

# Why the NCAA Can't Reform College Athletics

MURRAY SPERBER

*"The NCAA is run by the athletic directors and coaches whose jobs depend on winning basketball and football games. And these people... also set the rules for the administration of college sports. Sound like the fox in the hen-house?"*

—From a *Phi Delta Kappan* Special Report.

Great hopes for significant athletic reforms are being pinned on proposals now before the NCAA and the Knight Commission. But even a short review of the makeup and recent history of these bodies will show them to be unlikely agents for significant change.

Over 800 colleges and universities belong to the NCAA. In theory, the association represents the will of its members, keeping intercollegiate athletics in line with its educational goals. In practice, the NCAA functions mainly as a trade association for athletic directors and coaches; it implements their wishes regardless of whether these are in the best interests of the member schools.

Power in the NCAA resides in the forty-four-person executive council, the association's version of a board of directors. For many years, most council members have been current or former athletic directors who serve multiyear terms and are either appointed by an athletic conference or elected at the annual convention. The elected members are preselected from a council-approved slate of delegates. Chuck Neinas, head of the College Football Association, has called the council a closed corporation: "There is a nominating procedure, but there are no nominations from the floor [of the convention]."

The council also selects a twelve-member executive committee to oversee the large NCAA bureaucracy and the business of the association. This committee supervises the executive director of the NCAA, now Dick Schultz (he sits as an *ex officio* member on it and the council). The president and the various vice-presidents of the NCAA—largely figurehead positions—are almost always *ex-council* or committee members, and sometimes both.

The executive director is the NCAA's most visible representative, frequently speaking for the as-

MURRAY SPERBER is an associate professor of English and American Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. Much of this article was adapted from his recent book, *College Sports Inc.: The Athletic Department vs. the University*, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1990.



AP/Wide World

Coach Jerry Tarkanian and team, shown celebrating 1990 title, gained a one-year reprieve from NCAA penalties.

sociation to regional and national media. The executive director also runs the daily business of the NCAA, manages its \$200-million-plus annual budget, coordinates its many committees, and plans long-term strategy and legislation. The NCAA executive director acts very much like a modern CEO, and his—it has always been a "he"—mandate is to carry out the wishes of the people who hire him.



From 1951 to 1988, Walter Byers served as executive director, helping the association to promote its own and college athletics' phenomenal growth. When Byers retired, a number of candidates from the college athletics establishment—ADs and conference commissioners—vied to succeed him. However, a group of university presidents, unhappy with the increasing number of scandals, proposed one of their own: John Ryan of Indiana University. The presidents believed that having an educator in this high-profile NCAA position could help bring intercollegiate athletics more in line with academic goals. They thought that even Ryan—who had never restrained his powerful basketball coach, Bob Knight—would be better than a former AD.

Because the executive council controls the selection process, it chose an athletic director—Dick Schultz of the University of Virginia—for the job. Schultz's fellow ADs hailed his appointment as "a vote of confidence for athletic directors" (a vote cast mainly by themselves). Schultz's comments were in the same vein: "I was a coach for twenty-five years. I was an athletic director for a good number of years. My background is there; that's where I'm coming from... The coaches feel like I'm one of them; the athletic directors feel like I'm one of them."

In his three years as executive director, Dick Schultz has proven to be competent, extremely hardworking, highly visible... and mainly in sympathy with the athletic directors who put him in office. Schultz believes in reform from within the

Harvard's Derek Bok (below) and Presidents' Commission chair John Ryan (opposite page) have led unsuccessful campaigns to reform the NCAA; NCAA leader Richard Schultz (left), with Cornell's Head Coach Bob Blackman, believes in changes from within.



present NCAA structure. He argues that if the association can strengthen its various departments, it can end the cheating and scandals in intercollegiate athletics. He also feels that the media create many of the difficulties in college athletics and that better NCAA public relations and image-making would help lessen them. Schultz is sincere in his beliefs but he has yet to face the double bind inherent in his job: the executive director of the NCAA is supposed to help solve the problems in college athletics, but he is appointed to further the (self-) interests of athletic directors and coaches—the very people responsible for those problems.

