

# BC's big revenue sports hit bottom, stirring scrutiny

The sorry state of the school's showcase sports has depleted morale, sapped attendance, diminished BC's national athletic stature, and prompted calls for action.



WINSLOW TOWNSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

**The BC men's basketball team suffered a fifth consecutive losing season, the program's longest slump since World War II. In addition, the program has lost thousands of paying customers since moving to the Atlantic Coast Conference from the Big East.**

By **Bob Hohler** | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 12, 2016

A bronze statue at Boston College honors the moment an undersized quarterback named Doug Flutie hurled a Hail Mary touchdown pass in 1984 that helped catapult his struggling regional school to national prominence.

A decade earlier, BC verged on bankruptcy. Then Flutie's last-gasp heave in Miami's Orange Bowl helped put the university on course to join one of the nation's richest sports leagues, the Atlantic Coast Conference, and amass an endowment of \$2.2 billion.

But Flutie's monument now stands as a sad reminder of the school's lost athletic glory.

The thrill of victory is all but gone at The Heights, where BC's major revenue sports of football and basketball are captive to the greatest competitive crisis in the school's history, a failure to thrive that has raised concerns about the administration's role in the collapse.

Ten years after BC entered the ACC, the big money of college sports continues to cascade into the university's coffers.

Comments  
But the sorry state of the school's showcase sports has depleted morale, sapped attendance, diminished BC's national athletic stature, and prompted calls for action.

The university also faces a diversity problem. Every head coach of BC's 31 sports teams is white, and the university's 51-member board of trustees does not include any African-Americans.

Few alumni have expressed greater concern about BC athletics than members of the 1984 team that won the Cotton Bowl and helped Flutie capture the Heisman Trophy after the Hail Mary game weeks earlier — a nationally televised 47-45 victory over the University of Miami, the defending national champion.

“It doesn't feel like there's a real strategy in place or a real fundamental focus on creating an athletic platform at Boston College that is superlative,” said Scott Gieselmann, a key member of the '84 team who has been a major supporter of BC athletics. “That's how you end up in mediocrity, which is where we are today.”

More than a year has passed since BC won an ACC football or basketball contest, a record 27-game losing streak. Home football attendance has dropped to its lowest point in 25 years, largely because season ticket sales have plummeted by more than 60 percent since BC joined the ACC.

The basketball team is mired in a fifth straight losing season, the program's longest slump since World War II. And turnout for home games has shrunk by more than 50 percent in the ACC era.

By contrast, BC's men's and women's hockey teams, which compete in the Hockey East Association, are national powers. The women, at 39-0 this season, are two victories away from a national championship, while the men, chasing their fourth national title since 2008, are 25-6-5 after Saturday night's 4-2 playoff loss to the University of Vermont.

But BC's athletic director Brad Bates said there is no sugarcoating the school's plight.

“The reality in college sports is that you have to win in football and basketball, and in both those sports we've just had terrible seasons,” Bates said. “It's definitely not fun to go through at all, but it flat-out motivates us not to go through it again.”

### **Leadership wanted**



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

**The Rev. William P. Leahy (right) hired athletic director Brad Bates in 2012.**

Many BC fans blame campus leaders for the downturn, citing deficiencies in planning, hiring, recruiting, and facilities. They say the administration has failed to sufficiently collaborate with vital constituencies such as students, alumni, donors, and former players.

“Boston College’s president and board of trustees are just not managing everything well,” said BC graduate Dennis DiSchino, a major athletic donor and former president of the school’s Touchdown Club. “They have the talent on the board and among their donors. They need some of those people to step up and take ownership of this franchise.”

BC countered some of the criticism last month by announcing plans to build a new student recreation center, new baseball and softball fields, and an indoor fieldhouse for the football team and other sports.

But the athletic department has yet to fully raise the \$200 million projected cost and the school has just begun seeking the city of Boston’s approval for the fieldhouse. Nearly seven years have passed since the city approved the ball fields and recreation center.

BC’s president, the Rev. William P. Leahy, declined an interview request and issued a statement.

