Few college football fans understand how much energy, work, and human capital must be put into the intercollegiate athletics enterprise just to insure that one football game happens on a Saturday afternoon. It is an incredibly complicated system of numerous moving parts concerning things like academic eligibility, athlete welfare, event management, boosters, sponsorships, and recruiting, just to name a few. The behind the scenes aspect of big time college sports, specifically football, is something rarely seen by the public and is even less understood. The old adage of “how the sausage is made” in big time college football is applicable and detailed in many ways in the book entitled, The System by Jeff Benedict and Armen Keteyian.

The title, The System, is on point in that Keteyian and Benedict expose for all to see, the daily 24/7 process that goes into providing weekly entertainment on fall Saturdays for millions of college football fans. The book does not address “the system” with regard to other intercollegiate sports, but one can infer from the book that the mechanism in place is likely similar in many ways for other sports. It is, however, more pronounced in football due to the popularity of the game and the sheer physical plans required to stage a contest in a massive stadium and for millions of fans watching on television.

The book takes an intimate look at the 2012 football season in the Bowl Championship Series subdivision starting with a discussion of the season-ending BCS national championship game pitting Notre Dame against Alabama on January 7, 2013. While that happy beginning does give the prologue of the book a sense of optimism regarding the system (i.e. student-athletes playing for the love of the game while attending school), it quickly goes into the breadth and depth of issues which are happening minute by minute in college football behind the scenes while the games themselves almost seem secondary. The prose itself is not specifically organized in a chronological narrative but rather a collection of short stories discussing the massive system of big-time college football. While discussing all 27 sub-stories that comprise this book is beyond the scope of this review, some of the topics covered by Benedict and Keteyian include stories on smaller programs like Towson University trying to compete with the “big boys” of college football, the role of academic tutors in eligibility of athletes, and several stories on the
daily life of a college football coach. Typically, books that are set up like this can seem to be disjointed. However, because all of these vignettes are connected, at least indirectly, by the larger details of the system—it works well for anyone who has an interest in college sports.

Starting with the optimistic approach in the prologue and stressing that college football owns the sporting public’s attention for 14 consecutive Saturdays, the authors are quick to note many pressing issues that underlie and even overshadow the games that the public so desire to watch. Off the field issues in 2012 were similar to, and yet unlike, other years in college football. There were wins, losses, injuries, player misconduct, and of course scandal, but 2012 seemed to be arguably the most scandal filled year in the 100-plus year history of college football. Specifically, issues included over a dozen programs on NCAA probation, academic integrity, and the education and graduation of minority athletes. Economically, college sports were in a constant state of flux, largely because of football. Spending outpaced revenue generation for almost every one of the 120 BCS football programs, while conference hopping to get a larger share of the revenue pie, even at the expense of tradition and desire of the fans, students, and alumni, became more of a daily sport than the games themselves. Coaching salaries continued to escalate to the point where the football coach at many top Division I schools is making five to six times the university president’s salary. Athlete welfare and a burgeoning college athlete rights movement continued to keep issues like “pay for play,” real educational opportunities, and better health protections at the forefront. In short, 2012 was a seminal year in BCS football but as the authors write, “none of that mattered as Notre Dame and Alabama squared off for the national championship.”

The “none of that mattered” mantra is what makes a book like The System a must read for any college sports fan and certainly for practitioners and coaches. It is important to know what is going on behind the scenes and what it takes to get a team on the field. While reading this book may not change someone’s opinions of college sports or football in particular; it can give a greater understanding to a system that is so much bigger, complicated, and bureaucratic than many can imagine. As someone who worked in college athletics for 15 plus years, I was surprised by several things in the book.

The chapters cover literally every corner of what a college football team might encounter in a one-year time span. As unbelievable as it may sound—there is a “routineness” to these issues as it seems every team has encountered them at one time or another. While the chapters cover the influence and power of coaches, athlete entitlement, athlete crime and violence issues, student-athlete health and welfare, NCAA infractions, recruiting, and the drive to make it to the NFL in an educational setting, there were a couple of stories that stand out, because they concern issues that are largely unknown to the college sports fan, but are vitally important to making the system work.

Two chapters in particular were eye-catching. They are aptly titled “The Closer” and “The Janitor.” While these two chapters are a small part of the larger systemic issues in college football, they show the power and influences smaller, behind-the-scenes individuals and situations can have on the larger system and successfully getting a team on the field every Saturday.

