

SNG-Nowlan-Pay the players-8-6-12

Pay big time college athletes

By Jim Nowlan

The average salary of big-time college football coaches topped \$1.4 million this year, according to USA Today. With that kind of money sloshing around, the players deserve their cut as well; after all, you can do without a high-priced coach but you can't do without the players.

When I was teaching at the University of Illinois, from time to time I had student athletes in my classes or in small-group independent study classes. The student-athletes often had trouble scheduling their fourth or fifth classes for a semester, which was required to be full-time students, because they were busy all afternoon and early evening with football.

The student-athletes (should be reversed and called athlete-students, to put the priorities in order) worked full-time at their football (and basketball) craft. After lunch it was the weight room, followed by lengthy practice sessions. And of course lots of travel for away games. By the time they finished a day, they were exhausted, and concentration on studies came hard, if at all.

The advisor in political science, where I taught, was a Catholic nun with a PhD. She was tough and compassionate at the same time. If we recruited a player with a weak academic background to play football, then the university had a responsibility to be helpful in finding courses for the student-athletes, or so she thought.

I remember agreeing to teach a small-group independent study course for student athletes at the training table facility under the stadium stands, where the athletes ate after weight training and practice. Having burned up thousands of calories that day, the athletes walked down the

cafeteria line, spearing a T-bone or two, plus a half chicken and a couple of baked potatoes. After gulping all that down, they were supposed to be ready for education, right? Wrong.

The big-time sports universities are under pressure to increase the percentage of student-athletes who graduate, which is good. But it is tough for the often poorly prepared student whose love is football and the dream of playing in the NFL.

Only two or three percent ultimately make the pros, and they stay in pro ball for an average of only three years, so rare in the college athlete who really rakes it in later.

Years ago I attended a professional soccer match in Guadalajara, Mexico; the teams were university-affiliated. High up in the stands, I sat next to a couple of local cops with the day off, so I practiced my broken Spanish.

“The players are paid, right?” Right, was the answer. “Do the players attend their universities?” Some do, some don’t, the cops told me.

This seemed eminently sensible to me. After all, as in Mexico, our university teams are feeders to higher-up professional teams.

American big-time college players do receive free tuition and most meals. But they deserve more, based upon the pleasure they accord scores of thousands of their fanatic school backers. (The fans don’t know the players, just that they are wearing the good ol’ orange and blue.)

At present the players are simply pawns in the big-money game of grown-ups who receive all the benefits. The players used to be forgotten when their eligibility ran out; I hope that is not true today.

If there are 100 players in a program, \$20,000 a year per player represents \$2 million a year in a big-time sports program that typically generates \$20 to \$90 million a year. This could be saved for the players and given to them when they departed school, enough to start a small business or pursue more education, if they had not completed their degrees.

We should abandon the fiction that the players are amateur. And so long as they are in school, we should also provide them counsel on how to get along in life after their playing days are over. For the pleasure of our games, we should spread the wealth around.