“Boston College is committed to excellence in all areas, including academics, student formation, and athletics,” Leahy stated. “The university has long valued the contributions of intercollegiate athletics to campus life, alumni engagement, and national exposure. In the last five years, staff and budget support for varsity sports, especially football and basketball, has increased significantly to the highest level in BC’s history, and will grow with the recent announcement of a \$200 million investment in new athletics facilities. Going forward, Boston College intends to continue working in partnership with alumni, friends, and fans on behalf of its athletics program and the well-being of all of its students.”

Leahy controls BC's athletics. He hires and fires athletic directors, who report directly to him, and oversees the hiring and firing of coaches. Yet unlike his predecessor, the Rev. J. Donald Monan, who was widely credited with leading the school out of its financial crisis by enthusiastically promoting both academics and athletics, Leahy is seen by many alumni as less exuberant about building elite sports programs than advancing the school's academic excellence.

His critics say small gestures sometimes can be telling. When BC held a reception last month to celebrate men's hockey coach Jerry York's 1,000th career victory, a large crowd cheered a video featuring congratulatory remarks by York's former players and associates, Mayor Martin J. Walsh, New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick, and others.

Leahy did not appear at the event. BC spokesman Jack Dunn attributed his absence to "a longstanding commitment with his Jesuit community."

2/5/2016 JY1K Ceremony: Celebrating Eagles Coach Jerry York



But several alumni and donors said Leahy should have at least participated in the video presentation. They cited his absence as emblematic of his perceived indifference at times toward sports.

Leahy's supporters credit him and former athletic director Gene DeFilippo with spearheading BC's shift from the Big East to the ACC, a move many universities envy. No matter how BC's teams fare competitively, the school receives a rich annual payout from the conference: more than \$20 million last year and more than \$140 million in total since BC joined the league.

The windfall helps BC fund one of the nation's most comprehensive athletic programs, with 31 teams competing in sports ranging from fencing to sailing. The school's \$69 million operating budget for sports last year far outpaced the likes of UMass Amherst (\$33 million) and Harvard (\$24 million). And no ACC school reported granting more than BC's \$18.6 million in athletic scholarships.

The investment has bred some success beyond the hockey arena. BC's men's and women's soccer teams reached the NCAA tournament last fall, as did the field hockey team. BC also ranked fifth in the nation last year in the overall graduation success rate of its student-athletes.



Comments  
“The unfortunate thing is, we have so many good things going on and they get camouflaged” by the failures in football and basketball, Bates said.

Critics of BC’s management of athletics contend the board of trustees has granted Leahy outsized power over the department by exerting little influence of its own. The board, for instance, did not vote on BC’s move to the ACC.

Gregory Barber, a former trustee and one of the largest donors to BC athletics, walked away in frustration after giving \$2.5 million to endow the football coach’s position and \$1 million to help build the athletic department’s Yawkey Center.

Barber, who declined to comment for this story, previously said he tried unsuccessfully as a trustee to persuade the board to create a committee to oversee athletics, such as those that exist at ACC schools such as Notre Dame and Syracuse.

John F. Fish, chairman of BC’s trustees, said the board “devotes attention to all matters pertaining to the university in a balanced and appropriate manner. The executive committee discusses athletics issues regularly and the board gets periodic updates on BC athletics. Boston College is clearly in excellent hands under the leadership of Father Leahy.”

### **Problems in the past**

Historically, BC has endured more damaging crises in football and basketball than the current dilemma. In 1978, mobsters who were later portrayed in the movie “GoodFellas” enlisted a BC basketball player, Rick Kuhn, in a point-shaving scheme that tainted the program and landed Kuhn in prison. And the 1996 football team endured a gambling scandal, with 13 players suspended for betting, including two who allegedly wagered against their own team.

Also in 1996, Leahy defended BC against charges of racial bias after the school denied admission to two prized minority basketball recruits from Boston.

Yet both programs quickly recovered under new coaches, Tom O’Brien in football and Al Skinner in basketball. By 1999, the football team had begun a streak of 12 consecutive winning seasons, a run that included BC’s first four years in the ACC, two under O’Brien and two under his successor, Jeff Jagodzinski.

