

***Journal of Issues in* Intercollegiate Athletics**

From the Buckeyes to the Bronx

By Rick Bay, Published 2012 by CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, Charleston, SC
(343 pages).

Reviewed by

Liz Sattler, Ed.D. Candidate

Illinois State University

Rick Bay's 25-year career as a sports executive spans both collegiate and professional sports. During his tenure as an executive, he served as athletic director at the University of Oregon, the University of Minnesota, San Diego State University, and The Ohio State University, and held high ranking executive positions with the New York Yankees and the Cleveland Indians. His professional memoir, *From the Buckeyes to the Bronx*, concentrates on the seven years he spent as athletic director for the University of Oregon and The Ohio State University, as well as his 100-day stint as the chief operating officer for the New York Yankees. The memoir reads as a collection of short stories that provide the reader with an in-depth, honest, and often humorous look at the trials and tribulations that come with leading a sports organization. The book is separated into three sections – the first detailing Bay's big break in sports administration – his tenure as athletic director at the University of Oregon. The second section focuses on his arrival, and eventual controversial departure, as athletic director at The Ohio State University. Finally, the third section describes his tumultuous 100-day stint as chief operating officer for the George Steinbrenner-owned New York Yankees. While the book itself is quite lengthy at 343 pages, Bay has broken his story into short chapters (often just 2-6 pages long), making it a quick and entertaining read.

In section one, or "Quack Attack", Bay describes his decision to leave his job at the University of Michigan Alumni Association in pursuit of a Division I athletics director position. The position that caught his eye was with the University of Oregon Ducks. Self-admittedly, he was under-qualified for any Division I athletic director position, but pursued it nonetheless. While he had experience in college athletics--he was a former collegiate wrestling star and successful head wrestling coach at Michigan--he lacked administrative experience. Most athletic director positions in the 1970s and 1980s were going to former coaches of high profile sports like basketball or football. To top it off, his former athletic director, Don Canham, had less than stellar things to say about his former employee, due to the manner in which Bay left the Michigan athletic department. In an unlikely turn of events, and with the help of a few positive references and candidates who dropped out of the process, Bay was offered the position of athletic director for Oregon and thus began his career as a sports administrator. His humble and

detailed account of the hiring process for his first big break proves there really is no single pathway for someone looking to break into the sport industry, and references can both hurt and help job seekers in a significant way.

While leading the Ducks in Eugene, Bay had to overcome many obstacles. The Oregon athletics program of the 1980s hardly resembled the powerhouse of today. Faced with a miniscule budget, NCAA sanctions, facilities with badly needed upgrades, and poor performing teams, Bay made bold decisions in his first stint as athletic director. From raising the price of football tickets at a time when the program was losing badly, refusing to change conferences, and determining not to reinstate baseball, not all of his decisions were met favorably by the coaches, faculty, or fans in Eugene. But overall, Bay would eventually leave the department in better shape than he found it.

Despite being an avid runner in his free time, disagreements with the highly respected track and field staff proved to be a menace during his tenure in “Track Town USA”. In particular, he received unwanted attention from the NCAA due to the track team’s relationship with Phil Knight. Ultimately Bay had to convince the co-founder of Nike to stop sending his athletes free equipment. While the track and field team found success, the football team struggled during Bay’s tenure. Despite any criticism he received for keeping him on staff, Bay’s loyalty to football coach Rich Brooks would pay off after Bay’s departure from the University, when Brooks led the team to the Rose Bowl in 1994.

Perhaps the most entertaining parts of “Quack Attack” are when Bay details the humorous, and often self-deprecating ways in which he and Bill Byrne, Oregon’s senior associate for development, attempted to fundraise for the Oregon athletics department. These attempts include a promotion that involved playing BINGO at halftime of men’s basketball games in order to raise money to paint the aging gymnasium, and a Joan Jett concert that left Bay under a tent dividing up several hundred thousand dollars to concert promoters and the athletic department. It is stories like these that provide the reader with humor, as well as a peek at the less glamorous side of college athletics administration.

In section two, or “The High Road Led Out of Town”, Bay describes his move from Oregon to become athletic director at The Ohio State University. A former Michigan man, he had to overcome some questions about his loyalties early on, but eventually he and his wife Denise, settled in as local royalty. Armed with a much larger operating budget, better facilities, and winning teams, the issues Bay faced with the Buckeyes proved to be very different than the ones he faced at Oregon.

The longest of the three sections, “The High Road Led Out of Town”, offers an inside look into Ohio State athletics during Bay’s tenure. More than that, this section serves as a narrative for several key historical changes in intercollegiate athletics in the 1980s, including references and descriptions of several NCAA rule changes, as well as insight into the early days of rising coaching compensation, conference realignment, television broadcasting contracts, drug testing, and a growing facility arms race. For instance, while at Ohio State, Bay was faced with two key NCAA rule changes that impacted both academic requirements and placed limitations on football scholarships. He also worked under a university president in Ed Jennings who initially refused to offer coaching contracts beyond one-year time frames, a fading trend at the time, and just one of the disagreements Bay would have with Jennings during his time with the Buckeyes.

The evolution of television broadcasting for college football while Bay was athletic director for Ohio State provided some interesting challenges in and of itself. At a time when

many universities feared their games being televised would deeply decrease attendance, and fans were appalled by the idea of changing game times for television, Bay stood up and made the tough decisions necessary to evolve with the changing media market. He faced backlash from fans who feared attending games at night (or maybe just feared change in general), and often stood alone when other schools in the conference first refused to alter game times for the sake of television. His detailed accounts of those uncomfortable closed-door conference meetings are not only interesting, but indicative of a changing time in which many in leadership positions failed to understand the need for evolution.

Bay spends much of section two detailing the conference football contests his Buckeyes faced against rival teams like Minnesota, Northwestern, Iowa, and the “team from up north”, Michigan. He describes the emotion, physicality, and specifics of each play so vividly, it’s almost as though you are watching an episode of *Friday Night Lights* unfold on paper. Bay would eventually resign from his post at the Buckeyes over a controversial firing of his beloved football coach, Earle Bruce. The firing was brought down by Jennings, a decision in which Bay disagreed and refused to stick around for. His resignation left many in the community, and around the nation, praising him for his decision to take the high road in the matter, including a baseball owner in New York.

In the third and final section of the book, “100 Days with the Boss”, Bay describes his short-lived and often turbulent tenure as chief operating officer for the New York Yankees. A job that appeared too good to be true, and ended up being so, Bay couldn’t resist the chance to work for the most famous professional sports franchise in history. He was called on by George Steinbrenner to essentially run the business operations for the team in New York, while George took care of his other business affairs in Tampa. George couldn’t disconnect in the way he promised, and Bay was left to pick up the pieces of the abusive and often eccentric Steinbrenner on a daily basis. While this final section is short, it includes several humorous stories of Bay’s daily interactions with Steinbrenner, most of which ended with Steinbrenner hanging up the phone on Bay mid-sentence. This section also includes a few stories of Bay’s childhood, which he says led him to become interested in a career in sports. In the end, Bay determined the toxic environment in New York was not for him, and eventually went on to continue his career outside of the Big Apple, where he served as athletic director for the University of Minnesota, San Diego State, and president of the Cleveland Indians.

Overall, *From the Buckeyes to the Bronx* is a well-written and enjoyable read for anyone in the sport industry, but particularly for those interested in college athletics administration, as much of the memoir is focused on Bay’s time as a college athletic director. The book could also easily be utilized for students in classes with a focus on college athletics administration or the history of college athletics, as it brings up several issues that are still relevant in college athletics today.