Saturday Millionaires: How Winning Football Builds Winning Colleges

Reviewed by

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In Saturday Millionaires, Kristi Dosh tries to tackle and dispel what she believes are the most pertinent myths surrounding college athletics. Instead of bemoaning the shortcomings of college athletics, the focus is on illustrating how institutions can use football in its current form to their advantage, following the lead of others such as Clotfelter (2011) and Toma (2003). Throughout the book, Dosh also tries to stay away from the philosophical arguments surrounding college athletics (i.e. should athletes be paid), and concentrates more on whether or not many of the common reform propositions are actually viable (i.e. could athletes be paid).

One of Dosh’s first contentions is that direct institutional support budget lines, which are often at the forefront of the discussion on allocated revenues, vary from institution to institution, making them difficult to compare. In the introduction, she uses the example of Georgia Tech, where out-of-state student athletes are charged in-state tuition, and this difference is indicated under ‘direct institutional support’ though no actual money is being shifted from the university to the athletic department. She revisits this subject in the first chapter to make the point that differences in accounting practices make it difficult to determine exactly how much support athletics is receiving from a university simply by examining broad categories such as direct institutional support.

The first chapter continues on from the discussion of direct institutional support to discuss athletic budgets more broadly, and specifically how football and men’s basketball fund the other sponsored sports at most institutions. Dosh brings in other financial issues such as transfer pricing; for example, how some athletic departments pay rent to a university for facilities, office space, etc. She provides an in-depth analysis of Ohio State’s athletic budget, and shows that through transfer pricing, more than $32 million from the athletic department was sent back to the university in 2011-2012 – over 25% of their total athletic budget. However, this is one of the examples in the book where the author uses the atypical as a counter argument to certain opinions. Of course there is nothing wrong with using Ohio State as an example here, but it would be helpful if another example of transfer pricing at a non-self sustaining institution were included as a point of comparison with Ohio State. Dosh finishes this chapter by discussing how some state legislatures have chosen to support athletic departments in order to assist with Title...
IX compliance, making the point that an athletic department cannot refuse these funds or reallocate them elsewhere in the university.

The second chapter begins with a discussion of the impact of football coach Bobby Petrino on the University of Arkansas, which enjoyed the most growth in football donations in all of the SEC during his first three years, from 2007 to 2010. Attendance was up, and licensing revenue more than tripled, so she argues the university more than received value back from Petrino’s $3.53 million per year salary. She only briefly mentions the circumstances under which Petrino’s tenure at Arkansas came to an end and the impact of those events on the university, concentrating only on his first three years.

In order to further attack the criticism that college football coaching salaries are to blame for financial problems, Dosh uses the University of Florida as an example, bringing in figures of net profits for each sport during the 2010-11 year, showing exactly much profit the football and men’s basketball teams made, as well as how much all the other sports lost. She goes on to dissect a detailed balance sheet for Florida’s gymnastics program that year, showing exactly how the program ran a deficit of approximately $1.5 million. This spawns her discussion of how college athletics is unfairly viewed as a for-profit business, when of course any for-profit business would cut the losing program and move on. While there is little new about this argument in itself, Dosh’s approach of including detailed financial statements strengthens the contentions being made. This approach leads to a level of depth many authors do not provide, which is one of the practices throughout this book that sets it apart from others.

The rest of the second chapter is spent primarily on a discussion of bowl game costs, and how many institutions lose money from competing in bowl games. Dosh doesn’t strongly challenge this stance, beyond providing some evidence that these losses are often inflated in the media, but instead shows more financial records indicating the deficits associated with postseason opportunities in other sports are more significant (and damaging) than what comes from bowl game participation. Dosh also provides a thorough examination of how bowls pay out television money; however, a more in-depth discussion of the bowl payout system at the conference level might have been helpful so that the reader could better see exactly how much of the payouts get back to the individual institutions. The discussion on bowl games is the first of Dosh’s arguments to support her stance that the money spent on athletics is more effective than if the same money was put toward some other type of advertising campaign.

The third chapter is focused solely on the issue of pay for play. Dosh attempts to stay away from much of the emotionally charged rhetoric typically found in discussions on this topic, instead focusing on the legality and economic viability of any such system. She provides a thorough explanation of Title IX, which is helpful for readers less familiar with the details of this piece of legislation. While there are several assumptions made as to how certain courts might rule, particularly in the discussion of how institutions could lose their non-profit status if they were to pay student-athletes, her positions are generally well reasoned. Dosh does acquiesce her hypothetical situations may never take place, but she makes it clear enough that at the very least there are a number of legal hurdles involved in paying players, and that the significant threat of legal action should be enough to discourage further discussion on the matter.

