PART ONE

COMMERCIAL SPORTS AS A UNIVERSITY FUNCTION

ONE

Strange Bedfellows

Two starkly different worlds coexist today within American higher education. One is the traditional academic world that conforms to the succinct statement offered by economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz: "The business of colleges and universities is the creation and diffusion of knowledge."[1] Because American research universities have excelled in these functions, today they enjoy global preeminence. Yet there is another world within American universities, just as firmly rooted, that bears no obvious relation to the first. It is the world of big-time college sports, a form of entertainment that has over the course of a century enmeshed itself in the American higher-education scene, becoming part of the popular conception of the "collegiate" experience.

To appreciate the gulf that divides these two worlds, it is instructive to visit the campus of a university that has a big-time sports program. Let us take a quick virtual tour of one of these – the sprawling campus of the University of Texas in Austin. It will be sufficient for our purposes to visit just two buildings on that campus.

The first stop on our tour is a five-story building that is home to the Center for Nano- and Molecular Science and Technology. This brick and concrete building houses offices, equipment, and laboratories used by scientists and engineers. The professors affiliated with this center come from departments like chemistry and biochemistry, physics, biomedical engineering, chemical engineering, electrical and computer engineering, and mechanical engineering. Some of these departments rank among the country's highest rated in their respective disciplines.[2] Together with postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, and other technical staff, some of whom have come to the United States from other countries, these faculty members carry out research projects related to fields like nanoelectronics, nanobiology and nanomedicine, nanoparticle synthesis, and nanomechanics. Their

research articles appear in such scholarly publications as *Biochemistry and Bioengineering*, *Inorganic Chemistry*, *Journal of Physical Chemistry*, *Nature*, *Polymer*, and *Science*. This research has the potential to contribute to such practical advances as better fuel cells and improved therapies for combating human neurodegenerative diseases.

The highly technical research and advanced training that take place in this building exemplify the essential work of research universities – the creation and diffusion of knowledge. Indeed, the center's activities seem to embody perfectly the university's published mission statement:

> The mission of The University of Texas at Austin is to achieve excellence in the interrelated areas of undergraduate education, graduate education, research and public service. The university provides superior and comprehensive educational opportunities at the baccalaureate through doctoral and special professional educational levels.
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> The university contributes to the advancement of society through research, creative activity, scholarly inquiry and the development of new knowledge. The university preserves and promotes the arts, benefits the state's economy, serves the citizens through public programs and provides other public service.[3]

The University of Texas is by no means unique in its devotion to research and teaching. American research universities like it are magnets for the world's best graduate students because they are home to a large share of the world's leading research faculty and doctoral programs. American universities occupy an enviable position of preeminence among the world's research universities, a fact confirmed by global rankings. For example, according to the ranking produced by the *Times* of London, a third of the world's top 100 universities are in the United States. The ranking produced by Shanghai's Jiao Tong University, a ranking heavily weighted toward scientific research output, indicates that more than half of the top 100 are American.[4] In short, the Center for Nano- and Molecular Science and Technology at Texas admirably symbolizes the academic purpose of American universities.

The second stop on our virtual tour of the University of Texas, just a 10-minute walk away, takes us to a realm that is strikingly different from the world of research and teaching. This stop is the university's football stadium, named the Darrell K. Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium. This structure, featuring double decks on one side, can accommodate more than 100,000 spectators, and it was filled to capacity at every one of the seven home games during the 2009 season. At two ends of the stadium are towers, eight- and nine-stories high, respectively, that house luxury suites outfitted with theater-style seats, televisions, kitchenettes, and bars, and are available for lease at rates up to $88,000 a year. The university's football team, which

has played in postseason bowls in each of the past five years, rides to practice every day during the season aboard chartered buses and dresses out in a locker room equipped with five flat-screen TVs and adorned with a 20-foot ceiling light in the shape of a longhorn. A professor in the business school characterized the university's sports facilities as "beyond opulence."[5] The team's coach, whose salary in 2007 was more than four times that of the university's president and whose name elicited more than 12 times the number of Google hits, has his own weekly television show, broadcast on 14 local stations and one regional network each week during the season. Those who count themselves Texas football fans are legion. They are spread throughout the state and beyond, and they are by no means restricted to those with a college education.

The worlds represented by these two buildings at the University of Texas are astonishingly different. Not surprisingly, they occupy different parts of the university's organizational chart. One of them is under the jurisdiction of the university's academic enterprise, and the other is under the control of the athletic enterprise. The nanoscience center, on the academic side of the university, exemplifies the rarefied, rational realm that has traditionally been associated with the academic world. Although this academic realm is by no means innocent of the commercial world, it is largely divorced from calculations of profit and loss. Facts, reason, and beauty are its raw materials; analysis, study, and free expression are its modes of operation.