*"Division I is like being in a poker game where you have the second or third best hand, but they keep bumping up, and bumping up, until you have trouble staying in."*

—Landing C. Baker, president of Ulica College



AP/Wide World

The college athletic establishment, like all interest groups, wants to grow and expand. Over the years, coaches and athletic directors have passed key NCAA legislation that ensures expansion—even though costly athletic department growth does not serve the financial or academic interests of higher education. For many years, almost all athletics programs have lost money. Dick Schultz recently admitted publicly, “You can probably count on your two hands the number of athletic departments that actually have a surplus annually.” These annual athletic department losses—often in the millions of dollars—have to be covered with university funds that could go to academic programs, faculty, and students.

Rather than help to ease these recurring deficits, the NCAA has built them into the college athletics system. A decade ago, it adopted a new qualifying rule for play in Division I-A football: “Members in the restructured Division I-A must now maintain an average [paid] attendance of more than 17,000 per home game over a four-year period or have a [home] stadium with at least 30,000 [permanent] seats.” This economic criterion for NCAA participation forces colleges to spend millions of dollars to stay in the Division I-A poker game. And because winning fills the expanded stadiums, the

rule also institutionalizes a win-or-die approach to college football.

When this rule went into effect in 1982, the NCAA dropped six of the ten members of the Mid-American Conference from Division I-A football (Kent State, Bowling Green, Ohio U., Eastern Michigan, Ball State, and Northern Illinois). Later, at great expense, these schools built back up to Division I-A status, but for most of them football remains a red-ink proposition, especially when the maintenance and debt-servicing costs on their expanded facilities are calculated.

A more pernicious and long-standing NCAA regulation concerns the number of intercollegiate teams that a school must field to qualify for NCAA play. In 1985, the association—in spite of the rising costs in college athletics—set a new minimum requirement for Division I-A participation of sixteen teams (men’s and women’s) in eight sports. Many colleges scrambled to add teams, coaches, and athletes in various sports; if an institution did not meet the new requirement, the NCAA dropped it to “unclassified membership,” barred all of its teams from NCAA play, and penalized it in various other ways.

Since 1985, the association has fiddled with its minimum requirements. It now stands at thirteen teams in seven sports for Division I-A, but the numbers will increase next year. The association will use this rule to force smaller programs to expand their nonrevenue athletics programs or quit the top division and lose the chance to participate in its men’s basketball tournament.

The association’s rationale for the sports and team minimum rule is that colleges should have “well-balanced athletics programs,” including squads in many non-revenue sports. (Only football and men’s basketball are considered revenue-producing.) In practice, this rule serves the college athletics establishment: ADs want their departments to be as large as possible, employing increasing numbers of coaches, administrators, and athletes.

Nonrevenue sports are aptly named, cost great sums of money, and at most colleges are of no interest or benefit to 95 percent of the university community. (Attendance is usually low for their events, and the elite athletes in these sports often have exclusive use of the expensive facilities.) Moreover, Division I nonrevenue programs increasingly provide free minor-league training for young athletes in baseball, hockey, tennis, golf, and

Olympic sports. This relieves very wealthy professional organizations of the financial burden. Almost 75 percent of current major league baseball players, 20 percent of National Hockey League players, and a very high percentage of tennis and golf professionals and Olympic athletes passed through the intercollegiate system. (It is striking to note that although many NHL draftees from American colleges are Canadian, only one former student of a Canadian college appeared on the league roster last season. Canadian universities do not give "full ride" athletic scholarships.)

By locking athletics programs into a minimum number of sports and teams, the NCAA deprives member institutions of a large degree of autonomy over their athletic budgets and condemns most to go on spending—and losing—money forever on athletics programs.

*"A lot of these presidents have never had a jock on. They've never been in sports. They just get in there and come up with these foolish rules. That's scary. I worry about it."*

—Bill Mallory, head football coach,  
Indiana University.

