



## **The College Football Problem:**

### **How Money and Power Corrupted the Game and How We Can Fix That**

By Rick Telander.

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Reviewed by

**Emalee Nelson**

*The University of Texas at Austin*

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The ever-changing landscape of collegiate sport is one of the most exciting but challenging elements of higher education. Exacerbated by an unprecedented global pandemic, it has become apparent that sports drive so much energy and revenue on college campuses across America. Journalist Rick Telander's *The College Football Problem: How Money and Power Corrupted the Game and How We Can Fix That* illustrates how large the machine of collegiate football has become within our society in recent decades. This 2020 publication is an updated version of the quasi first edition, *The Hundred Yard Lie: The Corruption of College Football and What We Can Do to Stop It*, where Telander argues in favor of professionalizing college football, especially at "big-time" programs. In the three decades between the publication of these two books, even a casual football fan could notice the drastic changes taken place in the sport, ranging from the exponential increase in coaching salaries and bowl games to network contracts for conferences and schools to name a few. Telander's updated secondary title perfectly captures just how large, and frankly uncontrollable, these issues in football have become. There is no way to "stop" these issues from permeating into collegiate athletics, a space notoriously branded as an amateur arena for athletes to play for the love of the game. Instead, we must find ways to change the highly regulated version of collegiate sport we have today into an entity which ceases to exploit young athletes on and off the field.

In short, Telander argues college football's biggest problems stem from the astronomical amounts of money being pumped into athletic departments from generous boosters, alumni, and other lucrative outlets. Like any competitive entity existing within a capitalist society, more money equates to higher chances of being successful. However, while the coach with the big price tag brings a certain element of skill to the team which can absolutely influence their outcome of winning, the money and power generated to these institutions come at the expense of many athletes who risk bodily and mental injury. Over the course of the book, Telander dives deeper into the various controversies which have plagued the sport and will continue to do so until seismic changes are made to the machine that is college football. In true fashion, with many

critics of sport (or virtually anything), a common counter to their argument is more criticism, which is often to the tune of, “If you hate it so much, then you don’t have to watch it/write about it/read about it/etc.” Telander intercepts each chapter with a brief section of “Stretching,” as a sort of timeout and reminder to readers that the reason we question, challenge, and critique sport is because we love it. Oftentimes, with things we love, we cherish it and, ultimately, we want to see it improve.

After two forwards and an introduction, Chapter 1 kicks off with an appropriate, self-aware title, “You Can’t Let a Few Isolated Incidents Ruin the Sport for You.” Telander highlights quite a few (but not all) scandals which have permeated various college football programs across the years. To effectively make his point, nearly every team, at one time or another, has encountered some sort of violation of rules, policy, conduct, or even criminal law. This deviant behavior is not just coming from athletes, but those located at all levels of collegiate athletics including coaches, athletic directors, university presidents, and beyond. Telander identifies the hypocrisy of those so deeply entrenched in a system, which provides so much wealth and power, are often the same people who are quick to toss aside morals and ethical practices to maintain status and success.

Chapter 2, “Playing for Free is Noble,” discusses the idea of amateurism, or as Telander fondly puts it, “shamateurism.” The lack of payment for athletes in relation to how much money a university athletic department generates is perhaps the largest critique of collegiate sports and not just football. Furthermore, the non-National Championship prize for most teams is the chance to play in a bowl game, which provides a generous paycheck to the universities thanks to big name sponsors. Even with the very recent development of the Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) since the publication of this book, players do not see a single cent of the money which runs through the athletic department. The reason for this arrangement echoes back to the early days of sport in American culture which insisted wealthy, elite university students playing football at an institution like Harvard, Princeton, or Yale in the late 1800s did not need to rely on recreational sport as a viable profession for means of income. It was solely meant to indicate one’s virtuous escape from engaging in problematic behavior. While originally run by students, administrators did not become involved until they realized how much money sports could generate for a university.

