



FOOTBALL U.

**Spectator Sports in the Life
of the American University**

J. DOUGLAS TOMA

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

ANN ARBOR

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PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA BY

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

⊗ PRINTED ON ACID-FREE PAPER

2006 2005 2004 2003 4 3 2 1

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

TOMA, J. DOUGLAS.

FOOTBALL U. : SPECTATOR SPORTS IN THE LIFE OF THE AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY / J. DOUGLAS TOMA.

P. CM.

INCLUDES INDEX.

ISBN 0-472-11299-6 (ALK. PAPER)

1. FOOTBALL—SOCIAL ASPECTS—UNITED STATES. 2. COLLEGE SPORTS—
SOCIAL ASPECTS—UNITED STATES. 3. UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES—UNITED
STATES—ADMINISTRATION. I. TITLE.

GV959.5 .T66 2003

796.332'63'0973—DC21

2002153617

Acknowledgments

As this book is the product of a research study, I would like to thank, first and foremost, those people who were so generous in sharing their reflections about the impact of spectator sports on external relations and campus community in American higher education. I agreed to keep their identities confidential, although throughout the manuscript I do identify the eleven campuses that I visited in conducting the study. These institutions are representative of the different types of universities that make a substantial institutional commitment to intercollegiate athletics generally, and to football in particular:

University of Arizona
Brigham Young University
Clemson University
University of Connecticut
Louisiana State University
University of Michigan
Northwestern University
University of Nebraska
University of Notre Dame
University of Nevada-Las Vegas
Texas A&M University

I conducted 177 formal interviews, focusing on senior administrators and senior faculty—and at least the same number of informal interviews, generally with students, other faculty, and lower-level staff. Once again, I would like to thank these people for their time and insights.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I conducted this study while at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and would like to thank my colleagues and students at the School of Education there for their support, particularly Joan Gallos and Richard Palm. I would also like to thank the offices of the Vice Provost for Research and the Dean of the School of Education at UMKC for funding this work. I completed this work while a visiting research fellow at the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania at the invitation of Robert Zemsky, whose work has made such an important contribution to our understanding of American higher education. Writing can be lonely work, but Bob and my good colleagues at IRHE and the higher education division at the Penn Graduate School of Education, as well as our students, provided me with the space, intellectual engagement, and good wishes needed to bring this work to fruition. The same is true with my present role on the Penn faculty, where my colleagues and our students, both in The Executive Doctorate and our other programs, make my work both better and more fun. Particular thanks to Bob and Marvin Lazerson for their support and good counsel; to Matt Hartley and Chris Hopey, who are good friends and true colleagues in every respect; and to Christy Santos, Michael Harris, and our executive doctorate team.

I would also like to thank my many colleagues across the country who study higher education for their work, on which I have drawn so heavily in this and other projects, as well as for their fellowship over the years. Particular thanks to Mike Cross, Greg Dubrow, Chris Golde, Adrianna Kezar, Christopher Morphew, Lisa Wolf-Wendel, and Kelly Ward for being such great collaborators, consistent supporters, and very good friends. Furthermore, I would like to express my appreciation to my faculty advisors and my fellow students at the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. At Michigan, Marv Peterson showed me how to run an academic program; he and his colleagues introduced me to the study of higher education; and I learned what it means to be a researcher by working with Joan Stark. In writing this book and in my other scholarly work, I have also drawn on my experience as an undergraduate at James Madison College at Michigan State University and as a law student at the University of Michigan. At MSU, I first experienced Football U. and the collegiate ideal, particularly through a group of friends who remain friends to this day—and I was fortunate to have the same experience later at Michigan Law.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kelly Sippell and the staff at the University of Michigan Press have been an absolute pleasure to work with—and have improved this book in countless ways. Thank you—and Go Blue!

Finally, I cannot imagine this project, my other work, or anything in my life without my wife, Linda. It is to her love, support, and counsel that I dedicate this book.