“The Closer” delves into the sometimes saucy and allegedly raunchy world of recruiting and the use of recruiting hostesses to encourage and entice young men to sign with a particular university. Legendary names like the “Bama Belles” and Florida’s “Gator Getters” have been part of recruiting lexicon since Bear Bryant established ‘Bear’s Angels’ as a way to get an advantage on the competition. In essence that’s what this book is about—getting ahead and
always being one step up on the competition, sometimes by what seems to be any means necessary. Even in situations with the best intentions, the pressures in the system to win and generate revenue often lead those closely involved to the temptation of going down a path of least resistance and doing what it takes to achieve those goals. Attracting top athletes is a daily battle and one that is fought by schools more fiercely than the game on Saturday.

“The Closer” focuses on Lacey Pearl Earps, a recruiting hostess in Orange Pride at the University of Tennessee. Earps fits the mold of a beautiful college co-ed who loves her school and its athletic program. She claims to never being intimate with recruits (something these groups are often accused of) but makes no issue with heavy flirting with UT prospects who were visiting campus. Once Lane Kiffin took over at Tennessee, he used Earps to his advantage to help lure top recruit Bryce Brown to the Volunteers. Earps acknowledges heavy flirting and NCAA violations by UT coaches in the recruiting of Brown and others; they gave her more money to entertain recruits than allowed by the existing rules, but she was permanently endeared to the staff who gave her the name “The Closer” because of her ability to lure top recruits to Knoxville.

The good times did not continue. The loose interpretation of rules by Kiffin and his staff led to Earps and fellow Pride member Charlotte Henry being blamed for NCAA violations on a recruiting visit to a high school game in Duncan, SC gone wrong. Both girls were easy to spot by eye-appealing outfits and signs expressing love for then Byrnes High School star Marcus Lattimore. The girls stated their actions were approved by the coaches, but once the NCAA started to investigate, the football staff and administration distanced themselves from the very same person they once called invaluable to the system in order to deflect blame from themselves.

This change of heart by UT administrators and coaches led Henry and Earps to question what exactly they were doing and how they were compromised to benefit the system. A powerful quote from Henry says much about the realization of what she was being used for. She states, “You wear high heels and your blazer. You look your best…but when you get into it and you learn the real reason you dress like that, the real reason your pants are tight, it’s just warped. That was the reality for me.” As the chapter goes on to say, most coaches are opportunistic and if they have a chance to protect themselves and gain cover, they will, even if it means blaming someone else. As Henry, who later transferred the University of Memphis stated… “the people that work there every day (Tennessee) could care less about the colors they represent. It comes down to what is going to bring in the most money. People don’t step back and say ‘at what cost?’ Nothing came to be more important than winning football games.”

The chapter, The Janitor is even more pronounced in describing the lengths universities will go to protect the image and brand of the football team. Keeping athletes eligible and on the field is critical to the success of any team and that means keeping them out of trouble whether academically or socially. Conversely many things beyond academics can damage a team’s image and potentially keep a key player off the field. Potential NCAA violations can be so minute, teams have found it a requirement to employ coaches or others to insure players are doing the right thing all of the time. More often than not, these individuals must “clean up” situations as they arise so it does not become a public and media incident taking focus away from recruiting and winning games.

Very few schools handled situations proactively and reactively as well as the University of Texas and its designated janitor/cleaner, Director of Football Operations, Cleve Bryant. The DFO’s job at any BCS school is to eliminate distractions for the players, coaches and other administrators so they can focus on the task at hand—recruiting and the actual game. In the
chapter, Bryant, a former head football coach at Ohio University, is praised for his ability to “stamp out fires before the first sign of smoke.” Bryant was always on the lookout for cars a little too expensive for the athletes to be driving, pretty girls who might be working for a sports agent, and anything that might be an NCAA violation or distraction. The job of a DFO has evolved from not even being a position at most schools 10 or 15 years ago, to an absolute necessity as the pressure on head coaches to win and generate revenue increases. Today’s head football coaches simply cannot, and should not, handle the day to day heavy lifting and direct dealings with player arrests, team travel, social media issues, academic problems, etc. Even though ultimately they are responsible for everything that goes on in the football program, they need someone in the trenches to keep the system moving as efficiently as possible. Just like recruiting hostesses, DFO’s are an important cog in a huge systematic wheel. As Bryant eloquently says, “I am the janitor, I fix shit.”

Overall, the System is an excellent and interesting book that really takes some of the technical behind-the-scenes issues in the actual system of college football and makes them simple to understand even for the casual reader. This book is an important resource for academicians, administrators in college athletic departments, and students in classes with a significant focus on college athletics. There are very few negatives in the book, except I wanted to read even more. While the vignettes are revealing and detailed, there is even more to be explored in The System, but far too much for one book. The short story approach does work in my opinion, but it is amazing to think that this book only scratches the surface on what it is actually like in The System. Whether this changes anyone’s mind toward college athletics, like it did for a couple of the Orange Pride ladies, or even in advancing the conversation on the future of, and reform efforts in, college athletics is up to each reader to decide.