By contrast, the stadium and those who work there represent a world that is unashamedly commercial and thoroughly popular, even populist. This part of the university is quite literally a part of the country's entertainment industry. It sells its brand of performance in the commercial marketplace, depending for revenue on both paying customers and media. Perhaps its most obvious distinguishing feature is that its normal operations – as a matter of course – are visible to an extent unmatched by anything that happens on the academic side. The team's games are carried live on radio, from Abilene to Wichita Falls, on 40 different radio stations.[6] All 12 of its games during the 2008 season were televised, and so was its appearance in the Fiesta Bowl the following January.[7] Even ignoring the television cameras, just the gathering of 100,000 individuals in one location is enough to mark an event as out of the ordinary. It has been said that many American universities are best known across the country, if at all, not for their academic programs, but for their football teams, and this remark is as true today as it was when it was written, more than 80 years ago.[8]

But even setting national recognition aside for the moment and viewing the big-time sports enterprise merely as one organizational unit inside

a university, it still stands apart. On any campus with a big-time athletics program, the football and basketball schedules quite simply rule the university's calendar of events. What other department or school in the university holds the power, merely through its regular operation, to bring the rest of the institution to a halt? What other unit's scheduled activities are so influential that every other department, all the way up to the president's office, makes sure not to schedule any important meeting or event that would conflict with one of those scheduled activities? To anyone who grew up in the United States or who has spent much time around a university with a big-time sports program, none of this will come as a surprise. Both the coexistence of these two disparate realms and the sway of athletics are such familiar traits of the American higher-education scene that they are simply taken for granted.[9] Were it not so familiar, the contrast between these two worlds would surely be cause for wonder.

Here is an authentic case of American exceptionalism: in no other large country in the world is commercialized athletic competition so closely tied to institutions of higher education. To be sure, universities in Europe, Asia, Canada, and elsewhere frequently sponsor "club" teams that compete against each other in a variety of sports, ranging from squash and ice hockey to basketball and badminton. The oldest organized intercollegiate competition still going is the annual Boat Race, which has for more than 150 years pitted against each other crews from the two great British universities, Oxford and Cambridge. But none of these forms of university-affiliated athletic competition generates the revenue or rises to the level of commercial sophistication of American intercollegiate athletics. Only in the United States has there grown up such an elaborate system of publicized and commercialized sports contests involving university-sponsored teams. Although most of the teams sponsored by the 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States are no more famous or commercial than university teams in other countries, the football and basketball teams representing several hundred universities achieve such high levels of revenue and visibility that their universities in effect become part of the American entertainment industry. This is big-time college sports.

THE EUROPEAN VISITOR'S NAIVE QUESTION

Although this peculiarly American activity may be second nature to most Americans, and thus considered unremarkable, one can only imagine how odd it must appear to a visitor from abroad, whose experience with universities has never included an entertainment spectacle of this order that is put

on by universities themselves. This is precisely the hypothetical situation imagined back in 1929 by Henry Pritchett, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, when he included the following in his preface to the foundation's lengthy study of college athletics:

> Nothing in the educational regime of our higher institutions perplexes the European visitor so much as the role that organized athletics play. On a crisp November afternoon he finds many thousands of men and women, gathered in a great amphitheater, wildly cheering a group of athletes who are described to him as playing a game of football. . . .
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> When the visitor from the European university has pondered the matter, he comes to his American university colleagues with two questions:
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> "What relation has this astonishing athletic display to the work of an intellectual agency like a university?"
>
> "How do students, devoted to study, find either the time or the money to stage so costly a performance?"[10]

Pritchett's imagined visitor can easily discover the answer to the second question: it is the university, not the students, that stages the performance. It is the first of these questions, concerning the fundamental purpose of the athletic enterprise, that is the truly perplexing one. And it is as deserving today of careful consideration as it was eight decades ago. Why do universities engage in this activity? This gaudy, wildly popular form of entertainment has no obvious connection to the intellectual work of universities other than the name on the uniforms. Yet big-time college athletics has over the course of a century become woven into the fabric of many American universities. So the visitor's question remains both pertinent and challenging, and it inspires other ones. Why is the enterprise of big-time sports a part of the operation of contemporary American universities? What are the consequences for the universities that undertake it? What, if anything, needs to be done about it? These are the questions that motivate this book.

To explain the existence of big-time college sports, university leaders and outside observers usually offer one of several justifications. First among them is the educational argument: beginning with the ancient Greeks, athletic pursuits have been recognized as a valuable component of a complete education. Through both training and competition, the athlete learns life lessons taught nowhere better than on the field of play. As Harvard president Charles Eliot argued before the 20th century, athletic participation develops such "qualities as courage, fortitude, and presence of mind in emergencies and under difficulties" as well as cooperation and, for some, the "habit of command."[11] While this explanation continues to have real force when

applied to students' participation in the variety of sports offered on college campuses, it does little to justify the big-time athletic operation, since college students participate in big-time college sports primarily as spectators. Relatively few of them enjoy the moral and physical benefits of participating in these sports. And for those who do play one of the revenue sports, as we will see, participation often takes on the quality of employment more than that of recreation. Despite their official amateur status, their role begins to morph into one that has many of the markings of a professional player, though certainly without the professional's monetary compensation.

