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Lure of Big-Time Sports Propels Rutgers

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NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.

Art Applegate, who played football at [Rutgers](#) in the 1960s, when the opponents tended to be Princeton, Lehigh and Colgate, not West Virginia, South Florida and Louisville, is standing outside the chain-link fence, peering down at the most notorious unbuilt seats in New Jersey.

That would be the 13,000 proposed seats in the south end zone that make up the bulk of the [\\$102 million addition](#) to Rutgers Stadium that began with more enthusiasm than resources and has since gone south on both counts.

Maybe the project needs to be delayed or scaled back, he says. But as for big-time football at Rutgers, he can't imagine any path other than full speed ahead.

"I'm a firm believer in manning up and not apologizing about it," Mr. Applegate says, sipping Diet Pepsi from a KFC cup as he looks down at the pilings meant to complete the bowl around the stadium where he once played. "If it was up to me, we'd try to join the Big Ten. Look what football has done for [Penn State](#). We don't need to be playing Princeton anymore. It's a state university. I say act like it."

Mr. Applegate is probably a bit more gung-ho than most. But he's probably on the winning side in a parable of university life that goes well beyond the losing record of the Rutgers [Scarlet Knights](#) this dour autumn. This year is playing out like the reverse of the 11-2, feel-good season two years ago that was hailed as Rutgers's emergence as a football power.

Yes, there's a revived online version of the [Rutgers 1000](#), the group of professors, students and alumni who protested the growth of the sports program without much success during the 1990s. The group is bitterly opposed to the stadium project and the leadership of the athletic department.

But the president of Rutgers, Richard L. McCormick, while acknowledging that the university needs to reshape its oversight and ethics policies and that it faces a severe cash crunch that is likely to scale back the stadium project, says that turning back from big-time sports is not an option. He says that the \$50 million sports budget is less than 3 percent of the university's \$1.75 billion budget. The university provides \$15 million of the athletic budget, with the rest coming from ticket sales and other sources. Dr. McCormick then reels off a list of the big-time

public universities with big-time sports: Michigan, Virginia, North Carolina, Berkeley and the rest. For better or worse, that's the way the game is played at America's public universities.

"This is a policy that's been in place for a long time," he says. "We're going to stay the course."

If any state university might try to create a different model, you would think it might be Rutgers, which was established in 1766, was a private college for most of its existence, is relatively new to the athletic big time and has fought furious intramural battles for two decades over big-time sports.

Many students chafe at the idea of all the money being spent on football while tuition and room and board have gone up 6.5 percent this year, the State Legislature has cut financing to the university by 10.8 percent, the endowment has lost 10 percent of its value, and administrators are drawing up plans in case of further cuts. That said, most of those interviewed on Friday seemed to be questioning the execution, not the rationale. And lousy season or not, the waiting list for season tickets stands at 12,000. (Rutgers managed to beat Connecticut, 12-10, on Saturday to run its record to 2-5.)

"Before I came here, the main way I knew about Rutgers was through sports," said Peter Fabian, a freshman from Connecticut. "It shouldn't take precedence over academics, but I think it's something most students want."

Kyle Jespersen, a senior, talked about football during his time at Rutgers like someone tracking the Dow. There was the euphoria — call it irrational exuberance — during the 2006 season, he said, followed by the university's decision to spend money it didn't have.

He said students wanted successful sports but not a program that upended the balance between academics and athletics. "We shouldn't want to be [Ohio State](#)," he said. "It's like everyone got scarlet and white fever, and not enough people were looking objectively and asking if this was a fluke."

In the immediate future, Rutgers is facing rising financing costs, a severe budget crunch and a depressed economy that has all but shut down the donations that were expected to help pay for the project. And the questions raised by The Star-Ledger of Newark about the financial management of Rutgers athletics have hurt the university's credibility with the Legislature at a time when it most needs it.

Chances are the situation will get worse before it gets better, but you could take three lessons away.

First: Whatever the costs and flaws, the lure of big-time sports in public institutions, and the idea of a payoff in applications and prestige for winning teams, seem to be stronger than ever.

Second: Almost none of the issues about Rutgers sports would have come to light without The Star-Ledger, which has been facing threats to its continued existence. Anyone doubting the

10/19/2008

Our Towns - Lure of Big-Time Sports ...

Star-Ledger, which has been facing threats to its continued existence. Anyone doubting the importance of a vigorous press need only contemplate New Jersey officials without it.

Third: Even in New Jersey, the cost of being lax or stupid with public money has gone way up. If, as seems inevitable, the financial pressures on Rutgers continue to increase, the cost of a little irrational exuberance is going to be a lot different than it was when the Dow was at 14,000 and all seemed well with the world.

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