

The New York Times

August 24, 2013

College Football's Most Dominant Player? It's ESPN

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The nation's annual rite of mayhem and pageantry known as the college football season begins this week, and Saturday will feature back-to-back-to-back marquee matchups.

At the Georgia Dome in Atlanta, last year's national champions, the Alabama Crimson Tide, will battle the Virginia Tech Hokies in the Chick-fil-A Kickoff Classic.

Earlier in the day in Houston, Oklahoma State will play Mississippi State in the Texas Kickoff Classic. And that night in Arlington, Tex., Louisiana State and Texas Christian will face off in the Cowboys Classic.

The games will not just be televised by [ESPN](#). They are creations of ESPN — demonstrations of the sports network's power over college football.

The teams were not even on each other's schedules until ESPN, looking to orchestrate early-season excitement and ratings, went to work. The 2013 Chick-fil-A Kickoff Classic came together more than two years ago when one of the network's programming czars noticed that Alabama was not scheduled to play this [Labor Day](#) weekend, brought the Tide on board and found a worthy opponent.

Far beyond televising games, ESPN has become the chief impresario of college football. By infusing the sport with billions of dollars it pays for television rights — more than \$10 billion on college football in the last five years alone — ESPN has become both puppet-master and kingmaker, arranging games, setting schedules and bestowing the gift of nationwide exposure on its chosen universities, players and coaches.

The money and programming focused on college football by ESPN, as well as its competitors, have transformed the game, creating professionalized sports empires in the midst of academic institutions.

At a time of rising tuition and fiscal struggles, the millions of dollars that flow to the top athletic departments are, with few exceptions, used to enhance athletics, not academics. Celebrity coaches earn many times more than college presidents, and even teams at financially strained public universities train in lavish facilities financed by donors and corporate sponsors.

In the chase for money and exposure, college football, once a quaint drama of regional rivalries played out on autumn Saturday afternoons, has become a national sport played throughout the week, intruding on class schedules and even on exams.

"The growth of the exposure to college football is directly related to ESPN's increased involvement in it," said Bernie Machen, the president of the University of Florida, which won two national championships in recent years.

ESPN is not the only network that exerts control over the scheduling, programming and financing of college football. But it is the undisputed leader, given its size, reach and single focus on sports. This season, ESPN channels will televise about 450 college games. ESPN's closest competitor, Fox, will show 50 on various networks.

ESPN and the universities often call each other business partners, and that partnership has been enormously rewarding for both sides. For the colleges, beyond money for athletic departments, the partnership provides exposure that college officials say increases recruiting prowess, alumni donations and even the quality of applicants. For ESPN, college football feeds a voracious need for the kind of programming that makes the network indispensable to sports fans.

"With college sports, you have enormous volume, great quality, and there is unbelievable passion with the fans," John Skipper, ESPN's president, said.

Sometimes, ESPN's business relationships can run up against its role reporting on those same partners in the sports world. Last week, after ESPN abruptly bowed out of a collaboration with the PBS program "Frontline" examining concussions in the National Football League, The New York Times reported that the decision was made after top ESPN executives came under pressure from the league.

The extent of ESPN's influence over college football is literally displayed on the face of your ticket to next week's game. Tickets to most games are printed with the date and the opponent's name, but something is missing: the kickoff time. That is because ESPN, under its contracts with conferences, has the right to set kickoff times and wait until 12 days before game day, or in some cases only six, to inform universities.

Every Monday morning during the season, ESPN's football brain trust meets in a war room in Building 12 on the network's sprawling campus in Bristol, Conn., to consider options for coming games and make sure the hottest teams get the choicest time slots on each of its channels. After decisions are made, calls go out across the country, setting off a scramble on dozens of campuses as universities arrange everything from parking to security to team transportation.

ESPN's contracts have increasingly allowed it to go, as its executives like to say, "beyond the white lines," putting microphones on coaches and getting access to team practices and locker rooms.

The network's wall-to-wall coverage before, during and after games can significantly lift the profiles of colleges and nurture heroes and celebrities. In interviews, people involved in recruiting coaches said the telegenic qualities of candidates factored into hiring decisions. Similarly, Eric Hyman, the athletic director at Texas A&M, said his university's move from the Big 12 to the Southeastern Conference, which has a closer relationship with ESPN, paid big benefits, particularly for one player: quarterback Johnny Manziel, a k a Johnny Football, the first freshman to win the Heisman Trophy.

