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**A conversation with Michael Oriard**

Author of *Bowled Over: Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era*

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**Q: How did your experience as an All-American at Notre Dame during the period of social change you write about in *Bowled Over* influence your perspective?**

**A:** My own experience playing football at Notre Dame in the 1960s is a touchstone in numerous ways for how I think about college football's subsequent history and the game today. I was extremely fortunate, a beneficiary of a system that anyone who follows the sport knows does not benefit everyone. As a walk-on, I arrived in college with education as my top priority; my Notre Dame football career then worked out in almost fairytale fashion, but without ever challenging that fundamental priority. I know that my experience was not typical for my generation, but neither was it unique. (Believing one or the other is dangerous in writing from personal experience.) I played with teammates who arrived with scholarships and much greater expectations from the sport, but they were also students (the starting offensive line on which I played in 1968 had an average GPA of 3.4). As I have followed college football in recent decades, at my own university and around the country through the media, I have come to doubt that the kind of academic experience that was available to all of us, if we chose it, is even available today.

My experience thus brings home to me how the pressures on "student-athletes" and their time commitments in big-time college football have increased since I played, and not to the benefit of the "student" in the "student-athlete." My experience also makes me aware of how much more commercialized the game has become since the 1960s, how much more money flows in and out of the sport, again not to the benefit of the young men who play. In these and many other ways, my experience shapes my view of how the "system" of big-time football has changed, but at the same time it keeps me from forgetting that football players are individual people, like myself and my teammates forty years ago, not the one-dimensional figures in the headlines denouncing the latest scandal. Football players have been stereotyped, in both positive and negative ways, for decades, and my experience prevents me from believing the stereotypes. It does not enable me to know exactly what it's like to play big-time college football today; rather, it keeps me from assuming that I can know on the basis of what I read or see on television.

Having played (and come of age) in an era of extraordinary social change also keeps me from subscribing to the stereotyped views of the politics of the 1960s and of the politics

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of football. More on that below.

**Q: The subtitle of *Bowled Over* is *Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era*. For those who don't know, what is the BCS era?**

**A:** The BCS (or Bowl Championship Series) was created in 1998 supposedly as an arrangement for determining a national champion in Division I-A college football. What the BCS did, more importantly, was increase enormously the payouts from the major bowls and assure that the overwhelming bulk of bowl revenue would go to the major conferences and top independent programs. The "BCS era," then, simply refers to big-time college football since 1998, but it is also the latest stage in widening the gap between a superelite of football programs generating tens of millions of dollars in revenue and all of the rest.

**Q: Is there a fundamental contradiction that lies at the heart of big-time college football?**

**A:** Yes. Everyone who follows college football knows that the sport is a highly commercialized popular entertainment sponsored by institutions of higher education, and knows that there is considerable conflict between those two aspects. Recognizing that this "conflict" is in fact a "contradiction" emphasizes not just the incompatibility of the commercial and academic objectives, but also the fact that the commercialization continuously undermines academic priorities. The consequences of this contradiction have become increasingly acute, but we have been living with it for more than a century. Football began in the 1870s as an extracurricular activity at a handful of elite universities in the Northeast, with no interest (or knowledge of the game) beyond those campuses. By the early 1890s, the championship game on Thanksgiving in New York was drawing 40,000 spectators and newspaper coverage in every part of the country was spreading the game with astonishing rapidity. Once university leaders realized that they could gain more publicity from their football team on one Saturday afternoon than from their academic programs over the course of a year, they embraced the contradiction of an extracurricular activity operating as a highly-commercialized popular entertainment. And they have been trying to manage this contradiction every since.

