

COLLEGES; Unusual Alliance Forming to Rein In College Sports

By BILL PENNINGTON
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It began with faculty senates at large universities on the West Coast, upset over \$80 million expansions of college football stadiums and \$2 million coaches' salaries. Then faculties at universities in the Big Ten and other major conferences also started voting to restrain the growth of big-time college sports.

Today, the professors are expected to pick up a surprising and potentially powerful new ally: the national association of college boards of trustees, which represents governing bodies whose authority includes the power of the purse.

The alliance of university professors and the boards of major universities, frequent adversaries whose merger is akin to the Hatfields and the McCoys joining forces, could represent the most serious attempt yet to take on the modern American monolith of intercollegiate athletics.

It is a sweeping -- some would say unattainable -- ambition, one culled during a year of behind-the-scenes meetings and born of the notion that something in college athletics is significantly out of kilter. The professors and the trustees have discussed trying to build a coalition that would remake collegiate athletics over the next decade, by raising academic and eligibility standards for athletes, by curtailing athletic excesses that have often led to scandal and by curbing the rampant race to build ever newer, more lavish athletic facilities.

Whether any coalition, regardless of its makeup, can restrain, let alone transform, what has become a pervasive and beloved American entertainment industry is uncertain and virtually without precedent. Is there truly a groundswell for change when the favorite song lilting across many American living rooms is the theme music to ESPN's "SportsCenter"?

"I can't argue that we face an enormous challenge," said John Walda, the chairman of the board of directors of the Association of Governing Boards, the national trustee organization that will meet today to weigh endorsing the coalition seeking to alter college sports. "But we can't sit back and say, 'Gee, there are all these things broken about college athletics, but let's leave it to the athletic directors to fix.' Because it has been years and years and they haven't been fixed."

The coalition plans national conferences this year to establish a specific agenda for change and to enlist the help of other important groups, including the leaders of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, whose new president, Myles Brand, has been an outspoken proponent of fundamental change in intercollegiate athletics.

The conflict between academics and athletics is nearly a century old in American higher education, with each camp stereotypically recognizable. But even on the heels of several decades of expansive growth and burgeoning popularity for collegiate sports, the campus eggheads now feel emboldened in their fight against the jocks because of their unusual new ally: the governing boards that include many university presidents.

If the current leaders of the movement succeed, television networks will have less influence in things like the number of football and basketball games and their scheduling, corporate logos will be less commonplace on uniforms and in stadiums, and the colleges will pay less heed to keeping up with the Joneses through construction projects with opulent amenities like luxury boxes.

"If intercollegiate sports were a TV show, everything might seem fine," said Bob Eno, Indiana University's faculty senate president, who is among the leaders of the coalition. "But it is actually part of an institution whose mission is academics. And when we see something significantly diverting from that mission, it is our job to get upset. We are the stewards of that mission."

In college athletic departments, which were once on the front lines of any change in college sports, most people are unaware of the coalition of professors and trustees and many of those who are aware remain skeptical about its potential impact.

"How much time can they spend on this, a couple of meetings a year?" asked Joe Castiglione, president of the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics and the director of athletics at the University of Oklahoma. "We have to live and deal with this every day. A dialogue is fine, but the change should be engineered through the structure that exists on campus."

Bob Bowlsby, the athletic director at Iowa and the president of the N.C.A.A. Division I-A athletic directors, said: "Those groups cannot manage the logistics of change; they don't know what questions to ask. They can define parameters, but it will have to come back to faculty athletic representatives, university presidents and athletic administrators. We know where the bodies are buried."

To date, faculty senates at nearly two dozen major universities, principally in the Pacific-10 and Big Ten Conferences, have voted to create the coalition, and faculty leaders at another 30 to 40 universities in the other major conferences represented in football's Bowl Championship Series have also expressed interest in joining the movement. The Association of American University Professors has also supported the initiative and has discussed a conference on the topic this fall.

But perhaps most unexpected and potentially significant is the stance expected to be taken at today's gathering via teleconference of the directors of the Association of Governing Boards, an organization of 34,000 university trustees, regents, presidents and chancellors. The

association's board of directors was approached by the faculty coalition organized in the Big Ten last year. The faculty leaders sought an endorsement, understanding the weight that such an unusual partnership might bring to bear.

"Professors' groups and the A.G.B. have gotten together before, mostly to debate," said Walda, who was chairman of the Indiana University board of trustees for 12 years. "So this is unusual. The A.G.B. has also never been involved in anything like this with athletics. But our board has discussed it for months and we are unified behind the concept of athletic reform.