In the next chapter, Dosh provides an in-depth history of conference realignment from the 1970’s through the present day. She focuses on two primary motivations for realignment, namely power and television revenue. There is a lengthy history of the College Football Association (CFA), including how the Penn State and Notre Dame moves from the 1980’s indicated a shift in power to the conference (and sometimes individual institution) level, which continues to lead

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conference realignment today. She also works to dispel common perceptions surrounding the most recent round of conference realignment, such as the discussion of geographical differences among conference members. She thoroughly discusses Penn State’s move to the Big Ten as a seminal moment in conference realignment, and particularly how this was one of the first examples of a conference broadening its geographical reach with the purpose of annexing more television markets. The chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of 2010-12, a particularly complicated time in conference realignment, and effectively breaks down the motivations for each institutional move individually, as well as how everything fit at the conference levels.

The fifth chapter discusses the issue of automatic qualifying (AQ) conferences within the BCS, as well as the new playoff system. Dosh suggests it makes more sense to completely divide AQ conferences from non-AQ conferences, rather than to treat all FBS conferences equally. She discusses how the market demand has historically been weighted heavily towards the AQ conferences, and believes that if college football fans aren’t as interested in non-AQ teams and conferences, why should the AQ’s be including (and subsidizing) these programs? Of course there are many ethical/philosophical concerns with this argument that are more thoroughly covered in other books on college athletics, but this is another example of Dosh’s perspective on college athletics – that they are a business, even if they are not for profit. She finishes the chapter by arguing that the non-AQ conferences had more opportunities to compete in the BCS than ever before, and that the new playoff system will increase those opportunities yet again. The sixth chapter continues this discussion, where Dosh examines what is essentially a legal impasse between the AQs and non-AQs. She explains how the threat of a lawsuit is enough for AQs to continue to integrate non-AQs into the postseason model, but also provides a thorough discussion on antitrust law (again, an effective primer for anyone not familiar with the subject) and past practice in antitrust cases to show how unlikely it would be for any such lawsuits to be successful.

The seventh chapter on the desirable skills/qualities for an athletic director seems to bring a loss of focus – the chapter in itself is certainly an interesting read, but it seems tangential to the main direction of the book and potentially less interesting to a wider audience who are not already part of the industry. In any case, the chapter outlines the shift in the backgrounds of athletic directors (and college athletics administrators in general), and also discusses how the responsibilities of those people have changed over the years. Although Dosh discusses the myth surrounding the perceived infiltration of individuals from corporate America into athletic departments, the tie to why this discussion is relevant in the context of the rest of the book is never explicitly made.

The next chapter veers back toward the issue of television in college sports, and features a lengthy examination of the Big Ten Network as an example of the power conferences wield in college athletics today. This is followed by discussions of the other conference-specific networks, as well as some of the challenges faced by the Longhorn Network which will probably lead other schools away from seeking institution-specific networks in the near future. Dosh also makes the point that more TV money decreases the direct payments and student fees necessary from the institution to support athletics. However, she does not tie this back to a brief discussion earlier in the book on irresponsible spending in athletic departments, which might cause this money to be wasted.

The final chapter represents the climax to which Dosh has been building throughout the book – her eight reasons why football raises the university. She presents arguments such as increased advertising, more student applications, and more donations, and she integrates both a
healthy amount of academic research along with conventional wisdom to support her argument. However, this segment of the literature is characterized by mixed results, and while Dosh does make the point that not all of the research supports her claims, she does not specifically cite any of these studies as she did with the others. She finishes by suggesting universities are entities offering many different products to the public, ranging from education to athletics and entertainment. Instead of trying to distance themselves, universities should work more cohesively with athletic departments to maximize the benefits of athletics (i.e. nationwide marketing).

In general, *Saturday Millionaires* is an enlightening and interesting book that might be overly technical in some places for a casual reader, but would be an excellent resource for academics, employees of college athletic departments, or students in virtually any class with a significant focus on college athletics. As mentioned previously, there is little mention of issues such as amateurism and institutional missions. Instead of philosophical discussions driven by semantics, she provides only economic and legal arguments supported by thorough research. This is an interesting approach, but it does still overlook a significant part of the discussion. Whether or not this method is effective in pushing forward the conversation on the future of college athletics is up to each individual reader to decide.

**References**

