

School for the sake of football

BY HERBERT JACK ROTFELD
Special to the Ledger-Enquirer

In the Marx Brothers' movie "Horsefeathers," new college president Groucho announced that their future hinged on having a winning football team. It was a joke. But in a small town in Texas last summer, the new president to the local junior college announced that his vision for building a great school centered on developing a high-profile baseball team.

At Auburn University, every heavy rain makes faculty in my building scramble to protect their work from leaky walls and ceilings. Class size is growing, faculty pay is stagnant well below regional averages and course sections are closed with inadequate instructors to staff already too-large classes.

Meanwhile, a senior Auburn administrator recently said, "All varsity sports teams are fully staffed, all varsity teams are on full scholarships and all coaches are paid on a par with their peers at other universities . . . Trustees deserve thanks for those accomplishments." And plans are afoot for major expansion of the football stadium.

In the unfortunate modern reality, many alumni, administrators, and even boards of trustees act as if their college or university is a sports franchise that runs a school to retain conference eligibility. Athletic teams are a potentially strong marketing tool, providing national visibility for many schools. But marketing should not become more important than the product itself.

Maybe you think my fears sound silly. After all, think what Auburn would be like if its most important activity were sports instead of education . . .

If budgets were tight and academic programs being cut, alumni would focus their discussions on whether a losing coach should be fired. The highest salaries on campus would go to the coaches; during campus-wide hiring and salary freezes, pay raises might still go to the athletic director, coaches or their staffs.

If Auburn were a sports franchise instead of a place of education, young athletes would first be recruited and accepted for the teams and then "apply" for admission to the school, instead of going to school and trying out for the teams. And, of course, the basis on which athletes would be accepted might even bypass some common concerns for educational ability. Some young men and women might first get accepted as students and then try to join the teams, but would be labeled as "walk-ons" and face derision and low expectations.

If Auburn were just a team, athletes would receive academic course credit for participating in their sports. While tutors would be hired to help the important

team members pass courses, no one recruited as a student would receive special training to help him or her succeed in athletics. Faculty would also be frequently asked about academic performance of athletes in their classes so that those with problems can be spotted and helped, though seldom would such proactive aid go to full-time students.

And if Auburn were primarily a sports program, academic requirements such as exams or term paper due dates would be required to work around important athletic events. Evening basketball games would be considered valid reasons for students not to prepare for class the next day; no faculty member would dare give an exam the Monday morning after football homecoming or the day before the all-important Auburn-Alabama rivalry. A televised Thursday night game would supersede anyone's ability to seriously conduct class the latter half of the week. And even if they wanted to, no one could find a parking space within walking distance of the classroom anyway.

The nightmare, of course, is that all I have just described is true.

When I attended my first Board of Trustees meeting during another time of economic constraints, many academic needs were repeatedly dismissed: "We can't afford it." Programs were cut and class sizes were increasing.

Yet when faced with an almost almost \$1 million shortfall in construction of the new baseball stadium, they fell all over themselves to find education money to cover it because "those boys are just playing their hearts out." Today, while there is an expected pay freeze on the Auburn campus, the assistant coaches are getting huge pay raises to bring them up to regional averages.

But what is especially galling to many faculty in these tight budget times is the financial realities of the sports programs. In effect, the athletic association tells the rest of campus, "What's ours is ours and what's yours is also ours." The programs are described as financially self-sufficient, but they aren't.

At many schools with large athletic programs, athletic associations have a financially separate funding system, keeping apart from the academic needs of the university the sales income from tickets, revenue from televised games or the donations they are able to solicit from alumni.

At the same time, they have rent-free offices and campus property. Many



people believe that more donations are made to academic programs when the team wins, but there is absolutely no evidence to support this. Since the potential pool of donors is finite, what goes to the athletic programs are donations that could otherwise have been made to the school.

Yet the issue is not just donation diversion. Even winning teams operate at a deficit, with the extra money coming from the academic funds. Nationally, it is rare for a sports program to operate in the black. And not all teams are winners.

Every talk by the Auburn Board of Trustees refers to their support for "athletics and academics," at best putting education on an equal footing with sports. Their decisions consistently show how they see themselves as managers of a popular sports franchise, while the school is an extraneous cost to be restrained. A colleague sarcastically told me that some of the Auburn board members would really like to be George Steinbrenner, but since they can't bring the Yankees from New York, they want to run a well-known football or basketball team.