"We want to take a leadership role, and this is a great invitation to join forces with faculty, with the N.C.A.A. and presidents' organizations. We are not anti-athletics. We want to preserve what the original value of sports was meant to be. It was not meant to be primarily a major entertainment mechanism."

The association's board of directors consists of 21 prominent trustees who represent a wide range of colleges and universities, including some of the biggest athletic powers in the country, like Ohio State, Duke, North Carolina and Notre Dame. The board is expected to vote formally today in support of the faculty coalition. The faculty leaders are also seeking financing from the association for their planned national conferences.

"Maybe most important is that the A.G.B. can bring continuity, a sustained direction," Eno said. "There is always talk about fixing problems. If we can establish a vision, with short-term and long-term steps, anything is possible if we've got faculty, trustees and presidents working together on it."

Hard Work Lies Ahead

Faculty leaders and university trustees know what they do not like in the current state of collegiate athletics: low graduation rates for athletes in most major sports at the Division I-A level, spiraling athletic costs, the growing interrelationship of commercial interests with athletic departments, and what is often referred to as the embarrassment of bad behavior by college athletes.

Less clear, though, is exactly what a transformed college sports landscape would look like and what specific steps should be taken to get there. Leaders of the nascent coalition acknowledge that this is the formidable work to come.

"Without a doubt, the question of how much reform and what kind of reform is something that has yet to be answered," Walda said. "I know on our board, the opinions might be different from one member to another. We have small schools represented and some institutions with very large, successful, proud athletic programs. We've examined a lot of alternatives because it is complex, but deciding to do nothing because it is complex, that is not the answer, either."

The faculty movement had its origins at the University of Oregon, where in 2000 faculty members first learned of an \$80 million expansion of the football stadium when they read about it in the local paper. Professors were outraged, especially since academic department budgets had been severely slashed for years, class sizes had ballooned and a study had listed Oregon's faculty as among the lowest paid when compared with institutions of similar size.

Things got worse on campus when the athletic department announced that the 2002 game against archrival Oregon State had been rescheduled to accommodate a new television schedule. The game was moved to the Saturday before final exams, interrupting what is normally called "dead week" on campus, a period reserved for study.

James Earl, the president of the Oregon faculty senate, was soon drafting a resolution underscoring the need for the university to reaffirm the primacy of academics and to restrain the growth of athletics and their influence on campus. When Earl approached the other faculty senate leaders in the Pac-10 with his resolution, they all signed on.

"It was not about disbanding sports, it's all about expansion," Earl said. "If we just let it continue, we'll have a billion-dollar athletic enterprise that owns us, the university and all the academic departments. It is supposed to be the other way around -- athletics as a support arm of the university."

At Oregon, the faculty senate has won concessions on scheduling, helped set up a university committee that is examining athletics and successfully pressed the university to end a \$2 million annual subsidy from the general fund to the athletic department.

A Nationwide Effort

The efforts in the Pac-10 caused stirrings in the Big Ten, especially at Indiana, where the Bob Knight saga was playing out. Brand, who recently became the N.C.A.A. president, was the president at Indiana who eventually dismissed Knight as basketball coach, and it is hardly a coincidence that Indiana has become a nexus for much of the impetus for change. Eno is a professor of East Asian language and culture at Indiana, where Walda was also chairman of the board.

John Nichols, who was an early leader of the Big Ten initiative in 2001 when he was faculty senate president at Penn State, said, "Maybe this means Bobby Knight really did do good things for college athletics."

It was Eno who later contacted the faculty senate leaders at other universities involved in the Bowl Championship Series, which also includes the Big Ten and the Pac-10. He was surprised at the response, with dozens of the institutions being interested in joining the discussion. No faculty leader rejected the notion.

Regardless of how many allies are lining up, the professors and the trustees -- indeed everyone approached on the subject of change in college athletics -- expressed a sense that the movement was up against long odds.

"I'm not optimistic," Nichols said. "It is a huge problem to undertake. But identifying problems and trying to solve them is what academic institutions do. Just because it's difficult or maybe even unresolvable, that doesn't mean we shouldn't be searching for the solutions anyway. The alternative is to throw in the towel."

Bowlsby, the Iowa athletic director, cast a philosophical, if fatalistic, eye on the effort.

"There are certainly plenty of things wrong with college athletics, and we can use assistance and forums for seeking remedies," he said. "There has already been much change, and more incremental change is inevitable. But some of these conversations sound an awful lot like what was being said about athletics and education at the beginning of the 20th century. It's all the same issues. It has always been a multiheaded monster.

"But like I tell my staff all the time: you eat the elephant one bite at a time."

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