A second common justification for big-time athletic operations is the one that might be the first to occur to many outside observers: money. At least in the public perception, the highly visible football and basketball programs run by universities would appear to be a ready source of income, given the large figures commonly reported for such items as football bowl receipts and coaches' salaries. Indeed, the head basketball coach for the University of Connecticut defended his $1.6 million salary at a time when the Connecticut state government was running a large deficit, telling a reporter that his basketball program brought in $12 million a year.[12] Although some big-time basketball, and football, programs might well turn a profit if run by themselves, universities typically consolidate all their intercollegiate sports under one department, with one budget. And most of these departments lose money, including the one operated by the University of Connecticut. As we will see, however, calculating profit or loss for these departments is not without its complexities and ambiguities.

A third argument that universities sometimes use to justify their investment in commercialized spectator sports is that athletic acclaim begets public attention for the university's academic mission, which in turn pays off in quite tangible ways. Chief among the benefits thought to result from heightened visibility is a boost in applications for admission. Whether it is a Cinderella team's surprising success in the NCAA basketball tournament or the widespread recognition that comes from being a perennial football powerhouse, admissions directors believe that athletic prominence generates student applications. But the hoped-for benefits go beyond generating a stronger pool of applicants. Athletic success, and the notoriety it brings, is believed also to generate more donations, as already noted, and stronger support from state and local governments. Buoyed by the apparent success of newly ascendant big-time football programs at institutions like the University of Connecticut, Rutgers, the University of South Florida, and Boise State, other universities, among them Georgia State and the

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, have announced in recent years their intention to launch football programs of their own.[13]

One more standard justification for big-time athletics is the idea that mass allegiance can help to build the bonds of community on a campus. Having a team to root for has a feel-good effect on students that can build valuable social capital while they attend and continue into later years as alumni. One administrator wrote, "Sports teams can foster a deep sense of community and social solidarity, even when those teams lose more often than they win."[14] Since the vast majority of students become involved in big-time sports, if at all, as spectators rather than as players, this justification also invites careful consideration.

These four justifications make up the conventional answer to the foreign visitor's question. Together they say that America's unique form of university-sponsored commercial sports bolsters the academic mission of the universities that have chosen to engage in this enterprise. Some historians have argued that American colleges latched onto sports in the first place as a way to garner the attention and resources they needed to survive in the country's decentralized, competitive marketplace, and these justifications are consistent with that argument. Is it a coincidence that the country whose universities are recognized as global leaders is the only country whose universities sponsor commercial sports on a grand scale?

THE CASE AGAINST BIG-TIME COLLEGE ATHLETICS

Despite these purported benefits, the college sports enterprise has long been a target of vigorous criticism. From the earliest days of intercollegiate competition in rugby, boat racing, baseball, and football, beginning well before 1900, college sports competition generated not only throngs of spectators and widespread newspaper coverage, but also episodes of shocking misbehavior and intense controversy. And well before the era of television and multimillion-dollar pay packages, university leaders were worried about the insinuation of commercial motives into college athletics. As a result, "What is to be done about college athletics?" has been a question of vigorous debate for well over a century. The longevity of this debate alone suggests that the problems associated with big-time athletics are not easily eliminated.

As far back as the 19th century, when the ivy-covered universities were the epicenter of football prowess, Harvard president Charles Eliot warned of "great evil" in the commercialization and overemphasis of college

sports, particularly the highly popular competition in boat racing, baseball, and football. He declared in his 1893 annual report, "With athletics considered as an end in themselves, pursued either for pecuniary profit or popular applause, a college or university has nothing to do. Neither is it an appropriate function for a college or university to provide periodical entertainment during term-time for multitudes of people who are not students."[15] In 1905, following a frightening number of injuries and deaths in college football contests, President Theodore Roosevelt called representatives from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton on the White House carpet to demand that they reform football's rules. This famous meeting resulted in a set of standardized rules and the creation of an organization of universities that would eventually become the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).[16] The rules that came out of this new association successfully addressed the plague of football injuries, so this persistent problem was more or less laid to rest.

Not so with the other problems of big-time college sports. In particular, complaints about excessive emphasis on sports continued to bubble up during the 1920s. To address such criticism with research, the Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching undertook a three-year study of numerous aspects of college athletics. Drawing on site visits to more than 100 colleges and universities, it addressed such issues as the administrative control of athletics inside the university, the consequences of participation, the status of college coaches, recruiting, press coverage of college sports, and amateur status. It documented abuses in recruiting, the undue influence of alumni boosters, slush funds, widespread subsidies to players, high salaries of coaches, and a "distorted scheme of values." As the cause of these defects, the report blamed "commercialism, and a negligent attitude toward the educational opportunities for which the college exists."[17]

In the eight decades since the Carnegie report of 1929, remarkably little has changed in the case against big-time athletics. The reform-minded Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics decried the increasing time demands of televised games, other compromises of academic standards, the high salaries of coaches, abuses in recruiting, and under-the-table payments to athletes. It asserted that big-time athletics had taken on "all the trappings of a major entertainment enterprise."[18] It listed as causes many of the same factors named in the 1929 Carnegie report: the push for revenue, the involvement of media, and the influence of boosters outside the university. Citing practices that threatened academic standards in the pursuit of more revenue, the commission argued that universities were guilty of a "great reversal of ends and means" and, as a consequence,