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College Sports and Our Winter of Discontent

By John Lombardi September 21, 2011 12:00 pm EDT

Periodically in the world of intercollegiate athletics, we cycle

through a set of controversies, changes, and challenges that cause our many constituencies and the legions of interested fans and observers to generate remarkable noise levels. The commentary ranges from absurd to rational and from passionate to disdainful, and the rhetorical flights rise to stratospheric heights. For those of us who have lived through multiple iterations of this cycle, and others who have read the history of college sports, this all produces a sense of *deja vu*.

Like most familiar places, however, each cycle illustrates different characteristics of our enterprise and reflects changes in the environment of college sports. The issues of intercollegiate athletics remain universally constant since the early 20th century, the lamentations of the critics echo familiar themes about corruption, failure to follow the rules, too much money, overemphasis on winning, too much publicity, weak university presidents, and the like. As is often the case, the complaints are frequently correct but the solutions offered not very practical or too extreme to be useful.

In our current conversation there are two big themes circulating that deserve some comment. One of course is the realignment of conferences, which I'll pass on for the moment. Another is the hardy perennial of paying celebrity student-athletes.

There's lots of talk about the payment question, but some parts of the conversation seem to me at least to be rather straightforward. So in the spirit of proposing what I cannot implement, which is the normal mode for most proposals on college sports, let me offer the following set of guidelines for the student-athlete compensation issue.

- We continue to refuse to pay for celebrity athletic performance, and the scholarship plan for all student-athletes follows the same rules, whether the scholarship applies to a celebrity superstar or a regular participant.
- We prevent student-athletes from becoming professionals while they are students, and the current general rules about payment for athletic activities while a student-athlete continue.
- We pay for the full cost of attendance as is done for other scholarship students in many universities. The full cost of attendance is a standard number generated by all universities for financial aid purposes and is the appropriate reference. This amount is sufficient to deal with issues of housing, clothes, books, incidental expenditures, and travel home. It is not enough to make a student-athlete a professional, but it does recognize that most student-athletes do not have the opportunity for jobs during the regular school year. Student-athletes continue to have access to various emergency funds available through the NCAA and conferences.

- We provide at a minimum a four year scholarship for every scholarship student-athlete. If the student-athlete ceases to be an athlete, the scholarship continues as an academic scholarship at the same rate for the time remaining up to four years as long as the student is in good academic standing following the methodology of the NCAA APR. These continuation scholarships would not count against a sport's scholarship allotment once a student-athlete ceases to be an athlete.
- We provide for health and catastrophic injury insurance for all student-athletes, whatever their status as scholarship recipients. While the NCAA requires insurance certification, the coverage for student-athletes needs to be complete throughout the period of their participation in intercollegiate athletics and the cost covered by the institution.
- We continue to prohibit student-athletes from benefitting from the commercialization of their game performances, images, or other elements of their identities while they are student-athletes.
- We develop appropriate mechanisms, taken from the experience of the movie and music industries perhaps, for sharing with former student-athletes the revenue derived from their performances, images, or other individually identifiable attributes after they cease to be student-athletes.

These measures will cost universities, conferences, and the NCAA more money. Some universities will be unable to pay for these benefits and arrangements. The consequence of not dealing appropriately with these issues, however, is likely to be much more costly to the enterprise.

Who should take up these changes? University presidents, acting through their organization of the NCAA and with the support of their major conferences (in whatever shape they end up), can implement these changes. It will cost money, it will place a hardship on those institutions struggling to stay in the Football Bowl Subdivision and compete with the rich institutions, but the truth is we are in the middle of a major shift in college athletics reminiscent of the changes that produced the current divisional structure. Not everyone can compete in the celebrity conferences, not everyone can or should afford to absorb ever larger losses to stay in the Football Bowl Subdivision. Providing appropriate support for student-athletes may be a problem for some, but it may also force a clearer focus on the relative value of investing in celebrity sports as compared to investing in quality competition in a non-celebrity environment.

Nothing proposed here reflects any official or unofficial position of any of my current or former university colleagues, academic institutions, or employers. Most of them would probably reject these proposals, but it is time to make the changes.