Skinner achieved similar success, guiding the Eagles to the 2006 ACC championship game and fielding top 25 teams in seven seasons between 2000 and 2009.

But the reigns of both coaches ended badly. O’Brien departed in 2006 to become the head coach at North Carolina State after a long-strained relationship with DeFilippo. And DeFilippo fired Skinner in 2010 after his second losing season in three years.

Both coaches left their programs in far better shape than they inherited them. And their departures still anger many BC alumni and donors.

“The first thing I got upset about was Tom O’Brien,” DiSchino said. “It’s one thing to force him out because the athletic director



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2010

**Gene DeFilippo retired from his post as athletic director in 2012.**



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2004

**Tom O'Brien coached the BC football team from 1996 to 2006.**

wanted to be the coach. But then they had no plan to replace him when they got rid of him.”

As for Skinner, “the mistake that was made in firing him should be publicly admitted and fixed,” said Len DeLuca, a BC graduate, donor, and former radio voice of the basketball team who later became an executive at CBS and ESPN and is now a senior vice president at IMG, a global sports management company.

DeFilippo, who retired in 2012, said, “Tom and Al did really good jobs here, but coaches and athletic directors don’t stay forever. People get tired of you, you get tired of them, and it’s time to move on.”

DeFilippo also has been blamed for alienating many season ticket holders by establishing a donor-based program that requires patrons to pay more for prime seats and parking. BC’s tailgating and stadium experiences already were considered among the least entertaining in the ACC.

DeFilippo said the initiative brought BC into line with the other big-time college athletic programs. And he rejected assertions that the BC football team’s current woes stem from O’Brien’s departure.

Despite three coaching changes since then, BC has qualified for five bowl games in nine years. Yet the school has not won a postseason game since 2007 and has struggled to recover from DeFilippo and Leahy hiring Frank Spaziani as the head coach in 2008.

Spaziani, who lacked head coaching experience, turned a 9-5 program into a 2-10 embarrassment by 2012. Only then did Bates dump Spaziani for Steve Addazio, a move that paid immediate dividends as the Eagles went 7-6 in each of Addazio’s first two seasons, before he went winless last year in the ACC.

The trouble throughout has been weak recruiting. BC’s football recruiting classes have ranked last in the ACC in five of the last six years.

“It’s kind of unnerving to see the recruiting classes ranked so low,” said Bill Stephanos, a BC football alumni who was drafted by the Minnesota Vikings in 1981. “There’s a correlation between recruiting and performance, and when you’re getting out-recruited by every school in your conference, it’s not going to end well over time.”

The consequences have been stark. Addazio’s team, lacking enough depth to overcome injuries and woefully short of experienced talent, last season ranked 125th among 127 teams in the elite Football Bowl Subdivision in total offense.

BC finished its season of misery at 3-9 overall, its victories due largely to subpar competition and a top-notch defense guided by coordinator Don Brown, who has since departed for a much higher salary at the University of Michigan.

Amid the transition, several former BC players questioned whether Bates and Addazio are up to fixing the football program.

“Brad seems like a good guy who has a lot on his plate and is trying to figure things out,” Gieselman said. “And I like [Addazio]. He seems like a very energetic guy. But they strike me as guys who are learning what they know and what they don’t know after they got there, as opposed to before they got there.”

As BC’s highest-compensated employee, Addazio earns more than \$2.5 million a year on a contract that runs through 2019. Bates is BC’s highest-paid administrator, at nearly \$700,000. He is in the fourth year of a five-year deal.

In one of BC’s most embarrassing episodes last season, the Eagles defeated a stunningly inferior team from Howard University, 76-0, the game shortened by 10 minutes because of the mismatch.

BC used Howard to fill a hole in its schedule after Bates failed to keep an elite-division team, New Mexico State, from renegeing on an agreement to play the Eagles in Chestnut Hill.

“We got caught in a unique situation,” Bates said. “It was really unfortunate.”



BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2015

**Football coach Steve Addazio received an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty for berating the officials during the Eagles’ game against Notre Dame in November.**

So, too, was some of Addazio’s profane sideline behavior during the season. The most damaging episode occurred in a nationally televised loss to Notre Dame at Fenway Park, first when a camera focused on Addazio shouting the F-word, then when he received an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty for berating the officials.