**Q: You challenge the conventional wisdom that associates college football and football players with a "jock" mentality that is socially conservative, clean-cut, and anti-radical. Can you give some examples that support this more complicated view?**

**A:** The stereotype of the conservative, clean-cut, anti-radical "jock" suffered a severe blow in the late 1960s, when football players at dozens of programs staged various kinds of protests against their coaches and universities. More often than not the players were black, and their actions were part of a much broader movement in which African Americans refused to continue living in the U. S. as second-class citizens. But white players, too, responded to the political and cultural turmoil of the times. Outside the world of football, the Vietnam War and the draft hovered over all of us and, along with the Civil Rights movement, forced us to make political choices. Within the world of

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football, players politicized by national and world events became less likely to acquiesce automatically to the dictates of that ultimate authority figure, the coach. A handful of players became famous as rebels: Dave Meggysey quit the NFL and wrote a scathing indictment of football at both the college and professional levels; Chip Oliver quit the Oakland Raiders, joined a commune, and wrote a book about it; George Sauer quit the New York Jets because he felt that football was dehumanizing. More generally, college football players were college students, too, facing the draft and the national turmoil like everyone else. Whether football players in general were more conservative than the rest of the student body, I don't know, but I do know that the players were individuals grappling with the issues of the day in our own consciences, not through a collective identity of political conservatism.

**Q: What was the legacy of the social and political protests of the 1960s, particularly protests against the Vietnam War and against racial bigotry, on college football?**

**A:** For college football, the legacy of the 1960s was a loosening of the coach's authority over players' lives off the field and over incidental matters such as personal grooming (hair length, facial hair) that once seemed vitally important to team "discipline." More significantly, the end of segregated football in the South and the dramatic expansion of racial integration in the North racially transformed the game on the field while also forcing white coaches to understand that not all of their athletes came from the same social world. To some degree, coaches had to deal more directly with their players as people as well as athletes. White coaches also had to hire black assistants who could relate to their black players, breaking down another racial barrier (that has not yet been fully removed).

Creating more opportunities for black players, however, also created more possibilities for exploiting black players' athletic talents. Academic scandals became a routine part of big-time college football by the 1980s. And coaches' ultimate power was not actually reduced because they controlled the football careers of athletes hoping to cash in on the dramatically increasing salaries of the National Football League.

**Q: You mention several U.S. presidents who were football fans, and one in particular, Richard Nixon, who became known as the "Chief Jock." How do you account for Nixon's passionate and at times inappropriate involvement with the game?**

**A:** Nixon was routinely identified as a former "scrub" football player at Whittier College, and he was genuinely a fan throughout his adult life. But in the late 1960s, he seems also to have consciously used his passion for football as a way to connect to ordinary Americans, the "Silent Majority" opposed to the counterculture and political radicalism of the time. He also pushed the metaphorical identification of politics with football to new extremes, to the extent that some commentators wondered if the connection went beyond metaphor, and that Nixon viewed politics and governing as competitions no more complicated than football games in which the sole object is to win at whatever

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cost. Nixon's open love for football sometimes seemed merely quirky (as when he recommended a play to the Redskins' coach, George Allen, which lost 13 yards in a 1971 NFL playoff game), but his seeming to confuse politics with football on other occasions seemed possibly dangerous.

#### **Q: How did the integration of college football differ in the north than in the south?**

**A:** None of the major conferences in the South (the Atlantic Coast, the Southeastern, and the Southwest) had integrated football teams as the 1960s opened, and the last southern teams did not integrate until 1972. Because football in the South was a hugely important symbol of southern manhood and southern culture, integration meant a major readjustment. Yet no headline-grabbing racial "incidents" disrupted the integration of southern football (until 1972, when Georgia Tech's black quarterback Eddie McAshan was suspended). The actual experiences of the black pioneers were often painful and difficult, but no one reported this at the time. The relative silence of the southern press during this momentous transformation is one of the most intriguing aspects of the events.