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

1

The Name of the Game:
Spectator Sports in Institution Building 1

2

The College Try: The Collegiate Ideal and the Landscape
of Intercollegiate Athletics 17

3

School Colors: The Forms of Institutional Culture 47

4

Team Spirit: Community and the Substance
of Institutional Culture 73

5

League Standings: The University as National Brand 95

6

Home Games: Local Involvement in the Life of the
American University 127

7

Loyal Fans: Institutional Identification at State U. 165

8

The Football School: Institutional Image
and Brand Equity 195

CONTENTS

9

Homecoming Weekend:
Motivating Institutional Advancement 217

10

Amateur Ideals and Commercial Realities:
Understanding the American University and the Future of
College Sports 245

Index 283

Illustrations *following page 150*



The Name of the Game: Spectator Sports in Institution Building

At Football U., spectator sports are central in institutional life, providing the campus with a distinctive identity and popular appeal. When enough people are paying attention such that football really matters at a university, teams and games contribute in important ways to the culture of the institution and how outsiders connect with it. College football exemplifies the collegiate life that is of paramount importance to universities and that gives institutional culture much of its form and substance. Spectator sports contribute to making what can be otherwise indistinguishable large universities distinctive. Football also makes otherwise distant institutions accessible. Football provides a meaningful point of connection for the local constituents who provide financial support to universities. It is what they know and like about the university. Accordingly, football facilitates identification by individuals with institutions and fosters effective external relations, whether in the form of alumni relations, fund-raising, admissions, government relations, or public relations. And effective external relations is what enables the aspirations of essentially local institutions to national standing.

In American higher education, it is not enough for leading institutions simply to sustain adequate or even exemplary programs. There must be the widespread perception of continued improvement and increasing status. Accordingly, these institutions focus on pursuits that can be framed as academic accomplishments. These include noteworthy

FOOTBALL U.

faculty hires, accomplished and diverse students, and growing endowments, as well as research funding and graduate programs at universities that claim a research mission. Most of these research institutions are public, and the leading ones are state flagships.¹ These institutions rely on state subsidies and other support from mostly local sources to advance their ambitions. The name of the game here is to make a successful appeal to acquire the resources needed to fund the initiatives and programs that raise their overall profile. This appeal involves spectator sports at most flagship state universities, as well as at a few larger private institutions that generally resemble flagships, such as Syracuse University and the University of Southern California. These institutions are “Football U.”—large universities where football, the quintessential spectator sport on American campuses, receives considerable attention. The focus of this book is to understand better the cultural significance of football at these institutions, as well as the place of spectator sports in serving the ambitions of individual universities.

There are certainly important American universities where spectator sports does not matter or barely matters in institutional vitality and ambitions. The American Association of Universities (AAU) includes the sixty-one most prominent American universities—and thirty-eight of these institutions play football at the highest level. Spectator sports are essentially a historical relic at eleven others, including seven members of the Ivy League (excluding only Dartmouth) that once competed in college football quite famously. A listing of the college football powers circa 1900—and well into the twentieth century—would have included Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Penn, along with current leaders such as Georgia Tech, Louisiana State, Michigan, and Penn State. Of the twenty-two teams to be named national champion in one of several polls between 1900 and 1915 (there are commonly multiple champions in a given year), fourteen were members of the Ivy League.² The Yale Bowl and Franklin Field at Penn, both seating over sixty thousand spectators, date to the late 1910s and early 1920s, respectively, and are a lasting testament to the importance of college football on Ivy League campuses during this era. Other AAU institutions, most prominently the University of Chicago, would have certainly been on the list of football powers, and Carnegie Mellon, Case Western Reserve, and Catholic also once fielded leading football teams.

Football is now a footnote in the Ivy League. With the exception of “The Game” between Harvard and Yale each year, the great old stadiums

THE NAME OF THE GAME

in Cambridge and New Haven are considerably more empty than full on game days. Chicago eliminated football in the 1930s, only recently reviving it at the Division III level, where competition is student activity, not spectator sport. (There are no athletics scholarships in Division III, for instance, as there are in Division I, which is where Football U. competes.) There are also a few prominent institutions, such as the newer University of California campuses, Caltech, MIT, and Emory, where football has never been prominent, and is participatory in nature, if it exists at all. The State University of New York flagships—Albany, Binghamton, Buffalo, Stony Brook—traditionally avoided spectator sports, but all have moved toward them in recent years, with Buffalo returning to Division I football and the others establishing Division I basketball programs. Ivy League games still serve a institutional purpose, providing an excuse for alumni to return to campus and reminding those on campus of the symbols and other cultural forms that contribute to making their university distinctive. (Where else is “10,000 Men of Harvard” likely to be sung?) However, the event has little of the scope of football Saturday at Football U.—and thus little of its impact. In their day, these universities used football to amplify campus community and enhance external relations much as does Football U. today. The popularity of their football teams around the turn of the twentieth century certainly contributed to building these institutions, enhancing collegiate life, and establishing places like Harvard and Yale in the popular culture. Football made these universities accessible and appealing to those beyond campus, as it does for Football U. today.