"If we were in the Big 12, I don't know that Johnny Manziel would have won the Heisman," Mr. Hyman said.

ESPN, of course, is about much more than college football. It is everything sports, all the time — from the National Football League to the national spelling bee. But from ESPN's early days, its executives looked at college football, with its iconic place in American culture, and saw opportunity.

Before the mid-1980s, televised college football amounted to little more than one national game a week, along with a few regional telecasts, all controlled by the N.C.A.A. Then a Supreme Court antitrust ruling freed universities and conferences to negotiate their own TV deals.

At the time, ESPN was a fledgling cable network without the money to compete with the broadcast giants for important games. But it had seemingly endless hours to fill with sports programming. ESPN executives persuaded lower-profile universities to deviate from traditional Saturday schedules, and Thursday night college football was born. Then Friday night. Then even Tuesday.

But what made ESPN such a force in college football was its growing role in the professional game.

Like most cable networks, ESPN draws revenue from two sources: advertising and subscriber fees. When it struck a deal with the N.F.L. in the late 1990s to carry a full season of games, that revenue stream became an ever-quickenning cascade of cash. N.F.L. games, probably the most valuable commodity in televised sports, became the leverage that allowed ESPN to demand more money from cable companies, with fees nearly quadrupling in one seven-year period.

Today, nearly 100 million households pay about \$5.54 a month for ESPN, regardless of whether the subscribers watch it or not, whether they realize it or not. This year, ESPN will take in more than \$6 billion in subscriber fees.

The network's revenue is such a boon to its parent company, Disney, that the former Disney chief executive Michael Eisner said in an interview: "To this day, the Walt Disney Company would not exist without ESPN. The protection of Mickey Mouse is ESPN."

Flush with those cable fees, ESPN has gone on one of the biggest shopping sprees in TV history,

securing the rights to prime college football for the next decade and more. It spent \$2.2 billion for SEC rights through the 2023-24 season and in May announced a 20-year agreement with the SEC that will include building the conference's own television network. In a 12-year, \$7.3 billion deal, ESPN gained the rights to the college football playoff, which begins after the 2014 regular season.

The power of television contracts has driven the recent fever of conference switching, as colleges forsake geographic loyalties in pursuit of more lucrative deals. In the last year, three universities jumped to the Atlantic Coast Conference for all sports: Pittsburgh, Syracuse and Louisville, none of them located within 200 miles of the Atlantic coast. Each stands to receive more than \$16 million a year from the A.C.C.'s \$3.6 billion contract with ESPN.

In the world of big-time college sports, universities like these are the winners. But there are colleges on the losing end, too — those stuck in conferences whose value is diminished by realignment, those that simply lack the resources to build teams good enough to break into the exposure game.

David Schmidly has watched what he calls the “massive increase in commercialization” of college sports as the president of several universities, most recently New Mexico, a public college with a respected men's basketball program but a mere trickle of television dollars. As he sees it, the escalating television deals, especially at a time when states are slashing subsidies to public universities, have only widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots — between a “group of super-wealthy institutions and those that are trying to gnaw at the wood of the doors to get in.”

Shaping the Schedule

One of the most powerful people in the business of college football is a boyish, unassuming graduate of the University of Southern California named Ilan Ben-Hanan. His title is vice president for programming and acquisitions for college football at ESPN. What he really is, though, is the network's master scheduler.

Wherever he is, at whatever time of year, Mr. Ben-Hanan, 35, will be carrying a 15-page spreadsheet on legal-size paper, a continually evolving master list of matchups and game sites for every week of the season. Much of the schedule, of course, is determined by the colleges and conferences themselves. What's more, ESPN's contracts with conferences contain a variety of scheduling stipulations. Even so, the billions of dollars that ESPN pays for TV rights allow it, in some cases, to decide what time games are played and to have a say in who plays whom and when.

Mr. Ben-Hanan's mission, which embodies one of the central alchemies of ESPN, is to take all that information, what is set in stone and what is not, and create on-screen events as the season approaches and then unspools, week after week.

In Mr. Ben-Hanan's world, every day of the football schedule is another opportunity to create

maximum “buzz and heat.”