In 1979, as a result of an exhaustive study, the American Council on Education called for major reforms in all phases of college athletics. The ACE particularly urged presidents and ADs to bring athletics programs in line with the educational missions of their colleges. Athletic directors and the NCAA ignored these requests. Three years and many scandals later, Harvard president Derek Bok, chair of the ACE Council, appointed a committee of twenty-six presidents from colleges and universities across the country to figure out how to implement the recommendations of the ACE's study. These executives were given a year to work on ideas before meeting in August 1983 to map out a strategy.

The outcome of their meeting was more radical than expected. One of the presidents' assistants told the *New York Times*: "They studied ways to reform the association [the NCAA] and finally threw up their hands and said, 'There isn't any way to reform it.'" Instead, the ACE group proposed that a board of presidents take charge of the NCAA and be given "authority to veto or modify NCAA rules and to impose new rules of its own design on association members, subject to review only by

a mail vote of presidents of all member institutions."

In its public statement, the ACE group explained that they were proposing this drastic move because institutions had lost control of their college programs to athletic directors and to the NCAA itself: "educational interests are often subordinated to the aims of winning games, boosting attendance, and maximizing television revenue. The consequences for academic standards and for the education of athletes are too well known to warrant repetition."

The NCAA was outraged. Its president called the ACE proposal "undemocratic." He claimed that the NCAA's structure better represented the will of its member colleges than would a presidents' "banana dictatorship." The NCAA also counter-attacked with a presidents' commission proposal of its own. It used the conclusions of a long-standing Select Committee to suggest a council of presidents with the power to "(1) review Association activities and advise the NCAA council, (2) commission studies of matters of concern, and (3) propose legislation" (added emphasis).

The ACE presidents were willing to compromise and, in late 1983, they revised their proposal to allow the actions of their presidents' board to be overruled by a majority vote of the NCAA convention, and to allow open nominations and voting for members of their board.

The ACE insisted, however, that its modified proposal be submitted to a vote at the January 1984 NCAA convention. Before the convention, the ACE presidents were confident of victory, and a December poll of their constituency showed that although the vote might be close, only 23.5 percent of the responding presidents said that they would definitely vote "No" (another bloc was undecided). In January, about 150 presidents attended the convention—thus ADs or faculty athletic representatives served as voting delegates for the remaining 500 colleges. Nevertheless, the ACE group assumed that the absent presidents had instructed their delegates on how to vote and that the ACE proposal would pass.

After some rancorous debate on the proposal, the convention delegates were ready to cast their ballots. The chair requested a "voice vote" and, hearing a louder chorus of Nays than Ayes, ruled that the proposal had been defeated. This maneuver stunned the presidents, who demanded a "roll call vote." The chair asked for a show of hands on

this motion and it, too, went down. The presidents' proposal was dead.

Outraged, the president of California State University at Long Beach complained to the press, saying the proposal would have passed on a roll-call vote where delegates could not hide behind a "voice vote and an anonymous show of hands." *New York Times* columnist George Vecsey commented, "Now dozens of athletic directors will go back to their schools and insist to their presidents that they followed orders and raised their hands for Proposal 35 [the ACE presidents' board]."

The former faculty athletic representative of a Southern institution, a delegate at this NCAA convention, later recalled, "The ACE presidents and their friends really got snookered. They assumed the good-ol'-boy AD types play by Roberts' Rules or something. The ACE ignored the fact that their proposal, especially all the presidents' board rules to follow, would take away these boys' jobs, or at least end their way of doing business. The ADs weren't about to allow that. They gave Bok and his pals a good mouthful of red dirt to take back to their ivy halls. We've never seen them again in the NCAA to this day."

With the defeat of the ACE's Proposal 35, the NCAA leadership trotted out Proposal 36, the select committee's plan for a Presidents' Commission with advisory power. The NCAA executive council had endorsed this proposal and the convention promptly approved it. The head of North Carolina A&T said, "Proposal 36 is nothing more than a politically contrived eleventh-hour response to 35... an attempt at cooptation." Thus was born the NCAA's Presidents' Commission, the supposed instrument of reform of college athletics.