In the end, education suffers from this secondary status. Students focus on sports as if they were the primary goal, as do some administrators. When I was wearing a "University of Illinois" T-shirt, the other person at the exercise track only said, "They lost their game yesterday" — as if that had an impact on my education. I have a varsity letter from my undergraduate days, but it is my diplomas I hang on the office walls.

Alabama's universities provide first-rate education experiences for many students. Auburn's research programs are internationally renowned; many of our graduates are nationally respected. The problem is to make more people realize that the universities and their education programs are important regardless of who won the most recent game.

Herbert Jack Rotfeld is a professor in the Department of Marketing at Auburn University. He is the author of "Adventures in Misplaced Marketing," from which some of the material in this essay is adapted.

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Sports teach what classroom doesn't

I would like to take issue with several of the claims and comments that Herbert Rotfeld made in his Misplaced Marketing column, "College for Football's Sake." (Marketing News, Oct. 27, 1997, p. 9.)

It seems that every few years, certain academic types get all riled up about some athletic issue and lash out at the injustice of intercollegiate sports vs. academics. Unfortunately, too often the arguments presented are emotional, not rational.

Athletics is one of the most important educational tools our society has. More than 100 years ago, some of the first college football games were played. Why? Because even then collegiate leaders knew that athletics teach many characteristics desired by society, including leadership, discipline, perseverance and teamwork. These qualities—which are not easily instilled on a blackboard or in a group debate—are why athletics still are important today.

With regards to the claim that athletics are misplaced marketing, I would claim that most schools misplace the marketing opportunity provided by intercollegiate athletics. I often have claimed that athletics can be one of the best vehicles to market an institution's academic accomplishments.

This year, our athletics department has secured approximately 10 national, nine regional, and more than 120 statewide televised events. In the national and regional broad-

casts, at least one advertisement per game is used solely to promote the academic accomplishments of our institution. In the statewide broadcasts, the announcers provide as many drop-ins as possible to promote the academic accomplishments of our institution.

This is only the tip of the promotional iceberg as we also highlight academic accomplishments in our media guides, on our Web site, at our sports facilities and in all our athletic recruiting material.

In addition to the inherent value of intercollegiate athletics, I would like to refute several of Mr. Rotfeld's claims. On our campus, the highest-paid employees are the president, researchers, deans and directors, not coaches or the athletics director.

Also, his argument that donations would go the botany, physics or marketing departments if schools didn't have athletics is a misplaced claim—people give money to things

just wanted to re-focus on why athletics are important to society and how they can be an excellent vehicle to promote an institution's educational accomplishments, as well as to point out a few misplaced claims in Mr. Rotfeld's column.

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they have affinity for and you cannot assume they would have affinity for other areas of the school if athletics were dropped.

And to refute another of Mr. Rotfeld's claims, our athletes do not get preferential treatment in parking or student housing. This is a violation of NCAA rules and regulations.

I know this rebuttal will not placate those who would like to see the demise of intercollegiate athletics. I

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'Misplaced' Rotfeld missed the point

Herbert Rotfeld's column, "College for Football's Sake" (*Marketing News*, Oct. 27, 1997, p. 9), failed to make the point for misplaced marketing. Rather it appeared to be one academician's weak attack on college athletics.

Rotfeld relies on time-worn, unsubstantiated arguments for his premise that sports supersedes all other programs on campus. He fails to cite any facts to support his contention that sports programs drain resources from academic programs.

The fact is that sports programs serve as the "window to the university," showcasing some of the best the university has to offer.

On most campuses, athletic programs are funded by ticket revenue and alumni donations. Eliminating sports programs would not make dollars appear for academic programs. Rotfeld needs to look at the increase in alumni donations and applications that took place at Northwestern after they went to the Rose Bowl.

Conversely, since Wichita State discontinued its football program, enrollment has declined to about 14,000 students from more than 17,000 students.

Athletics and academics both serve a purpose on campus, contrary to Rotfeld's elitist opinion. Smart marketing professionals look at ways to use the strengths of both to enhance their organizations.

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