In December, he went looking for a game to showcase nationally in prime time on Nov. 7, 2013, a Thursday nearly a year in the future. He trained his sights on the Pacific-12, one of the nation's major conferences, and saw that conference rules required one of the hot teams of the moment, Stanford, to host a Thursday or Friday night game in 2013. From a list of Stanford's potential conference opponents, Mr. Ben-Hanan chose Oregon, which was headed to its fourth consecutive appearance in a Bowl Championship Series game.

The result is what Mr. Ben-Hanan, with only a slightly proprietary claim to prognostication, calls the “Pac-12 game of the year.” The game will also come two days before L.S.U. plays Alabama, turning the weekend into a prospective hot zone on the football calendar. “It will be an opportunity for a game like that to shine,” he said.

Using much the same logic, ESPN dived into Deep South tradition to persuade Mississippi and Mississippi State to reschedule this year's edition of their annual meeting, known as the Battle for the Golden Egg.

From 1998 to 2003, the game was televised by ESPN on [Thanksgiving](#), but since 2004, it has been played on the Friday or Saturday after Thanksgiving.

Last fall, ESPN's schedulers realized they needed a high-impact game for Thanksgiving night. They also knew they could persuade Mississippi, Mississippi State and the SEC with an enticing pitch: if the game returned to Thursday, it would not be lost in the glut of big rivalries on Thanksgiving Saturday.

“You'll have a window to yourselves and focus much more of a spotlight on it,” Mr. Ben-Hanan told them.

ESPN's manipulations come into finer focus as the season progresses and teams rise or fall in the rankings.

The network's right to wait until as few as six days in advance before announcing which games it will show, and at what times, encompasses all but the first three weeks of the season, when game times are set far in advance. At the Monday morning meetings in Building 12, executives also apportion the games among the network's channels: ABC, ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNU and even the online platform ESPN3.

A look back at the waning days of last season shows how ESPN uses its last-minute control.

Going into the weekend of Nov. 17, with berths in the national championship game potentially at stake, the nation's No. 1 and No. 2 teams were Kansas State and Oregon. The network put the Kansas State-Baylor game on ESPN and Oregon-Stanford on ABC, both in prime time.

“When both of the top two teams in the country got upset, that was a massive day on the sports calendar that couldn’t have happened if we’d had to make those decisions three or four months beforehand,” Mr. Ben-Hanan said.

Quick scheduling turnarounds can be logistically challenging for university officials. Still, many athletic directors echoed Jay Jacobs of Auburn, who said, “It works very well for us now that we’re used to it.”

Underscoring ESPN’s special relationship with college football is the fact that it created and owns the software used for scheduling games. The online portal, known as the Pigskin Access Scheduling System, or PASS, is now used by virtually all conferences and colleges, as well as competing networks. Generally, the colleges work together to set up nonconference matchups, but sometimes they reach out to ESPN for a suggestion, or even to play matchmaker.

In January, Bob Arkeilpane, the deputy athletic director at Cincinnati, sent an e-mail to an ESPN executive, Dave Brown. Mr. Arkeilpane explained in the message, which was obtained by The Times, that Cincinnati would be opening a new premium seating area and press box in 2015 and needed a top-tier opponent.

Mr. Brown, who is well known for his thick Rolodex, wrote back that morning, “Will do — let me look and see what’s out there for ’15.”

ESPN’s Promotion Machine

In the business of college sports, success on the field is crucial. But almost as important is the perception of success. Central to the process of molding perceptions is ESPN’s multipocketed toolbelt of off-the-field programming, gimmicks and teasers, which provide exposure and help the network promote players, coaches and universities, many of them its television partners.

ESPN’s promotion machine was in full force last Sept. 1, when two of the most hallowed names in college football, Alabama and Michigan, kicked off the season in a prime-time Saturday game, brokered by ESPN, at Cowboys Stadium in Texas. According to the contract, which was reviewed by The Times, each university earned \$4.7 million.

Pregame hoopla had started two weeks earlier, when ESPN announced that “College GameDay,” its premier college football talk and campus-craziness extravaganza, would broadcast from outside the stadium.

The show began on ESPNU at 9 a.m. and was picked up on ESPN from 10 until noon, with its typical mix of news, analysis of the Alabama-Michigan game and others being played that day, and a tour of tailgate parties in the parking lot. One of the show’s stars, the former coach Lee Corso, performed his weekly antic of predicting the winner of the featured game, in this case Alabama, by

donning the head of the team mascot.