A racial revolution took place in the North as well in the 1960s, but of a very different kind—as noisy as the South's revolution was quiet. Dozens of teams experienced protests by black players over playing time, treatment by coaches, the absence of black assistants, and the range of issues of concern to black college students generally. Some of these protests were addressed more or less quietly, behind the scenes, but several of them—including ones in major programs such as Oregon State, Iowa, Wyoming, Indiana, Washington, and Syracuse—convulsed the entire university and community.

#### **Q: What are the origins of the one-year athletic scholarship and how has it affected NCAA football?**

**A:** The one-year scholarship, renewal at the coach's discretion (as opposed to the four- or five-year guaranteed scholarship), was established at the 1973 NCAA convention so quietly that the public paid little attention, and most fans likely did not even realize that it happened. The rationale was economics—saving money—and it also addressed a long-standing desire among coaches to have more control over their athletes. (Before 1967 a scholarship athlete could even quit his sport without surrendering his scholarship.) But coincidentally, the institution of the one-year scholarship also closely followed the years of athletic protest (NCAA legislation in 1969 openly addressed this rebelliousness). The one-year scholarship, which transformed "student-athletes" into athlete-students—making the athlete accountable to his coach, not his professors, for the continuation of his financial aid—seems to have been motivated at least in part as a response to the student radicalism and racial upheavals of the late 1960s. The Law of Unintended Consequences is painfully evident here as athletes have had no choice but to accept the increasing time commitments demanded for their sport.

#### **Q: In 1973 the NCAA divided its membership into three divisions or levels. Why did this come about, and what has been its legacy?**

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**A:** The division of the NCAA into Divisions I, II, and III was the last piece of legislation—along with making freshmen eligible for varsity competition, lowering admission standards, and instituting the one-year scholarship—that transformed college football in 1972-73. The creation of divisions was the first major attempt by the NCAA to address the desire of the big-time football schools to set their own rules (and to claim for themselves the revenues that they alone generated). Creating three divisions was not enough, and it was followed by the creation of the College Football Association, the separation of Division I-A from I-AA and I-AAA, and ultimately the Bowl Championship Series, in each case consolidating more autonomy and revenue for the football elite.

**Q: In 1983 the NCAA reformed its earlier "reforms" by attempting to reassert academic standards for college athletes. What were the consequences of these reforms?**

**A:** The need for reforms was brought about by a series of highly-publicized academic scandals that followed inevitably from the transformation of college football at the NCAA conventions in 1972 and 1973 (freshmen eligibility, looser admission standards, the one-year scholarship). Reform of some kind was indisputably needed, and the actual reforms (raising the admission requirements for football eligibility) were applauded by many, but they also were attacked as "racist" for disproportionately affecting African American athletes and for relying too heavily on the culturally-biased Scholastic Aptitude Test. More fundamentally in my view, the efforts for academic reform have been continuously undermined by an unending pursuit of more and more revenue. Efforts to assure that "student-athletes" graduate (and perhaps receive a real education along the way) confront the increasing demands on their time and energy on the football field as the financial stakes have been constantly raised.

**Q: The role (and salary) of football coaches changed dramatically in the 1990s. How has that change affected college players?**

**A:** I had no idea how much money my college coach, Ara Parseghian, made. Today, it would be almost impossible for a Division I-A (Football Bowl Subdivision) football player not to know how much his coach makes. The average salary in the top division now exceeds \$1 million with the highest-paid coaches taking in more than \$4 million. As this has happened, the players have not received a "raise" since athletic scholarships were first established in the 1950s. A scholarship is worth more in dollars, but it pays for the same tuition, room, and board that it paid for when I played (with possibilities for a little extra spending money for the truly needy). Football players today are more aware than players in my day that college football is a "business," that playing football is their "job," and that they are generating millions in revenue in which they are not allowed to share.