By the formal establishment of the Ivy League in the 1950s, its members had become sufficiently positioned that they could turn from football to other sources of connection with supporters. The difference between the Ivy League and Football U. is that the former found that they could still acquire needed resources without spectator sports. This is inconceivable at Football U. today. At the universities at which I researched this book—Arizona, Brigham Young, Clemson, Louisiana State, Michigan, Nebraska, UNLV, Northwestern, Notre Dame, Texas A&M—and those like them, a proposal to de-emphasize football would simply not be taken seriously. Spectator sports are too great a part of the fiber of the institution and too important a strategic tool. A plausible discussion of de-emphasizing football occurs only on campuses where the sport has struggled both on the field and at the ticket office for years, as at Rutgers or Temple. And even on these campuses, there is no real dis-

FOOTBALL U.

cussion of downsizing the more successful basketball programs (women's at Rutgers and men's at Temple). There are few prominent examples of institutions reducing their commitment to spectator sports absent financial concerns. Even the often-cited maneuver by President Robert Maynard Hutchins to eliminate football at Chicago occurred over several years, a decade after the departure of their famous coach, Amos Alonzo Stagg, and even longer after the Maroons were a national power. Penn de-emphasized football in the 1950s only under threat from other Ivy League institutions that they would no longer schedule games with the Quakers, who were attempting to continue as a football power by scheduling games with national powers such as Notre Dame, Michigan, and Army. Penn chose to preserve its Ivy League identity as an institution—an identity that football gave to Penn.

Given the importance of spectator sports at Football U. as an outlet for institutional enthusiasm, vehicle for institutional identity, and tool for fulfilling institutional appetites, it is safe to assume that Arizona, Clemson, Louisiana State, and Nebraska will not be faced with a choice similar to that made by Penn. Spectator sports simply matter too much at Football U., including in the expression of the collegiate ideal that is at the foundation of how Americans relate to higher education institutions. The collegiate nature of residential colleges and universities, including Football U., plays a significant role in the game of building community, enhancing status, and acquiring resources. Even the largest institutions, although ostensibly focused on the production and dissemination of knowledge, must also have a collegiate look and feel in order to be perceived in the right ways—and not only by prospective students. Football U. must incorporate the blend of community and campus culture originally associated with small colleges—and which universities continued to embrace as they evolved from colleges at the turn of the last century. In our uniquely American view of higher education, collegiate look and feel is a condition of status and legitimacy. Institutions that do not have it commonly identify the pressing need to develop a collegiate atmosphere and aura. Elsewhere in the world, students “attend university,” emphasizing scholarly pursuits. Americans, on the other hand, “attend college.” The popular conception of higher education, even at the largest universities, is coupled with “collegiate” things that have very little to do with the scholarly life—campus landscaping, residence life, student activities . . . and spectator sports.

THE NAME OF THE GAME

This is the collegiate ideal so firmly rooted in American popular culture: the combination of community and campus culture associated with the traditional American small college, a form that dates back to colonial times. Campus life has long been an important marker of the privilege conferred on those associated with an institution, even when that institution is a large university. In the American context, higher education institutions either link their academic missions with collegiate life, or explain that they are departing from that standard in order to focus on student convenience. And institutions that turn away from collegiate life are perceived, oddly enough, to lack academic rigor. Indeed, there is no leading American university that has separated itself from the collegiate ideal. Simply having the markers of collegiate life adds consequence to institutions—and the most important institutions are typically the most collegiate in look and feel. The spectator sports, particularly college football, that are—or once were—a prominent component of the collegiate ideal at nearly all of our great universities are simply part of the equation of enhancing status and acquiring resources. They are a far more significant part, in fact, than commentators or institutions themselves readily acknowledge.