It was a perfect Saturday for ESPN, designed to nurture one of the choice constituencies of the transformed college football world: the breakfast-to-bedtime fan. The idea, Mr. Ben-Hanan said, is to “be able to have fans sit down in the morning, watch ‘College GameDay’ and really not be satisfied until the last game, usually from the Pac-12, at the end of the night and into ‘SportsCenter.’ ”

As much as any piece of ESPN programming, “GameDay” crystallizes the dynamic of exposure, and the colleges’ hunger for it. “GameDay,” according to another of its stars, Kirk Herbstreit, a former Ohio State quarterback, is essentially a “48-hour infomercial” for the home team.

The show’s arrival on campus typically comes after much lobbying and planning.

In the fall of 2011, ESPN sent Texas A&M’s athletic director at the time, Bill Byrne, a detailed memorandum outlining “on-site requirements” for the show “in advance of a potential visit to College Station.” Those included signs for Home Depot, AT&T and other sponsors, as well as a promotional presence for ESPN consumer products.

As Texas A&M awaited a decision, it found itself in furious competition for a small piece of the show’s reflected glory. ESPN announced a contest to determine which university would get to host the filming of a “GameDay” commercial. The balloting, on Facebook and other social media sites, was shut down almost immediately because of the sheer volume of votes and suspicions that hackers were skewing the results. When ESPN reopened the voting, with better security, Texas A&M, with a quarter-million votes, edged Nebraska.

More than 20,000 fans showed up when the commercial was shot the next summer in College Station.

On Sept. 2, 2012, Texas A&M — still unranked but newly arrived in one of ESPN’s prime conferences, the SEC — learned that it would also finally get a visit from “GameDay,” the show, the following Saturday. Texas A&M lost to Florida, but the athletic department later boasted that the “GameDay” exposure was worth an estimated \$6.5 million.

The game also marked the beginning of the making of Johnny Manziel as on-field phenom and media superstar.

Throughout the season, ESPN kept close tabs on Mr. Manziel, not only on game days but also during its daily “SportsCenter” and “College Football Live” programs and, eventually, in its “Heisman Watch” poll. Leading up to the Heisman ceremony, ESPN played and replayed a signature Manziel moment, when he bobbled the ball before throwing a touchdown pass late in an upset victory over Alabama.

As a freshman, Mr. Manziel was barred by Texas A&M from giving interviews. But ESPN and the university found a way to leverage his silence, and the anticipation it had created. The Aggies did not have a game during the final week of the regular season, meaning he would be off the radar at a pivotal moment in the Heisman race. But the university granted ESPN's Scott Van Pelt an interview that became a lead story on "GameDay" that Saturday.

"We knew that ESPN would provide a great venue for us to continue the conversation about Johnny Manziel that weekend," said Jason Cook, a Texas A&M athletics executive.

The conversation continues. In April, the annual "GameDay" spring bus tour stopped in College Station, anointing Texas A&M as a team to watch in 2013. When the bus pulled out, ESPN stayed for another day to televise Mr. Manziel's return to the field for the Aggies' spring scrimmage. And in July, at the SEC Media Days event, he faced a gantlet of interviews to explain, among other topics, his tumultuous off-season — including a guilty plea to a misdemeanor charge stemming from a fight the year before. Recently, ESPN reported that the NCAA was investigating whether Mr. Manziel accepted payments for signing autographs.

The Ambiguities of Exposure

Mr. Hyman, the Texas A&M athletic director, has a long and intimate acquaintance with the benefits, and the underbelly, of ESPN's branding of college football programs.

In the late 1990s, he became the athletic director at Texas Christian, where the football team was so bad that students would chant, "Two, four, six, eight, score before we graduate." He made a priority of building a relationship with ESPN.

"We started to have to play on Monday, on Labor Day," Mr. Hyman said. "We played on Thursdays, Wednesday, nontraditional days. It was difficult for our fans."

T.C.U. even played on Fridays, sacred days for Texas high school football. The Horned Frogs have since played in the Rose Bowl and moved to the Big 12, one of the power conferences.

Mr. Hyman became the athletic director at South Carolina in 2005, when the football team was mired near the bottom of the SEC. "We struggled for visibility," he recalled.

However, South Carolina had a new coach, Steve Spurrier, who was highly telegenic and had been extremely successful at Florida. He instantly won the attention of ESPN.

At Florida, Mr. Spurrier had almost always played on Saturdays. Now he had no such luxury. South Carolina became a Thursday night fixture on ESPN, went on to a succession of bowl games and in 2011 finished in the top 10 in the national rankings.

