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The irresistible force of college football

By [George F. Will](#), Published: November 9, 2011

Afew millennia from now, when archaeologists from an ascendant Brazil or Turkey or wherever sift the shards of American civilization and find the ruins of the Big House in Ann Arbor, Mich., they will wonder why a 109,901-seat entertainment venue was attached to an institution of higher education. Today, the accelerating preposterousness of big-time college football is again provoking furrowed brows and pursed lips. But there probably were few of either among [the 20 million](#) who Saturday night watched the University of Alabama's student-athletes play those of Louisiana State University.

These teams' head coaches' salaries are \$4.6 million and \$3.75 million, respectively, and their additional perquisites and incentives have cash values not to be sneezed at. But by some hedonic or other calculus, these coaches may add more to the national stock of pleasure, and even more value to their institutions, than do Alabama's president and LSU's chancellor, who earn \$487,620 and \$400,000, respectively.

The college football conglomerate has recently been roiled by an unseemly scramble — if seemliness pertains to this industry — of schools abandoning their old conferences and jettisoning traditional rivalries in a race to get into other conferences where television revenues are more bountiful. For now, this is the landscape:

The Pac (for Pacific) 10 [now has 12 teams](#), having acquired Utah and Colorado, which is 936 miles from the Pacific. The Big Ten, which has had 11 teams since Penn State joined in 1990, now has, with Nebraska, 12. The Big East, having lost several members ([including Pittsburgh and Syracuse](#), to the ACC) and its sense of geography, is courting Southern Methodist, which is in Dallas, and Boise State, which would have to fly 4,300 miles round trip to play South Florida in Tampa. The Big East is desperate to remain one of the six conferences whose winner gets an automatic bid to one of the Bowl Championship Series games, which can pay a conference as much as \$26 million. One reason Texas A&M is [bolting to the Southeastern Conference](#) from the Big 12 (which is also losing Missouri to the SEC) is that Texas struck a 20-year, \$300 million deal with ESPN and started its own cable channel. ESPN, which has rights with its sister network ABC to 33 of 35 Division I postseason games, will by next year spend more than \$700 million on rights to college football and other sports. ESPN is what the feckless NCAA pretends to be, the real regulator of college football.

The NCAA may soon [ban from postseason competition](#) all football (and basketball) teams with bad graduation rates. This will increase the already powerful incentives to provide athletes with undemanding curricula that refute the adjective in the phrase higher education. This is one example of how reforms can make matters worse.

Another example is the proposal to pay the players some of the money their exertions are generating. If football players are paid, female field hockey players must be, too, because of Title IX's gender-equity mandates. Besides, it is one thing for a music major to earn money on the side playing trumpet in a dance band; it is something very different to establish an entitlement of athletes to a portion of the profits from a multibillion-dollar sports operation.

Furthermore, trumpeters do not risk broken limbs and torn ligaments. Football players do, and if they receive financial compensation beyond their scholarships (and potential future earnings in professional sports), are they then employees of their universities and eligible for workmen's compensation?

But wait. About those profits the players want a share of: Actual profits are difficult to document, particularly if you argue that big-time football programs are wholesome because those whose revenues exceed expenses can, or ought to, use their surpluses to subsidize their schools' many "non-revenue" sports — basically, all sports except basketball.

It is arguable, if not easily demonstrable, that universities' athletic successes cause increased student applications and alumni giving. Such giving matters increasingly as states' appropriations decrease. But even if true, this raises a question: Is the football industry as currently conducted an efficient way to do this?

This is, in several senses, an academic question. In 1873, Andrew Dickson White, Cornell University's first president, refused permission for the school's football team to travel to Cleveland to play Michigan: "I will not permit 30 men to travel 400 miles merely to agitate a bag of wind." Today, the muscular interests around, and institutional momentum of, big-time football make it impervious to reform. Agitation, in several senses, will continue.

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