At Football U., local communities provide the revenue from tuition, appropriations, and gifts that comprises the majority of the budget. They also provide the margin of additional resources that can be applied to strategic goals. Despite this crucial local support, the academic measures of a great research university—the status to which Football U. generally aspires—are often of little relevance and limited appeal to statewide communities. In other words, the academic goals that matter to faculty and administrators (and perhaps even boards of trustees) are commonly misunderstood and even unpopular among those who provide the resources needed for institution building at Football U. While external constituents may appreciate some academic pursuits, such as undergraduate teaching and applied research, they are usually more interested in things collegiate—and many are passionate about that cardinal element of collegiate identity, spectator sports on football Saturday. Football is what many outsiders know and like about an institution. It is what sells. Spectator sports make insiders out of local communities, who become passionate advocates for, and supporters of, “their” university on the basis of identification with “their” teams. Football U. naturally focuses in external relations on what local communities

FOOTBALL U.

understand and relate to. The collegiate ideal, particularly as celebrated on football Saturdays, provides Football U. with an invaluable means to reach external constituents for fund-raising and other objectives.

Local communities—and alumni and friends, in particular—can be willing and generous supporters when they identify so closely with the institutions they adopt. Much the same can be said of the legislators who appropriate state revenue on behalf of their constituents. Accordingly, these key constituents, who have so much invested in “their” institution, both financially and emotionally, demand that the object of their support be broadly recognized as worthy of it. In this way, universities bestow honor—or at least bragging rights—on the places and the people who support them. Football U., the flagship campus or campuses in a state, serves as a cultural touchstone for supporters. These institutions provide a locus for expression of the pride of place that is so central in the American psyche. Institutions must therefore contend that they are distinctive and noteworthy, and therefore able to confer that status on those who associate with them. Only then can they charge the tuition, attract the state appropriations, and secure the increasingly significant private donations that take institutions beyond mere maintenance toward greatness. Spectator sports provide a widely understood, public forum in which institutions—even otherwise unremarkable universities—can claim status. Indeed, football is the most distinctive and most noteworthy aspect of the majority of flagship universities (or their states, for that matter).

Academic accomplishments certainly contribute here. Without a meaningful academic program, the collegiate ideal is an empty concept. Without question, people support universities because of the worthy ends of their academic ventures: the teaching, research, and service that improve the lot of individuals and the collective life of society. However, most people understand these in only a vague sense—and may misunderstand and even oppose the more arcane academic ends of their state flagship university or universities. They may appreciate the most tangible and practical roles of institutions, such as preparing students for careers in professional fields or furthering economic development through applied research. But they are likely to see little value in the pure research in the humanities, for instance, that is at the center of what faculty and administrators value. This is where football comes in at Football U.—as a distraction from unpopular activities and a readily accessible opportunity to engage members of the community. Universi-

THE NAME OF THE GAME

ties can—and do—use spectator sports in deliberate ways to connect with their external constituents.

Nearly all of our great universities are—or once were—prominent in football. The connections that supporters make through collegiate life and spectator sports have provided the goodwill and capital that institutions needed to become great universities in the first place. It is no accident that “regional” or “compass point” state institutions that aspire to emulate flagships by expanding their research and graduate education missions often couple this with building a greater presence in spectator sports. Understanding the American university thus requires more than an appreciation of the academic life at its core. It demands an appreciation of the overall higher education marketplace that requires certain institutions—and essentially all leading institutions—to be concerned about matters that have little if anything to do with classrooms or laboratories. American institutions have never lived by academics alone. Just as the campus would be an empty shell without a vibrant academic life, the typical large American university would be incomplete—even unrecognizable—without the look and feel that make it collegiate. The same is true of the pride and involvement that collegiate life engenders for local constituents—and that prompt them to support institutions in attempts to raise their status and standing. At Football U., this quest is inexorably linked with spectator sports. The name of the game at American higher education institutions, particularly the most prominent campuses, is institution building. And the name of the game in institution building includes—perhaps even centers upon—the collegiate character and nonacademic pursuits that connect academic institutions with the key constituents who support them. The flagship American university is, by definition, Football U.