By April 1984, forty-four presidents had been appointed to the commission and a chair chosen—John Ryan of Indiana University. As one of its first actions, the commission called a special NCAA convention in New Orleans in 1985 to consider various reform proposals. Only minor rule changes resulted. Such participants as Eamon P. Kelly, president of Tulane University, commented, "The measures adopted will not solve the basic and systemic problems in college sports, which are [in part] its professionalization and commercialization."

In its next special convention in 1987, the Presidents' Commission decided to nibble away at more substantial problems in college athletics—the financial deficits caused by the huge number of NCAA-approved "full ride grants," and "student-

athletes" having to participate in the never-ending seasons.

The Presidents' Commission, however, underestimated the growing anger of many big-time ADs and coaches as well as their ability to organize the membership, including sympathetic presidents, against any reform proposals. At the 1987 meeting, the commission tried to reduce the number of grants for Division I-A football programs from ninety-five to ninety (a very reasonable proposal—NFL teams, with much longer and harder seasons than college squads, manage with forty-seven players on a roster). The ADs and coaches smashed the presidents' proposal, however, and football grants stayed at ninety-five. Then proposals for modest reductions in the number of "full rides" in non-revenue sports—for example, in men's cross-country track from fourteen to thirteen, in women's field hockey from eleven to ten—were trounced.

By the end of the special meeting, "the clear loser," according to an Associated Press story, was the Presidents' Commission. The news bureau reported, "There also was a sense that the NCAA's athletic directors were becoming impatient with the commission's 'ivory tower' approach to sports." Only ADs could see a cut from ninety-five to ninety football grants as an "ivory tower" move.

After the 1987 meeting, the Presidents' Commission was semi-moribund, but early last year, prodded by increasing media attention to the corruption in college athletics, the commission convinced the NCAA to pass a proposal to cut three games from the official basketball season. This rule was not scheduled to come into effect until August 1992, and the ADs and coaches vowed to overturn it before then. Last summer, the presidents quietly changed the basketball season cut to one game. (Last year's NCAA men's basketball champion, the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, played a forty-game season.)

At the same time, various members of the college athletics establishment presented several significant proposals to the commission. (Some officials worry that if damage control reforms are not instituted soon, Congress will step in and change the whole system.) A group of conference commissioners pressed for a minimum grade point average for intercollegiate playing eligibility—a 1.6 for freshmen escalating to a 1.9 for seniors (the NCAA

has no such requirement, although some member conferences do). However, the Presidents' Commission and the NCAA executive council refused to consider this minimal reform until 1992 at the earliest. The conference commissioners also suggested the abolition of athletic dormitories within three years. Again the presidents softened the proposal with a five-year phase-in as well as further study of the issue. Next, the proposal to cut the number of athletic scholarships was revived. The presidents agreed to sponsor this proposal with the proviso that the cuts in football should not take effect until 1994 and in other sports until 1993. Therefore, like so many NCAA "reforms," this rule could pass at the 1991 convention and then later disappear—a few years ago, a men's basketball scholarship cut was passed in January and rescinded in June.

The most startling proposal on the table, however, is a rule to limit an athlete's time per week on his or her sport to a maximum of four hours a day and twenty hours a week. The point is to guarantee athletes a day off each week, and to restrict off-season practice. The Presidents' Commission will present this measure to the 1991 convention, but it will meet broad opposition. Some dissident presidents argue that the NCAA cannot enforce this rule without establishing a police state. Coaches like the University of Louisville's Denny Crum (men's basketball) believe that such time constraints are ridiculous and "won't change a thing. . . Kids are still going to play on their own, lift weights, and condition, so they won't have any more time to study." Many athletes, even in non-revenue sports, oppose the proposal because it will hurt their bids for professional and Olympic careers. (The mother of Stanford swimmer Janet Evans says that if the proposal becomes NCAA law, "We would be prepared to file suit against the NCAA.")