Chapter 3 highlights the role many coaches play in this operation of collegiate football. While the title sends an optimistic note (“Your Coach is the Greatest Teacher You’ll Ever Have”), Telander quickly acknowledges that he does not view coaches in general very highly. However, he does insist that a humane, kind, and nurturing coach that can teach athletes well is a blessing. He begins by discussing his football coach during his time at Northwestern University, offering the idea that many coaches aim to build “proper, upstanding, free thinking superior men at the same time they are building good football players” (p. 87). Still, the reality is many coaches instead offer athletes a “warped perspective on obedience, morality, and competition” (p. 87). Unfortunately, this situation stunts many men from functioning properly in the real world. When so much emphasis is placed on churning out wins to increase program value, gain top talent recruits, and maintain job security in a highly tumultuous market, coaches are rarely concerned with the long-term effects of their teachings.

Chapter 4, “A Winning Team Makes a Fortune for Its School,” briefly touches on the conference realignment within the past two decades, which has broken up many years of tradition and logical geographical rivals. However, it is no surprise the root of these changes stem from maximizing the amount of exposure a school can receive, leading to large financial

gains. When paired with the football season's prime revenue generators like ticket sales, suite rentals, and parking passes, the accumulation of this small fortune is not necessarily for the school's benefit academically but rather athletically. Telander observes these funds "[bypass] the university and [go] to its semi-independent subsidiary, the athletic department" (p. 133). This arrangement not only sets up a strange relationship between university administrators and athletics, but further permeates the notion that athletic programs at big time schools are merely adjunct to the actual learning operations of the institution.

Chapter 5, "Football is Play," discusses the action on the field. Within recent years, there has been an increase in the number of conversations surrounding traumatic brain injuries. With some of football's brightest stars tragically succumbing to mental stressors from long-term brain injuries generated from their careers on the gridiron, various college football stakeholders (e.g., commissioners, coaches, and trainers) have been forced to reckon with the grim reality of football's future. Telander writes, "certainly, no one pursuing knowledge through higher education should have to descend into such a shallow exploitation of the physical self" (p. 163).

Chapter 6 shifts to a larger scope of understanding football in our national culture. "College Football Promotes the Values America Needs" provides a brief history of our country's obsession with football. From the late 19th and into the 20th century, a large emphasis was placed on "images of self-sacrifice, heroism, and duty" (p. 217). President Theodore Roosevelt's endorsement of football was in perfect alignment with the ambitions of Muscular Christianity seeping into the cultural zeitgeist, especially for American men. This view began to tie virtues of morality and pureness into sport and was further solidified when an association was specifically created to regulate the sanctity of amateurism. As a result, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was born.

Chapter 7 concludes with a seemingly grim conclusion, "There's Nothing We Can Do." Though the chapter's title seems grim, the aim of this final chapter is not as daunting. Telander reminds readers that it is crucial to acknowledge football for what it currently is opposed to the pillar of Victorian era amateurism in which the sport began. Instead, it should be viewed as the *de facto* professional minor league system that serves the National Football League. Once we have a collective understanding of the current landscape, it is then we can make substantial changes to better serve the athletes at the core of this sport we love.

Overall, this book can be an excellent tool for those trying to navigate the world of intercollegiate sports, which is shifting at an unprecedented rate to reflect the rapid changes in our society. Scholars and students alike ranging from sport history to sport management, even broadcast and print journalist students aiming for a career in sport, can benefit from Telander's text. Athletes have a voice and power to challenge a system to facilitate the demand for progress. Though this book was published in 2020, much change has occurred within recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced universities of all divisions to acknowledge the amount of revenue sports, like football, brings in to fund many ventures within the entire athletic departments. As a result, we witnessed just how quickly the tides can turn when that flow of money is eliminated or drastically reduced, even in a single season. Furthermore, the astounding participation from athletes in the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020 showed the impressive impact this generation of athletes can wield in the effort for change. Telander's work serves as a reminder that the fight for a more equitable and honest landscape in collegiate sport has come a long way, but we have much further to go.