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Broad-Based Athletics Departments Face Uncertain Future

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Chapel Hill, N.C.

Cutting a team, says Jeff Bourne, athletic director at James Madison University, tops the list of decisions most college sports officials hope they never have to make.

"Other than the death or loss of a student, this is the most painful thing you can go through," said Mr. Bourne, who presided over the elimination of 10 sports at James Madison in 2006. "You're isolating a significant portion of people, not just for today but going down the road for a long time."

But in tough economic times, preference often surrenders to necessity. And for many broad-based athletics programs that field more than 20 sports—James Madison, for one, had 28 teams before the cuts—the prospect of scaling back, however unsettling, has become ever more real.

Mr. Bourne's comments came during a panel discussion here on Wednesday on the ethics of cutbacks in broad-based athletics departments, held as part of the College Sport Research Institute's annual conference. The meeting, which attracted athletics administrators and professors, among others, highlighted that there are no sure safety nets for broad-based programs—and no easy fixes for the problems that threaten them.

Dozens of institutions have cut athletics teams since the worst of the recession. Athletics subsidies have dried up at many universities, and at the bigger programs, ticket sales and fundraising are down. The sports hardest hit have been those that don't make money. Of those, the men's nonrevenue teams—tennis, swimming, wrestling, golf—have suffered most.

Just last week, the University of California at Davis announced it would cut four of its 27 sports—women's rowing, wrestling, men's swimming and diving, and men's track and field. Next month, meanwhile, the men's and women's lacrosse teams at Moravian College, a Division III institution in Pennsylvania, will play their

final games, because of budget cuts.

It's not just the modest programs that are suffering: Last year, mighty Stanford, with 35 sports, a \$75-million budget, and a lengthy list of championships to its name, said it would consider scaling back unless financial conditions improved.

So what is the future of broad-based athletics departments? When university support slows to a trickle or disappears altogether, and when a costly sport like football drives spending priorities at many colleges, can expansive programs survive?

Some attendees here said rapid spending increases in big-budget sports were to blame for dropped teams.

Amy P. Perko, executive director of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, said college sports is like an airplane, with the marquee programs stretching out in first class while "everyone else" scrambles for a seat in coach—if they're lucky.

Using a sport that has seen quite a few dropped programs to further her analogy, Ms. Perko said wrestlers, for instance, should not ask female athletes, "Why are you getting on the plane and I'm not?" Instead, she suggests, they should ask, "Why is first class expanding so much?"

"There should be room for everybody," Ms. Perko said.

Blaming Football

David Ridpath, an assistant professor of sport administration at Ohio University, asked the panelists—who also included Michael Moyer, the executive director of the National Wrestling Coaches Association, and David Akinniyi, a football player who just transferred to N.C. State from Northeastern University, which recently cut its team—to comment on football's effect on broad-based programs. The money that colleges are spending on football, he said, is not an investment—as many often like to say—but more closely resembles "a bad mortgage loan" that quickly drains a program's resources.

"Do we really need to have 100 kids on a football team?" asked Mr. Ridpath. "That's expensive. That takes away opportunities from others."

Two of the biggest athletics conferences in the country offer contrasting models for how to juggle football and a wide array of sports—or not.

Members of the Southeastern Conference, home to some of the most storied football programs, tend to offer fewer teams than, for

instance, the Big Ten Conference. Both leagues are wealthy. Both are highly competitive. But if a Big Ten program spreads its money across 25 sports, say, while an SEC program doles it out to 19, then the Big Ten is at a disadvantage because the SEC program spends more per team, said John J. Cheslock, an associate professor of higher education at Pennsylvania State University at University Park.

Not all broad-based athletics programs are suffering, though, and some may even flourish during the recession.

In Division II, where fewer athletes are on scholarship, and in Division III, which doesn't offer athletics scholarships, it's a different story, Mr. Cheslock said. At those institutions, particularly the ones that rely heavily on tuition, a wide-ranging athletics program can be an effective way of bringing in students who can pay full freight.

As for the high-profile cuts in Division I, Mr. Cheslock said, "it's extremely easy to build a clear case for why we should restrain expenditures on particular teams." But, he added, "the solution part of it is much more complicated."

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