With this diverse opposition, the time-limit proposal in its present form seems doomed. Moreover, the presidents do not appear to have considered how this rule would change college athletics. With a twenty-hour-a-week limit on an athlete's time, the product for which the TV networks now pay so much—college football and men's basketball played at the highest possible level—will markedly deteriorate. (The telecasts of Ivy League football provide a foretaste of the diminished product.) When the TV ratings inevitably decline, will the presidents accept the renegotiated contracts and

lowered payouts offered by the networks? And when the ratings decline for the NCAA men's basketball tournament, will that association give back some of the billion dollars that it is scheduled to receive from CBS-TV to televise the tourney through 1997?

The other major proposals on the table at the 1991 convention directly concern the CBS payout, but will almost certainly pass because they are backed by the big-time athletic directors and the NCAA hierarchy. In fact, the association plans to keep a huge part of the swag, possibly up to 40 percent, for its own bureaucratic concerns. (Representative Tom McMillen of Maryland is now trying to look into the NCAA's books and understand its gargantuan bureaucratic appetite.)

The NCAA plans to distribute most of the tournament money—\$62.5 million next year—according to what it terms "an equitable but not equal" formula: those conferences with the most colleges and the winningest teams in the tourney will receive the largest part of the "performance" dollars to split among members. Those colleges with the most bloated nonrevenue sports programs will get the largest percentage of the "non-performance" money. (Some athletic departments will qualify under both criteria.) The NCAA trumpets this formula as a great reform. In fact, it mainly rewards the biggest programs, does very little for the middle-sized ones, and tells the small fry to go to hell.

Colleges in the Big Ten will gain over \$700,000 each from the tournament distribution, but institutions in most athletic conferences will receive payouts in the \$150,000 range (hardly enough to offset new 1990-91 expenses due to rising maintenance and travel costs). However, the bottom quarter of Division I institutions will lose increasing amounts of money because the NCAA distribution plan is coupled with some harsh new qualifications for membership in the poker game: (1) a requirement that a Division I institution now needs a minimum of fourteen teams in seven sports to play at this level; (2) a demand that an institution spend a minimum of \$500,000 on athletic scholarships in nonrevenue sports in addition to the estimated \$1 million-plus that it will have to spend on grants for football and basketball; (3) a prohibition on a member playing Division I basketball and Division II or III football (institutions like Georgetown now balance their athletic department books by fielding non-scholarship Division III football teams, but soon will have to go to an expanded version of the

sport with greatly increased coaching, recruiting, athletic scholarship, and facilities costs); and (4) a demand that a member meet Division I schedule requirements by playing only Division I opponents.

These "membership structure" proposals will probably force over fifty institutions to drop out of Division I. When the NCAA executive council announced them, the Reverend L. Edward Glynn, president of St. Peter's College in New Jersey (a college on this NCAA bubble), exclaimed, "Reform's not the motive in this particular proposal. It's greed." The NCAA replies that, because part of its distribution plan ignores tournament performance, it helps members like St. Peter's. A breakdown of the figures reveals the opposite. In 1991, the NCAA will guarantee a college with the minimum number of Division I sports and athletic scholarships only \$2,350 from the plan. However, the association will reward a big-time program with twenty-nine teams in fifteen sports and 268 athletic scholarships with a base payment of \$450,000 (even so, this program's total grant bill could be over \$4 million). The St. Peter's athletic director, out of step with his colleagues, accuses the NCAA of "eliminating [members] so fewer can share in the billion."

Thus, whatever comes out of the 1991 NCAA convention will not significantly change the current college athletics system. The popular media may hail some of the legislation as "Great Reforms," but the reporters will not read the fine print, especially the clauses that disclose when the proposals will come on-line. (NCAA reform legislation is often amended to death or quietly buried in the years before becoming law.)

When the immutable structure of the NCAA is considered, the bottom line on its reform of intercollegiate athletics becomes clear: the NCAA cannot solve the systemic problems in college athletics because it is a major cause of those problems. For the athletic directors and coaches who control the NCAA the present system works well—after all, it provides them with extremely comfortable livings—and they see no need to change it, except for minor tinkering.

*"Despite the pious half-time pronouncements we see on televised football and basketball games, in which the future of humankind is tied to the missions of universities with big-time athletics programs, these very programs*

*contradict the fundamental aims of American higher education."*

—Richard Warch, President of Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin.