Nowadays, many of the teams playing in bowl games are nowhere near the top 10. A small group of

bowls, including the Rose, the Sugar and the Cotton, was once the preserve of the season's very best teams. But last year, more than half the teams in the N.C.A.A.'s top division were invited to one of 35 postseason games.

That huge expansion, with ESPN in a leading role, underscores some of the perils of the exposure game.

In 1991, the network turned the bowl season into Bowl Week, surrounding the games with its full complement of programming. But as ESPN gobbled up rights to the growing roster of games — this season it will televise all but two — and created or bought others, Bowl Week morphed into Bowl Month.

ESPN's nine fully owned, commercially linked bowl games, with names like the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl and the Beef 'O' Brady's Bowl, generally draw some of the lowest TV ratings of the college football postseason. Still, they provide hours of low-cost live programming and help ESPN reward its partner conferences and teams.

For the universities, though, the benefits can be evanescent. A bowl invitation, even to a minor game, can make a lackluster season shine and boost recruiting efforts. But ESPN-owned bowls have among the lowest payouts to participants, so colleges can lose money, after travel expenses and contractual bowl bonuses for coaches.

In 2011, before Mr. Manziel's arrival, Texas A&M's record was 6-6, mediocre but good enough to merit an invitation to the ESPN-owned Meineke Car Care Bowl of Texas. Texas A&M's profit was \$230,000 — before the university rewarded its coaches under a line item noted as “extra pay for extra work.”

“Quite frankly, not a lot of people make money” from bowl games, Mr. Hyman said, adding, “You’ve just got to minimize your losses as much as you can.”

Similarly, while some teams have ridden the wave of television money and exposure so skillfully that their athletic departments have been able to contribute revenue to their universities' general funds, many more struggle to make the programs pay for themselves.

One of the winners is South Carolina, where the athletic department is sending about \$4 million this year to the university at large. About half of that money comes from the university's share of the SEC's new contract with ESPN. But of 340 Division I colleges, the athletic departments at only 23 generate enough revenue to cover their expenses, according to a report that Daniel Fulks of Transylvania University prepared for the N.C.A.A. in May.

Either way, on many campuses today, it is impossible to ignore the anxiety about the trade-offs inherent in big-time sports. These concerns turned up repeatedly in a Times review of minutes

from faculty senate meetings in recent years.

In March, the East Carolina chancellor, Steve Ballard, spoke in support of a faculty senate resolution urging Conference USA universities to review their travel policies to minimize disruption to classes and tests. According to a paraphrase in the minutes, Mr. Ballard “stated that it is absolutely against the interests of public education to let commercial entities like ESPN dictate the football schedules and therefore dictate the travel schedules and the class time available to our student athletes.”

Several years ago, Alan DeSantis, a communications professor who was then the faculty athletic representative at Kentucky, where basketball is king, decried the profusion of Tuesday and Wednesday night games.

“When did that ever become acceptable?” Mr. DeSantis asked. “It’s because there’s television revenue, and ESPN wants a night game.”

“And so for our amusement, for America’s amusement,” he added, “my students and your students are being yanked out of class to make us happy. And then they’re getting on the plane and we’re getting back at 3 in the morning exhausted and drained, and then we’re wondering why our kids aren’t performing better.”

In a recent interview, Mr. DeSantis said he had tried to persuade SEC presidents to agree on a rule barring athletes from missing more than 20 percent of classes because of games. He failed.

“It is like this insane arms race where no one wants to take their foot off the accelerator because everyone around them is upping the ante,” he said.

Winners, Losers and the WAC

On Sept. 18, 2010, ESPN announced its “GameDay” site for the following Saturday: Boise State.

That a university in a place so distant, geographically and psychically, from the national consciousness would become a national television draw would have been unimaginable in the world before ESPN. The story of Boise State’s rise, and how it played out across one college football conference, is a vivid demonstration of ESPN’s role in the making of winners and losers in this era of realignment.

In the mid-1980s, desperate for visibility, Boise State went so far as to install blue turf at Bronco Stadium. Although the team was often a winner, it was not a member of the N.C.A.A.’s Division I-A until 1996.

Things began to change five years later, when Boise State joined the Western Athletic Conference. The Broncos’ wide-open passing offense immediately caught the eyes of ESPN executives. The

team's willingness to play on weeknights won their hearts.

