, legislators, television watchers, to name but a few. The very best of America's colleges and universities have a tremendous investment in college sports, some of it highly visible in big-time football and basketball, some less visible in a broad range of expensive sports that generate no revenue at all. Most people support this activity at record levels of enthusiasm.

Q: When should we worry about it?

A: We should worry when a university or college loses so much money on its sports program that it cannot support its academic program, when a university competes in Division I-A and does so poorly it must subsidize football at great expense from its general funds, and when universities and colleges cannot manage their sports programs without cheating and scandal. Otherwise, enjoy the game.

John V. Lombardi, whose column, Reality Check, debuts today, is chancellor and a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

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