



COLLEGE ATHLETICS

A playing field for big business

By Roger Cushman

Students who founded athletic teams on their campuses during the latter half of the 19th century would be astonished to see the impact of sports at America's colleges and universities today. Beginning modestly as a recreational diversion from academic work, athletics has emerged as an important social and economic force in higher education. It is a rallying point for many people, a source of controversy for many others, and a subject of research interest for Illinois State University sociologist Wib Leonard.

Professor Leonard is the author of a book, *A Sociological Perspective of Sport*, originally published in 1980 and now in its fourth edition. The book has been adopted by more than 200 institutions, and a fifth edition will be published in 1997.

Leonard said the change in college-supported athletics is most dramatic at the high-profile institutions where big-time football and basketball teams play nationally televised games reaching millions of viewers.

"If we did a complete historical sweep from the 1850s when they were basically club-run intercollegiate programs," Leonard said, we would arrive at "places like the University of Michigan that has a sports budget alone exceeding \$30 million.

"Thirty million dollars," he repeated, emphasizing that Michigan's budget for athletics is more than one-fourth as much as Illinois State University receives in state appropriations. The state appropriated \$116 million for university operations this year.

By contrast, Illinois State's Athletics Department has an \$6.3 million budget supported by student fees, public donations to the Redbird Education and Scholarship Funds, and revenue from events and concessions. During the past five years the University phased out from the operating budget \$1.1 million in state revenue that had helped support Athletics.

Leonard emphasized that Michigan's mammoth athletics budget is not typical among the more than 900 schools affiliated with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The NCAA classifies schools in three divisions of competition, ranging from small liberal arts colleges to the huge land-grant research institutions.

"You may have only 25 percent of all the schools that actually make money," Leonard said. "It is only in Division I where there has been any hope or history of making money, and even there the odds of doing so are not good."

But the payoff can be huge for that top echelon of sports-supporting universities, especially those with football teams that appear regularly on television and in postseason bowl games. Corporate sponsorships and television revenue fueled a payoff of \$12 million each for Nebraska and Miami in the last Fiesta Bowl. The Rose Bowl payout for Northwestern and Southern Cal was \$6.5 million each.

"We're talking about big, big dollars that can be brought in from these postseason contests," Leonard said, although he added that schools with conference affiliation divide the income with other league members. Northwestern shared its Rose Bowl check with 10 other members of the Big Ten Conference plus the league office. Perennial football power Notre Dame is in a better position as an independent, because it keeps all of its bowl receipts.

Corporate money sometimes comes with strings attached. Leonard said that when the Reebok shoe company agreed to donate about \$9.1 million through a multiyear contract to upgrade facilities and buy athletic uniforms at the University of Wisconsin, the company sought an agreement that no university employee could speak disparagingly of Reebok. "How that could be controlled, I don't know," Leonard said. The university balked at the stipulation.

Leonard talks freely about the nation's intercollegiate athletic programs from the perspectives of a sociologist, a former athlete, and an interested spectator. He drew acclaim at Northern Cambria (Pennsylvania) High School for scoring 56 points in a basketball game, and, as a wide receiver, he earned a football scholarship at Albright (Pennsylvania) College.

After playing football and basketball at the small-college level, he observed an Ivy League program while studying for a master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania. Then he gained a close-up view of



Wib Leonard

big-time sports while earning a doctorate at Ohio State University, where legendary coach Woody Hayes stalked the sidelines at the Buckeyes' cavernous horseshoe-shaped football stadium.

Leonard came to Illinois State in 1970. He and a former Illinois State physical education professor, Beverly Wilson, developed a popular "Sociology of Sport" course during the mid-1970s. The course examines sport by using such sociological concepts as social organization, culture, socialization, deviance, social stratification, minority groups, and collective behavior.

"As a participant I was always interested in the effect sport had on both the individual and society," Leonard said. "The common thread is that sport is a microcosm of our society—the games, rules, and the relationship between the players and institutions.

"If a person from Mars came to the United States and didn't know about us, watching sports like baseball and basketball would give a lot of clues to what our society is like."

But that mythical Martian would be deceived if the only glimpse of intercollegiate athletics came from television, Leonard said: "There may be only a hundred schools at this top level. There are lots of schools that have low-key programs, and typically we don't see these on television. What we see on television are the high-profile, entertainment-based, commercialized schools—the Ohio States, the Michigans, the Notre Dames."

Intercollegiate sport has come a long way since the rowing crews of Harvard and Yale staged the first collegiate competition in 1852. The first collegiate baseball game was played in 1859 between Amherst and Williams. Collegiate football came on the scene in 1869, although the first game between Rutgers and Princeton more closely resembled soccer. Yale and Penn played the first intercollegiate basketball game in 1897.

Closer to home, Illinois State's first football game was a 12-4 victory over Illinois Wesleyan in 1887. Basketball was introduced to Illinois State by its women, who lost their first game 6-4 to Wesleyan in 1896. The men didn't organize an intercollegiate team until 1898.

"It was all student-organized and student-administered," Leonard said of college sports in general during that era. "The faculty kind of looked the other way and didn't have much of an interest in it."

But the universities took a stronger interest in regulating the programs when "tramp athletes" began moving from college to college to play on athletic teams without bothering to enroll for classes. Regulation became a necessity when the 1905 football season produced 18 deaths and 149 serious injuries, leading to intervention by President Theodore Roosevelt and the subsequent creation of the NCAA.

Still another reason for university control became apparent when 45,000 spectators showed up for the 1905 Harvard-Yale game. "Colleges began to realize that a buck could be made from intercollegiate athletics," Leonard said. "And not only was it potentially revenue-producing, but it had a public relations component. They could advertise their school much more cheaply through their sport programs than by taking out an ad."

Universities soon began constructing huge stadiums to capitalize on public enthusiasm, especially at the big land-grant institutions such as the University of Illinois, Ohio State, and other Western Conference (Big Ten) members. The University of Michigan has college football's largest stadium with a capacity of more than 106,000.

The emergence of a symbiotic relationship between athletics and the news media led to a "golden age" of sports from the years between 1919 and 1930 and eventually to the economic boom and bust of current times. "We are now at the point that many observers of professional sports in particular think that if television would ever pull out the money that these teams garner, it is not sure whether they would be able to sustain themselves," Leonard said.

So what's on the horizon for intercollegiate athletics? Financial realities will bring many changes, Leonard said.

More corporate sponsorship is inevitable, but that will come at a price. "I don't think some corporation is going to hand over millions of dollars without some strings attached," Leonard said, referring to Reebok's contract with the University of Wisconsin.

"The second thing I see is the rich getting richer and everybody else kind of staying the same," he said. Some of the schools competing in big-time sports may even establish preprofessional programs in athletics and make academic coursework optional. "At this top level, the term student-athlete may be oxymoronic," Leonard said.

A third trend is the continuing development of women's athletics through enforcement of gender equity. This issue was studied at Illinois State during the past year, resulting in the elimination of men's soccer and wrestling programs and the creation of a women's soccer team.

The opportunity for women's athletics to gain a stronger foothold on campuses increased slowly in the years after the passage of Title IX of the educational amendments by Congress in 1972. Originally the programs expressed a different mission than men's programs, but the direction changed after the NCAA wrestled control from the now-defunct Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women.

"I suspect that they will be making some of the same mistakes that men's programs have made, because as you go toward the big time it's more commercialized and more media-sensitive," Leonard said. "Those are the prices that you pay."