Boise State's coach at the time, Dan Hawkins, told The Idaho Statesman that while he preferred to play at midday Saturday, "the kind of exposure that you're able to get by being on TV, that's tremendous in recruiting."

The athletic director, Gene Bleymaier, said he was hoping for one nationally televised game a year. But ESPN provided much more than that, and Boise State began to sprint up the rankings, becoming a regular in the top 25 and reaching two B.C.S. games, including the 2007 Fiesta Bowl, where the Broncos upset Oklahoma, 43-42, in overtime.

"To the extent that Bronco Nation is defined by people outside our area and our blue field, it's ESPN's coverage over recent years that allowed this to happen," Boise State's president, Bob Kustra, said.

ESPN, in turn, was able to spruce up its midweek schedule with an attractive product that got even better as recruits flocked to Boise State after seeing the Broncos play in prime time.

What was good for Boise State and ESPN was also good for the WAC, a middle-of-the-road conference whose prominence was dependent on one or two teams breaking out.

ESPN's rights payment to the WAC reached \$3.4 million in 2010, federal tax statements show, and Boise State's bowl appearances brought more money to the conference. In less than a decade, ESPN had helped establish Boise State as a national brand. It had also made the university, in effect, too successful for the WAC. So in 2010, Boise State looked for more advantageous financial arrangements. It found them in the Mountain West.

The extent of ESPN's involvement in the reordering of conferences has been the subject of much debate. N.C.A.A. rules forbid television networks from dictating what they want conferences or colleges to do, but they are free to offer an opinion if asked.

Mr. Skipper, ESPN's president, acknowledged that conference officials frequently consulted him.

"I had, on occasion, two conference commissioners ask me about adding the same school," Mr. Skipper said, "and I said to both of them: 'Yes, you should add that school. If you can add that very prominent school, it would be good for your conference. But I'm not telling you to do it.' I don't provide leading advice, and I don't say, 'Wink, wink, I'll pay you more money if you do that.'"

ESPN executives have argued that realignment has been bad for the network's balance sheet because of a contractual incentive known as the composition clause, which allows conferences to reopen a rights deal, and get more money, if valuable colleges come on board. (ESPN can also reopen a contract if universities leave.)

“If we could go back to the day conferences were aligned in 2009, we would do so in a minute,” said Burke Magnus, ESPN’s chief of college sports programming. “Almost every move has cost us money.”

Still, there is no question that the riches paid by ESPN and its competitors have been the oxygen of realignment. And many educators worry that the shakeout is having a corrosive effect on college athletics at large.

To Mr. Schmidly, the former president at New Mexico, “what’s emerging is a select set of 50 to 60 schools” and everyone else.

The winners, Mr. Schmidly said, “will all have stadiums that seat more than 50,000. They’ll all have TV contracts that bring in \$20 million to \$30 million a year. And because they have all that money, they will be good in all sports.”

Meanwhile, he added, “The rest of the institutions will be struggling because they don’t have the same set of opportunities.”

Over the years, the WAC has been front and center in realignment. There are more than 20 former WAC programs. After Boise State’s departure, the conference became much less desirable to ESPN, and its annual television fee plummeted to \$1 million, tax statements show. That caused more teams to leave.

The WAC had a long and strong football tradition, but it could not weather the financial hit that followed Boise State’s exit. In August 2012, its membership down to seven universities, the WAC announced that it would abandon football at year’s end.

This season, two former WAC universities, New Mexico State and Idaho, are stranded without a football conference, forced to cobble together schedules as independents, though they will be joining the Sun Belt Conference in 2014 for football.

Eight years ago, after ESPN televised a New Mexico State game, the university’s president, Michael V. Martin, explained the event’s significance to the faculty senate. “I will tell you, last Saturday we hit a home run,” he said, “not because we had the biggest crowd in the history of N.M.S.U. football, not because we had the first sellout before game day, but because we were on ESPN nationally.”

But Mr. Martin, who last year became the chancellor at Colorado State, recently said: “ESPN treated the WAC as marginal cannon fodder. The contract was ridiculously small, and they made you play Thursday night at 8 if you wanted any exposure at all.”

Jeff Hurd, the WAC commissioner, said, “There is certainly a reality to the collegiate athletic world; the business side is very much there.” He added, “For lack of a better way to say it, it does become survival of the fittest.”

