

SNG-Who is calling the signals?-11-5-18

Who is calling the signals?

By Jim Nowlan

Whenever I go to a high school or college football game, I cringe at the sight of players on the field, standing as if witless (which they aren't), looking to the sidelines for instructions from the coaches as to plays to call and defenses to mount.

I fear that technology, coaches and parents have connived, unwittingly I'm sure, to take the game away from the kids. Let's give it back to them.

When I played high school football 60 years ago, we called our own plays in the huddle. And it was a good learning experience. In addition to using our own wits, we learned how to work together and make our own way on the field.

Quarterback Dan Carrington was the final word on play calling, yet players often chimed in with such as: "Go off left tackle, Dan. I know I can handle this guy."

Then we went off tackle, and "this guy" reared up, pushed our left tackle aside, and smote down our halfback for a loss. Thus, Dan learned how to measure his teammates and whom he could trust. Dan later became president of Western Union.

According to coaches and veteran football officials I talked with, those days are long gone.

Digital technology now gives coaches the capacity to learn instantaneously during the game, from assistants up in the press box, about opponents' defenses and of stuff players on the field can't know. And the team playbook is an order of magnitude more complex than it was in my day, when we passed the pigskin maybe three or four times all game.

Winning is apparently even more important to parents than it was in my day. A losing coach won't be around for long, as he might have been in back when. So, coaches are under pressure to take advantage of every tool available, including calling the plays and defenses.

And though they wouldn't admit it, the coaches love being a greater part, maybe the dominant part, of the action.

In effect, the high school players have become pawns under the Friday night lights.

At the big-time college football level, the top five conferences, such as the SEC and Big Ten, are really professional businesses. Coach Lovey Smith at U. of I. makes \$4 million a year and former athletic director Ron Guenther half a million in annual pension payments, with teams that can't beat the College of the Little Sisters of the Poor, adding insult to injury.

When I was teaching at the University of Illinois in the 1990s, the political science adviser helped the UI players as much as possible. They had trouble scheduling a fifth course each semester, because from noon until 8 p.m. or so each day they were at work: weight training, practice, games.

Then, when a player used up his eligibility, his scholarship was yanked, often long before graduation. Sister Marie Golla, PhD, the adviser, would raise Holy Hell with the athletic department, sometimes getting scholarships reinstated.

I would now and then help Sister Marie by taking a few players into independent studies, their fifth course in a semester. We met after evening training table meals. The players also lived in separate dorms, secluded from other students; they rarely became a part of campus life.

Now and then a player made it to the pros, but average tenure there is just three years, I recall. Few make really big bucks.

Here is what we can do to protect players from being pawns in a larger, adult game.

The U.S. Tennis Association prohibits coaching from the sidelines, from the pros down to the juniors. In high school tennis, players even make their own in-or-out line calls, which has to build a sense of integrity.

At the college level, the National Labor Relations Board dismissed a case in 2015 brought by Northwestern University football players, who sought labor union recognition. The NLRB dismissed the case, effectively denying the players the right to organize.

The NLRB basically punted, finding that most of the big-time schools are public universities, over which the NLRB had no control. So, the NCAA continues to play adult, incredibly profitable games, while the players are moved around like chess pieces.

Since the schools are public, public opinion will have to be brought to bear on the elite football schools to share the wealth, paying their players a decent salary.

I say let the high school players call their own games, and learn from the experience, pay big school football players—and fire Lovey Smith.