“That’s not something I’m happy about,” Addazio said of his sideline outbursts. “I’m working on that.”

He also is working on improving his program.

“We lost five games last year by three points or less. Are we happy with that? No,” Addazio said. “But we feel strong about where we are.”

### **Troubles on the court**



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE 2013

**Steve Donahue (left) was fired six days after the 2013-14 season ended.**

BC's basketball team faces a more difficult challenge. The program began declining soon after DeFilippo and Leahy hired former Cornell coach Steve Donahue in 2010 to replace Skinner. Donahue delivered only one winning season, in 2010-11, with a team led by Reggie Jackson, one of Skinner's recruits.

Jackson became Skinner's fifth recruit to play in the NBA. No BC player has since reached the NBA, and no BC basketball team has posted a winning record since Jackson left in 2011.

The administration, too, has seemed lost at times. During the 2013-14 season, Donahue was four years into a six-year contract when Bates agreed to grant him a one-year extension through 2017. Then, in a reversal that struck some BC supporters as a sign of erratic leadership, Bates fired Donahue six days after the season.

"After we extended him, the bottom just fell out," Bates said, referring to BC losing 17 of its final 21 games and finishing 8-24.

Donahue, now the head coach at Penn, declined to comment. But DeFilippo suggested his firing was premature.

"I believe that if Steve Donahue were given another year, the team would not be where it is today," DeFilippo said.

Donahue's successor, former Ohio University coach Jim Christian, has yet to make a difference. After finishing 4-14



in his first ACC season, Christian this winter went winless in 19 conference games, his team's performances at times dreadful.

At its worst, Christian's team last month became a target of ridicule as it fell behind similarly woeful Wake Forest, 37-4, in a nationally televised display of ineptitude.

When the misery ended with BC's 19th straight ACC loss in the final game of the season, the team's senior center, Dennis Clifford, was asked for his best memory of playing for the Eagles. He hung his head and wept before he replied weakly, "Going out to eat."

Boston College Basketball Emotional After Final Game Of Season



Christian, like Addazio, inherited an inexperienced team partly because of the recruiting shortcomings of previous coaches under the supervision of Bates and Leahy. And the basketball team's prospects appear so grim that no one anticipates a rapid turnaround, even Christian, who is two years into a five-year contract.

"I knew when I came here it was going to be a totally major rebuild," Christian said. "It's painful to go through, but I'm confident."

Marc Molinsky, who played for BC in the early 1990s and serves as co-director of the school's Hoop Club, counseled patience.

"Coach Christian is building the program the right way and is making the best of a very difficult situation," Molinsky said. "We need to give him time to nurture this freshman class along with three new recruits for next year."

By nearly all accounts, Christian and Addazio face the toughest recruiting challenges in the ACC. For all of BC's appealing qualities, its recruiters compete against basketball legends such as Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski and national football powers such as Clemson. The obstacles include BC's mediocre records, meager attendance, inferior facilities, high admission standards, and the school's distinction as the only one of 80 schools in the five most powerful athletic conferences to vote against granting financial stipends to student-athletes for expenses not covered by scholarships.



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2016

**Jim Christian is 20-44 in two seasons as men's basketball coach at Boston College.**

What's more, perceptions of BC's racial climate could hurt. Bates acknowledged that having an all-white roster of head coaches is not acceptable and said he planned to do something about it.

But several alumni were skeptical. M. Quentin Williams, a BC football player in the Flutie era who later became an FBI agent and an administrator in the NFL and NBA, said he was part of a group in 2006 that accepted an invitation from DeFilippo and Leahy's office to help develop a strategy to enhance the athletic department's diversity.

"Then it came time to do something, and they decided they weren't going to do anything," Williams said. "It was a real kick in the teeth."

A university spokesman said the athletic department's 15-member senior staff now includes one African-American and a Hispanic-American. In total, the spokesman said, 34 of the department's 191 employees identify themselves as African-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, or Native American.

In addition, he said, BC's board of trustees plans to add two African-American members in June.

