

Point of View

By George A. Drake

Small-College Sports, Big-Time Athletics, and the Yawning Chasm Between the Two

NINETY-SEVEN YEARS AGO LAST NOVEMBER, the University of Iowa and Grinnell College played the first football game west of the Mississippi River, and Grinnell won, 24-0. That was 1889, when each institution simply assembled a few students (and probably a ringer or two) and played a game for the fun of it.

Obviously, things have changed. Last fall, Grinnell won fewer than half its games in the Midwest Conference, while the University of Iowa barely missed defending its Big 10 title and returning to the Rose Bowl. On the sports pages, Grinnell is lucky if a short paragraph accompanies the report of its score. Iowa dominates those pages. Between 1889 and now, a chasm has opened, separating the athletic experience of the two institutions.

The reason is clear: Big-time intercollegiate sports have become the property of the public. They are entertainment for the millions rather than extracurricular outlets for students. The contrast with small-college athletics could not be starker. The latter are only incidentally spectator sports, concentrating mainly on student participation. Fewer than 5 per cent of the students at large universities participate in varsity sports, whereas at small colleges the figure is closer to 40 per cent.

In states without professional major-league sports, such as Alabama, Iowa, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, fan interest focuses entirely on the universities. Their teams have become the primary generators of state pride. Under such circumstances, it's nearly impossible for universities to control their own programs. In the fullest sense, the teams are public property, and their coaches frequently are among the most influential people in the state.

Small colleges have gone in the opposite direction. Grinnell, for example, was once a member of the Missouri Valley Conference, which always has been a major conference. In the 1920's, the college won frequent victories over Drake and Oklahoma A&M, and performed respectably in non-conference games against Minnesota and others. However, the handwriting was on the wall in the 1930's, when Grinnell began to lose to those teams by lopsided scores. In response to growing public interest, the universities began to invest more and more heavily in the quest for winning teams. Grinnell and other small colleges were forced to leave major conferences and form their own associations, which retained the amateur approach that originally inspired college athletics.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO had a parallel experience, but it decided on a more drastic solution. Not wanting to go along with the Big 10's escalation in the 1930's, Chicago simply dropped football. It recognized the sacrifices in institutional and academic integrity that big-time football would exact, and responded by backing out entirely, even though its team had the potential to compete and included the first Heisman Trophy winner, Jay Berwanger. Today, college football has returned to Chicago, but not in Big 10 style. Chicago, like Grinnell

College, is a member of the Midwest Conference.

It is true that there remain certain "non-revenue" sports such as soccer in which small colleges and big universities can compete. However, if soccer should suddenly catch on with the fans, the quality of university teams soon would surpass that of teams at small colleges, and the level of money involved would rise proportionately with the number of spectators generated.

As we all know, the universities themselves, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and even the fans are all wondering about the devastating effects of the huge interest in intercollegiate athletics. Some thoughtful people even suggest that universities should

► Institutions that cut the range of their athletic programs, refusing to offer some varsity sports because they don't pay their way.

The answer is that none of the above contributes to the betterment of education. Big-time athletics are controlled by money, not by institutional policy or by the interests, athletic or otherwise, of students.

Consider, by contrast, the athletic programs at small colleges. They offer amateur sports to as many students as wish to participate. Most offer *more* varsity sports than do state universities. In small colleges there is little correlation between sports and revenue. All varsity sports are supported from general funds, precisely because athletics are part of the educational program. And athletics *are* educational.

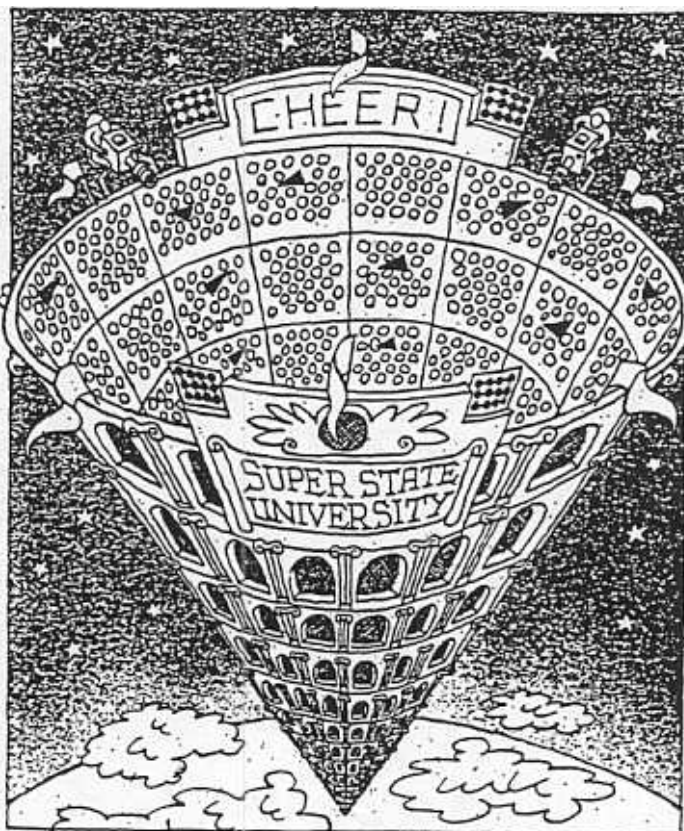
In addition to the commonly recognized values of physical fitness, athletics offer the discipline and togetherness of the team and the sheer joy of physical activity. There also is the challenge of performing up to one's potential in a highly visible arena. This is competition for its own sake, to test one's dedication and self-control, not just to please the cheering throngs in the stands.

I KNOW A LITTLE about such experiences. In my own college days, I was a successful runner and found that nothing challenged me as much as athletic competition. Successes were triumphs of the will, while poor performances devastated my ego. I grew in important ways by confronting athletic challenges and pitting myself against other dedicated athletes. It was not at all necessary to have myriad fans involved in the process. Without those fans, many athletes can have those maturing experiences. With the fans, only the best athletes compete, and the rest lose the opportunity. Though good theater, it is poor education.

This is not to say that small-college athletics are without problems. It is possible for a college to fall prey to the big-time syndrome and decide to build its image on winning teams. The N.C.A.A.'s Division III charter prohibits athletic scholarships. However, with up to 80 per cent of the student body on need-based scholarships at some colleges, and at least 50 per cent at most others, it is not hard to lure athletes with financial-aid packages. This is especially so as enforcement of the no-scholarship rule rests on a combination of self-policing and as much conference monitoring as possible. With such horrendous problems at the Division I level, the N.C.A.A. has few resources left for Division III enforcement.

With the discouraging examples of the universities before us, small colleges should be able to find the will to control their athletic programs. Their problems are manageable. Those of the universities just may not be. The real solution to the problems of big-time athletics lies with the fans, and that's all of us. We must permit university athletics to be just exactly that, *university* athletics, not public spectacles.

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abandon all pretense that athletes are students and mount honestly professional programs with hired athletes to entertain their fans. The shocking thing is that such views are no longer shocking.

If a university is dedicated first and foremost to learning, what do the following have to do with that enterprise?

► Gate receipts from football games exceeding \$1-million dollars, not to mention television revenues.

► Getting \$175,000 for a first-round N.C.A.A. tournament basketball game and much more for making the final four.

► Basketball coaches' receiving six-figure payments and thousands of dollars more in "speakers' fees" for agreeing to certain schedules.

► Universities, despite huge athletic revenues, that raise as much as \$4-million annually in sports donations.