Just as Football U. is a discrete institution type, it is crucial to keep in mind that spectator sports there are distinct from intercollegiate athletics more generally. Only a relatively few sports on a relatively few campuses are spectator sports, attracting sufficient notice so that the teams and games transcend their participants. At Football U., spectator sports are not merely an activity, but a phenomenon with an important place in both institutional culture and the broader American culture. I use college football as the primary illustration of these campus-based, spectator-focused sporting events at most state flagships and other large institutions. A few other sports—mainly men’s basketball, but also sports like hockey or women’s basketball at a few institutions—also gar-

FOOTBALL U.

ner enough recognition to be relevant beyond those participating on the field or court (and their friends and families) to influence the strategic ends of sponsoring institutions. By contrast, volleyball, golf, and gymnastics at these institutions, and even football at smaller institutions, are essentially about the athletes competing—they are a student activity. Football as a spectator extravaganza goes well beyond those immediately participating to contribute to the construction and expression of community and culture at Football U., as well as shaping policy, planning, and practice at these institutions.

I argue that football underscores the collegiate ideal—the broad norms, values, and beliefs identified with things collegiate—as well as things distinctive and things noteworthy, at Football U. Football highlights the unique culture through which particular institutions express the collegiate ideal. In both substance and form, institutional culture helps make institutions understandable and accessible to those associated with them by highlighting the appealing qualities, such as community, that are at the core of the collegiate ideal. Furthermore, spectator sports also provide institutions that are essentially local in their reach with a national brand, adding distinctiveness and importance to otherwise commonplace campuses. Teams and games provide a convenient vehicle through which external constituents, in particular, relate to institutions and thus identify with them—coming to think of the institutions as their own. In connecting key constituents to the institutions they come to want to support—institutions that are thought to be distinctive, central, and enduring—football is a critical tool in external relations at Football U., serving those in alumni relations, development, governmental relations, public affairs, and admissions. These events make institutions accessible and desirable—and thus worthy of support. Spectator sports are thus central in the strategic approach to the acquisition of resources necessary for institution building at Football U.

Within this framework, I examine the strategic importance of college football from a variety of perspectives on institution building, beginning with institutional culture. Any organization, higher education institutions included, requires the repeated expression of shared symbols, language, narratives, and practices to give form to the norms, values, and beliefs that define its unique culture. Smaller communities, as at a liberal arts college, can express culture in intimate ways, particularly in the practices—the rituals, taboos, rites, and ceremonials—that are the most complex and thus most meaningful declarations of culture. Insti-

THE NAME OF THE GAME

tutions develop and then underscore their unique cultures with a purpose: to build community and identification. Indeed, the collegiate look and feel that people associate with campuses both large and small evolved from the characteristics of places much smaller and more intimate than the contemporary large university. Enhancing campus community and institutional identification at larger universities requires the same expression of culture as occurs at smaller institutions. At Football U., spectator sports provide a prominent and powerful forum for the expression of what is distinctive about the institution. In and around the stadium on football Saturdays, the university community displays its culture in tangible and unique forms—its colors, logos, and mascots (symbols); songs and slogans (language); stories, legends, and myths (narratives); and rituals and ceremonials (practices).

These events embody the norms, values, and beliefs that American institutions generally share. It is only in their tangible expression that institutions differ from one another. The ideal in American higher education remains that of college—and the hallmark of the collegiate ideal is a distinctive culture and intimate community. Spectator sports articulate and express in tangible form the institutional culture associated with collegiate aura, atmosphere, and activity. They also manifest the campus community that is so central in the popular perception of “college.” The “big game” involves extraordinarily diverse groups in a single activity that many perceive to be significant, even when simply watched on television or followed in the newspaper. Since small-scale practices are impractical on large campuses, large-scale events must serve as surrogates. This is where football contributes, providing collegiate look and feel to the large campus. Certainly, small-scale community and identification exist at large institutions outside of football: in classrooms, student organizations, and residence halls, for instance. And large institutions can make themselves look like the idealized American campus with tree-lined paths and red brick buildings. Nevertheless, although not everyone takes part, spectator sports provide the broadest opportunity for extended communities to share in a complex cultural experience that embodies the collegiate look and feel that people expect of even the largest institutions.

These events are truly significant in community building with the extended university community. Those on campus generally have multiple connections to the institution, so football is only part of their bond. Spectator sports allow the extended, off-campus university commu-