The stakes could be high because it's not uncommon in college recruiting for rivals to try to steer minority prospects away from competing schools by citing diversity issues.

"When your school doesn't have any people of color in its head coaching ranks and is only speckled with color in its front offices, that's not going to get it done," Williams said.

Addazio and Christian denied that diversity concerns have hurt their recruiting. And they both praised Leahy's

leadership

Comments

“I’ve probably met with Father more than any president I’ve ever worked for,” said Christian, who also served as the head coach at Texas Christian and Kent State. “He wants to win.”

If so, frustrated BC supporters said, he may need help.

“What BC is going through is no different from the Red Sox and Patriots went through for generations,” DiSchino said. “As soon as they brought in the right management teams, they started winning championships.”

# Changing leaders, declining performances

Comments

Since becoming Boston College president in 1996, the Rev. William P. Leahy has approved the hiring and firing of seven football and basketball coaches and supervised three athletic directors: Chet Gladchuk (1996-97), Gene DeFilippo (1997-2012), and Brad Bates (2012-present).

## Basketball

### Winning record under Al Skinner

1997-98	48.4%
1998-99	22.2%
1999-00	36.7%
2000-01	84.4%
2001-02	62.5%
2002-03	61.3%
2003-04	70.6%
2004-05	83.3%
2005-06	77.8%
2006-07	63.6%
2007-08	45.2%
2008-09	64.7%
2009-10	48.4%

### Winning record under Steve Donahue

2010-11	61.8%
2011-12	29%
2012-13	48.5%
2013-14	25%

### Winning record under Jim Christian

2014-15	40.6%
2015-16	21.9%

## Football

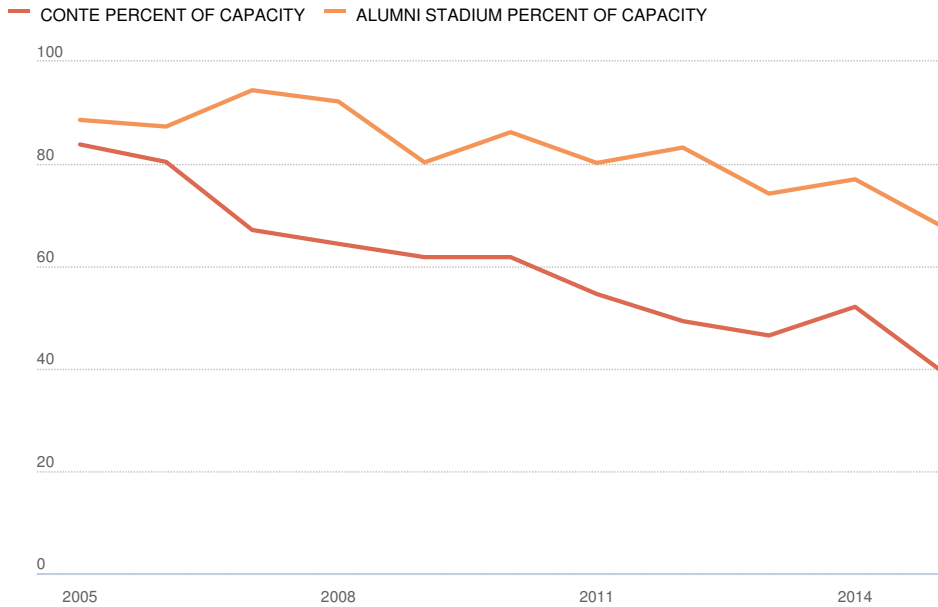
### Winning record under Tom O'Brien

1997	36.4%
1998	36.4%
1999	66.7%
2000	58.3%
2001	66.7%
2002	69.2%
2003	61.5%
2004	75%
2005	75%

## New lows at the Heights

Comments

Boston College joined the lucrative Atlantic Coast Conference in 2005. While it gained more than \$140 million from its membership, the school has lost thousands of paying customers for its football and basketball games as an ACC member: Annual average home attendance has dropped 27.9 percent during that period.



SOURCES: Boston College, NCAA

JAMES ABUNDIS, BOB HOHLER, PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF

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