If the NCAA will not reform college athletics, will other groups try? Last year, legislation was introduced into Congress that would force colleges and universities to announce the graduation rates of intercollegiate athletes and to reveal athletic department budgets (only the year-beginning numbers—often exercises in fiction writing—not the year-end financial books). The NCAA lobbied hard against these proposals, got the budget disclosure requirement thrown out, and maimed the graduation statistics part.

The legislation signed into law instructs athletic departments to compare their graduation rates to those of regular students. However, this is like comparing apples to alligators; most regular students drop out of college for financial, not academic, reasons, but athletic scholarship holders never miss a dorm, tuition, book, or tutoring payment because their "full ride grants" pick up these bills. Considering the years spent preparing and passing this legislation, it does not portend successful intervention by Congress in athletics reform.

Paralleling the Congressional activity is the Knight Commission, a panel of prominent educators and other citizens with a self-declared mandate to investigate college athletics. Funded by the Knight-Ridder Newspaper Foundation and co-chaired by Father Theodore Hesburgh (former president of Notre Dame) and Dr. William Friday (former head of the University of North Carolina System), in 1990 this commission has been long on hearings and short on ideas. Its most publicized recommendation would tie a college's accreditation to the honesty of its athletics program—that is, an institution could lose its degree-granting powers if its athletic department violated certain NCAA rules. College athletics is often called the tail that wags the university dog, but if higher education adopts this proposal, intercollegiate athletics will be the tail that *became* the dog—more important than the academic programs of America's colleges and universities!

The other group concerned about the systemic failure of big-time college sports and one with a large stake in reform is composed of the faculties of NCAA member institutions. In the last year at

various colleges, including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Iowa State University, faculty organizations have passed resolutions to try to slow down their athletic department juggernauts. These resolutions mainly focus on the special admission of athletes with SAT scores hundreds of points below those required for regular students and the "hideaway curriculum" in which athletes are often sheltered. If faculties across the country curtailed these abuses—and admission and curriculum are traditional areas of faculty concern and governance—they would end most of the hypocrisy and academic fraud involving so-called "student-athletes."

In addition, faculties could significantly change the current college athletics system by taking some relatively easy steps: (1) *insist that their faculty councils or senates appoint all the members of the faculty athletic committee and not abrogate these appointments to administrators*; (2) *do not allow the members of the faculty athletic committee to compromise their objectivity by accepting free game tickets, plane rides, or any other gratuities from the athletic department*; (3) *insist that the faculty athletic committee have total access to the financial books of the college's athletic department and that the year-end figures be made public*. At present, no athletic department in America opens its books, even at public institutions where no legal justification for secrecy exists, and almost no faculty athletic committee may see those books. If the university community and the taxpaying public learned about the financial losses incurred by athletics programs and the waste and mismanagement that brought about those deficits, major reform might come swiftly and permanently to college ath-

letics. Finally, (4) *faculty members must demand that the faculty athletic committee actually control the activities of the athletic department, that is follow the NCAA Constitution's mandate on the duties of a faculty athletic committee and assert real "institutional control" over the athletic department*.

None of these suggestions is utopian; any or all could be implemented with faculty initiative and determination. If faculties across the country carried out these suggestions, they would definitely change the nature of the intercollegiate athletics system.

**T**he NCAA will not reform college athletics; the Knight Commission, with such key members as the NCAA's Dick Schultz, is not about to do it; and the Congress is no better at fending off the NCAA's lobbyists than it is with the NRA's hired guns. Only the faculty community, through local organizations and national associations, can bring permanent reform to intercollegiate athletics. ■

#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Most of the direct quotations and other cited material in this article are referenced in the book *College Sports Inc.: The Athletic Department vs. the University*; not in the book are the comments by the mother of Janet Evans, the St. Peter's College president, and that college's AD (they appeared in *USA Today* on July 11, August 1, and June 26, 1990). The various proposals presented to the NCAA Presidents' Commission were reported in exquisite detail throughout the summer and fall of 1990 by *The NCAA News* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; especially good were the articles by Douglas Lederman of the latter journal.