Scoreboard, Baby: A Story of College Football, Crime, and Complicity
By Ken Armstrong and Nick Perry. Published in 2010 by The University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE. (372 pages).

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In October of 2000, University of Washington Director of Athletics Barbara Hedges, the only woman in the United States at the time running an NCAA Division I-A athletics program, delivered the Louise McBee Lecture at the Institute of Higher Education on the University of Georgia’s campus. At the time, Ms. Hedges had become famous for wooing head football coach Rick Neuheisel from Colorado with an unprecedented salary. Less than two months after delivering that lecture, Hedges was in a luxury suite at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, witnessing the Huskies write a new chapter in their storied history, claiming the national championship in January of 2001.

The topic of Ms. Hedges’ lecture was the value of sport in higher education. Expressing frustration with critics of college sport, she stated,

“Higher education cannot operate in isolation. It must reflect the values of society as a whole, and the truth is that Americans love sport. It is part of our culture and part of our soul. Sport is intertwined in education from kindergarten through graduate school. Why in the world would we ever want to diminish this enthusiasm?” (p. 15).

The answer to that question is resoundingly answered in Scoreboard Baby: A Story of College Football, Crime, and Complicity written by Seattle reporters, Ken Armstrong and Nick Perry. An apt beginning, the expression “scoreboard, baby” is the summarily dismissive response Coach Neuheisel gave to an opposing coach’s allegations that UW players used illegal tactics on the field. In a meticulously researched and compellingly written account, the authors offer up a haunting description of how an entire community (university, football program, local law enforcement, government officials, media) relinquished its moral center and commitment to law in order to assure a winning football season.

Through powerful storytelling, readers are exposed to a litany of incidents that occurred in the months leading up to and following Ms. Hedges’ lecture on the value of sport in higher
education. Six months previously, two UW players broke into a drug dealer’s apartment, stealing his stash of drugs and money while delivering such a vicious beating that the victim nearly lost his life. One of the two perpetrators would later be repeatedly let off the hook for speeding on highways and crashing his truck after excessive drug and alcohol use. In turn, the team’s tight end was arrested by a SWAT team on suspicion of raping a first year co-ed while a defensive player with a reputation for hard hits engaged in regular intimidation and domestic violence against his wife. By the time the storybook season described as “mystical and magical” came to an end, 24 players were arrested or charged with some crime during their tenure at the university.

While this may be a story about the unfettered pursuit of public recognition and the rewards that accompany it, the human cost is evidenced in the statistics that Hedges did not include in her lecture – the fact that four out of five Washington football players failed to meet the minimum academic standards for the university, a situation that set the stage for only one in three players to earn their degrees. Perhaps this is the reason why, in her lecture, she shared with the audience the graduation rate for female athletes, which was higher than that of the general student population, while making no mention of the academic accomplishments of male athletes (Hedges, 2001).

This book maps out a geography of college sport corruption and complicity. From the legally trained head coach with a penchant for parsing words to the UW officials who matched him measure for measure with their own wordsmithing to subvert the laws of the state that would have barred Neuheisel from receiving sponsorship money from Nike for work he was already doing at the university, the contours of a shifting moral relativity begins to emerge. Reminiscent of the moral standards that led to the sub-prime mortgage crisis, academic officers and faculty allowed football players to repeatedly take the same course for credit over and over again in order to remain eligible. Judges would follow suit, allowing players to plead to lesser charges or to complete court ordered punishments after the football season was over. Journalists who knew more than they wrote or reported about withheld information from the reading, listening, and viewing publics, opting instead to paint one dimensional pictures of football stars whose off the field conduct was anything but heroic.

For those who lament the passing of investigative journalism, solid reporting, and writing that moves readers by facts rather than pyrotechnics, this book is a rarity. The authors are skilled at their craft, offering nuanced portrayals that allow the despicable actions of some of the parties to be revealed in unsettling detail while at the same time finding moments of true humanity and nobility. What makes this book so compelling may in fact be the models of integrity that shine through this dark and foreboding tale – the female investigator who time and again sought justice for the young woman who had allegedly been raped; a member of the football team who embraced the educational opportunities available at UW, forging a life of service to those who are oppressed and downtrodden; the young woman who was brutally assaulted but came back to the university to finish her degree.

For those who follow college sport, you will find in the depths of this book not just a case study of UW but the links between UW and other programs (the University of Colorado, Florida State, Ohio State, Texas A & M to name a few). As Armstrong and Perry write, “Washington isn’t an aberration, it is an example”.

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As a cautionary tale, this book should be read by every college president in the country. As a journalistic tour de force, this book provides ample opportunity to teach the next generation of reporters the power of the Fourth Estate. As a morality play, this story offers a wealth of opportunity to reflect on the perils of an unregulated corporate enterprise that values greed before all else. As a tip of the iceberg story, this raises profound questions regarding our own complicity. The winners here are integrity, truth, and the determination to do right when doing right is unpopular.

References