

## Would Banning College Football Actually Help Academics?

Last week, *Friday Night Lights* author Buzz Bissinger offered his arguments for why college football should be eliminated. The article appears in advance of tomorrow night's Intelligence Squared debate, in which Bissinger and author Malcolm Gladwell will argue in favor of a ban on college football. They will be opposed by former NFL defensive end Tim Green and sportswriter Jason Whitlock. Bissinger's piece gets at some serious issues with college football and raises some fantastic questions, but it ultimately misses exactly how important the sport is to academic programs at universities across the nation.

The core of Bissinger's argument is financial: athletic departments annually dump millions of dollars into football teams at the expense of university students and other athletic programs. He points to the University of Maryland as an example of the latter:

"The president [of the university], Wallace D. Loh, late last year announced that eight varsity programs would be cut in order to produce a leaner athletic budget, a kindly way of saying that the school would rather save struggling football and basketball programs than keep varsity sports such as track and swimming, in which the vast majority of participants graduate."

The choice that Bissinger portrays, however, is not so cut and dry. What Bissinger fails to grasp is that schools cannot have track or swimming without football and basketball. Maryland's football team might have seen its profits shrink in recent seasons, but it's still a far cry from the losses incurred by non-revenue sports. All of Maryland's non-football-or-basketball athletic programs operated at a combined loss of \$7.3 million last year. The simple fact is that the vast majority of sports lose money, but they are kept afloat thanks to profits from football and basketball. Remove those revenue generators, and the other sports will quickly follow suit.

(It should also be noted that Maryland's basketball team is not actually struggling financially; only nine college basketball teams were more profitable last year.)

But Bissinger's biggest concern seems to be the students who suffer as a result of expensive, coffer-draining football teams. Yes, the same students who are awake at the break of dawn to paint their faces and scream themselves hoarse each Saturday. Those same students who identify themselves daily as Buckeyes, Bruins or Bulldogs. The very same students who may have chosen their schools based on college football allegiances, and who enjoy their fandom as a lifestyle rather than an occasional source of weekend entertainment. Fortunately, college football has also been a valuable source of revenue for their academic experiences.

Successful football programs inject millions into their universities' academic programs. Athletic departments not only cover the costs of student-athlete scholarships, but they often contribute to non-athletic scholarship funds. Alabama's athletic department, for instance, contributed \$3.5 million to the school's non-athletic scholarship fund last year as part of a \$6.5 million contribution package for university programming. Even far less profitable programs like Iowa and Oregon State have been central to academic initiatives. Iowa Athletics contributed \$9 million to a new Campus Recreation and Wellness Center, and Oregon State's athletic department spent \$7 million to open the school's Academic Success Center. Both are available to all university students.

What's more, college football games are an invaluable source of revenue for local businesses. Some teams generate more than \$5 million per home game for local hotels and restaurants. It's fair to argue that local businesses are not the responsibility of university athletic departments, but those businesses, which also serve and often employ university students, stand to suffer significant losses if college football were to be banned.

Bissinger also takes umbrage with the many alumni "who absurdly judge the quality of their alma mater based on the quality of the football team," but that doesn't change the fact that those same alumni donate hundreds of millions of dollars each year to academic programs. Some even put their lives on the line. Athletic departments also rely on the annual contributions that are tied to luxury seating and season ticket options for home football games. Removing college football would completely eliminate that wealthy revenue stream.

And while Bissinger rightly points out that some mid-major schools like Alabama at Birmingham and New Mexico State have football teams that have lost money, the criticism really ought to be an indictment of the BCS revenue distribution model. Schools from conferences that automatically qualify for BCS bowl games enjoy a greater share of league money, leaving mid-major schools to share the scraps. It's good news, then, that the newly proposed playoff system will eliminate automatic qualification while more than doubling the conference distribution pool. An even share of BCS money will hopefully help mid-major programs increase their profitability.

This is hardly to argue that college football is without serious problems. Are some athletic departments guilty of overspending on unsuccessful programs? Certainly. Do college football players get screwed over while coaches and networks make millions? No doubt. But those are reasons for reform, not removal. The argument to ban college football seems rash and tends to understate just how valuable a successful college football program can be to university initiatives.

My humble suggestion? Let's leave the crazy talk to SEC fans from here on out.

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