**Q: How has the NCAA tried to adapt to or work around Title IX legislation, which prohibits sexual discrimination at any federally funded educational institution?**

**A:** Football has always been the chief antagonist to Title IX because of the size of the

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roster (making it extremely difficult to create teams with a matching number of female athletes), and because of its privileged place in the athletic department and its huge revenues and expenditures in contrast to other sports. As men's programs in the "non-revenue" sports have been dropped to balance the number of male and female athletes, proponents of Title IX have blamed football for its bloated rosters and budgets, while proponents of football have insisted that their sport must be protected because it serves a unique function in marketing the university (and at some schools in generating revenues that fund other sports). After initial resistance, the NCAA embraced Title IX (whether because it was politically necessary or the right thing to do) but has continued to shield football from the kind of roster-paring and cost-cutting that proponents of Title IX have called for. What's most interesting to me in the conflict between big-time football and Title IX is how it highlights the difference between college sport viewed as an opportunity for young men and women to participate in a meaningful educational opportunity outside the classroom and the view of college sport as a marketing tool for the university. Except when the issue is Title IX, NCAA leaders always insist that playing football enhances the student-athlete's education.

### **Q: Is anything being done to reform college football today? What are your suggestions for reform?**

**A:** The NCAA under the leadership of Myles Brand has embarked on a two-part reform agenda. The academic agenda is focused on the Academic Progress Rate (APR) which assigns points based on the student-athletes' progress toward graduation and imposes real penalties for failing to meet a minimum overall score. The economic agenda asks institutions to reign in spending before the perennial deficits facing most athletic departments spiral out of control. The academic requirements are mandatory, while sound economic practices are voluntary; this is the best that the NCAA can do. (Economic policies can only be voluntary because any attempt by the NCAA to curb spending, including coaches' salaries, risks an antitrust lawsuit.) In addition, the economic recommendations are concerned only with spending, not with constantly ratcheting up the commercialization of the sport. This two-part agenda does not resolve the fundamental contradiction.

As the financial stakes keep rising, and thus the pressure on the "student-athletes" as athletes, I do not see how anyone can believe that education is the highest institutional priority for these athletes. The APR might have some positive benefits, but I'm frankly not overly hopeful (and one unintended consequence of the APR is to push athletes into easy majors irrespective of the athletes' interests). As for my suggestions for reform, there is no lack of proposals available from organizations such as the Knight Commission, the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, and the Drake Group. But again I'm not very hopeful that meaningful reforms are truly possible without addressing the fundamental contradiction between athletic and academic priorities. I cannot imagine the NCAA doing this. And the stakes are simply too high for university leaders to risk doing

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this for their own institutions. (Tulane and Rice nearly dropped big-time football in recent years, but backed down under pressure from alumni and boosters.)

Rather than trying to determine the most meaningful specific suggestions for reform (such as making freshmen ineligible for varsity competition, as they were before 1972), I would like to see universities cut through the contradiction by making good on one of its two sides: either acknowledge that "student-athletes" are really athletes first and then compensate them properly and help them prepare for the NFL (as we prepare students for other professions), or declare that we truly do want them to be students first and then make it possible for them not only to graduate but also to receive the full education and college experience available to other students. What specific reforms would be required in each scenario would have to follow from a commitment to one or the other of the basic principles.

But again, I cannot imagine either the NCAA or individual universities' leaders actually making this decision. Football was not incidental to the development of American higher education over the course of the twentieth century but integral to it. Whether football still serves a necessary function for American universities is not at all clear, and the potential risks from radical change are too great (as the presidents of Rice and Tulane discovered).

I do expect big-time college football to be radically changed in the not-too-distant future, but I expect the impetus for change to come from without rather than within: from a Congressional subcommittee that takes away the sport's tax-exempt status, or from a court where the NCAA loses a major "athletes'-rights" case, or from a meeting of TV executives and representatives from the football superpowers or major conferences who decide that small-market teams are no longer profitable. The have-nots in college football are already struggling to survive alongside the haves. Yet another realignment seems inevitable, and those who drop from the company of the elite may find themselves in a position where they have to do things differently. If (when) that happens, it may well prove to be not at all a bad thing.

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