Luncheon Address to N4A Region II Meeting

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Three years ago, I left the Southeastern Conference. With the birth of our first child and after being in a relationship with my wife for 14 years, only one of which did we live in the same time zone, I figured it was about time that we lived together. Despite this move, I don't consider my self "out" of college athletics. I regularly write, teach and speak on the subject. I think about it a lot. I am however, out of the daily grind of it. And this group knows as well as anyone, that when in the daily grind, you have a tendency to miss the forest because of the trees. You simply don't have the time to reflect on the big picture.

I have been fortunate in that my move to New York City, and then Dayton, Ohio, and now to a farm in Lancaster PA. has given me the opportunity to stand back and critically evaluate our "business". After careful and sometimes painful consideration, I've come to realize that what we "do" in college athletics, which is conduct games, is ultimately meaningless. We conduct games that have no lasting significance and contribute very little of substance to our culture. If you don't believe me, answer this. Who played in last year's Final Four? The year before? The reason that what we do is increasingly meaningless is that college athletics has become more about entertainment than education, or even sport, for that matter.

This realization hit me when I attended an ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) event. I was amazed at how worked up the fans got over it. They really believed that it was *real* sport. But we know that professional wrestling is not *real* sport. Everyone *knows* it is fake. But as the evening wore on, it began to dawn on me that what I was watching sure looked like the *real* sporting events I had seen recently. For example, during "player" introductions, there were flashing, glittering, and whirling lights, pounding music, and lots of smoke. Athletes preened, pointed, chest bumped, and "high five-ed'". Every other match, a scantily clad women accompanied the wrestler to ringside under the guise of being a "manager" or "ring mate".

Then, somewhere around the third match, it clicked. It wasn't that the ECW looked like a "real" sporting event, but rather, that the last NBA game I watched, and more and more college games, not only look, but feel, like a professional wrestling event. I couldn't distinguish between the opening introductions of the Chicago Bulls, the tag team of Rob Van Dam and "The Great Sabu", or the grand entrance of Rick Pitino minutes before tip-off in Rupp Arena. There was every bit as much preening, pointing, chest bumpin'and high fivin' — every bit as much pomp, pageantry, glitter, and glam. There wasn't much difference between Bam Bam Bigelow's "ring assistant", "The Lovely, Lady Francine" and the Laker Girls or UNLV's cheerleaders. All women portrayed as sex objects in a side show as the men dueled it out in the real event.

The ECW fans in Dayton, Ohio were every bit as vocal and serious about the fate of The Sandman and the Dudley Boys as those in Knoxville were over that of Peyton

Manning. On occasion, the fans, sweaty and red-faced, burst into a wild-eyed, lung-busting, fist-waving chant of "E-C-W, E-C-W". They could have easily been chanting "Let's Go Cats!" The same sweaty, red faces and wild-eyed looks I had seen on numerous occasions at the SEC tournament.

There was a time when the thought of comparing professional wrestling and the NFL or ACC as sporting events was unthinkable. The lines of distinction were simply too clear. Wrestling was staged. It was entertainment, pure and simple. *Real* sports were something entirely different. They were serious. It was the game that mattered. But have you been to an NBA game recently ? They are no different than an WWF event. They are not games. They are entertainment spectacles. The lines of distinction between professional wrestling and professional sports — these so-called "real" sports — have become blurred. And college athletics is blindly following suit.

To describe The Final Four as a "sporting event" is no longer accurate; it is an entertainment extravaganza, subject to all the promotional and marketing distortions of a three ring circus. It is packaged, merchandised, and marketed as entertainment. It is more about money, television ratings, advertising rates, and corporate skyboxes than it is about education, or even sport. As Dick Vitale might say, "It's Showbiz, Baby!" But the problem with this evolution of college athletics is that in transforming our student-athletes into entertainers, we have trivialized sport, but more important, education.

As a result, universities are facing increasingly difficult and controversial decisions about what form the relationship between athletics and the university will take in the future. Specifically, universities must decide the type of athletic program that will best serve the institution in the 21st Century. Driving this decision will be many factors. In addition to athletics' increasing focus on entertainment, I will highlight three: impotent governance, fiscal reality, and political consequences.

While the NCAA has served its purpose well since its inception in 1906, three recent legal decisions, the restricted earnings case, the Jerry Tarkanian settlement, and the ruling that NCAA is subject to Title IX and other anti-discrimination laws, have seriously undermined its' ability to govern effectively. What, for example, would be the impact of a weakened NCAA with an impotent penalty structure? Would it result in a college athletic environment ruled by the "free market" with few restrictions on the way in which athletic departments run their affairs? Would it result in an "athletic arms race", where only a handful of schools could continue to compete as scholarship limitations and recruiting rules cease to exist? What would happen if the NCAA's ability to enforce academic standards erodes? If the NCAA's governance authority is weakened, the issue of just how far universities are willing to go in compromising academic and fiscal integrity in the quest for athletic success will intensify dramatically.

Financial realities will also drive university policy making in the 21st Century. We all know that most NCAA Division I athletic programs lose money. And, as institutions are forced to begin to appropriate the long-overdue resources necessary to meet the demands of Title IX and gender equity, not to mention the ever-increasing travel, salary, equipment, insurance, and facility costs of running a big-time athletic program, future financial figures will be even more sobering. That being the case, schools will be forced to decide how much more of the university's resources they are willing to appropriate to underwrite a program with a financial history that is spotty at best and

a future that promises even less. This, all against a backdrop of increasing costs and declining resources for higher education.

Finally, universities will be challenged to weigh the political consequences of athletics' effect on the declining public trust in higher education. Many argue that it is athletics, with its' scandals, coaches being paid more than presidents, student-athletes being exploited in the name of generating ticket sales and television revenue, and disregard for academic integrity that has contributed more than anything to this loss of public trust. Just how much damage to institutional integrity can be absorbed as a result of the widespread perception that big-time college athletics are out of control?

These trends are already forcing many universities to begin to honestly consider whether the tremendous resources lavished upon athletics in the form of money, energy, and emotion continue to be justified for an activity that contributes to the mission of the university in no more timely and relevant ways than simply providing entertainment on a Saturday afternoon in the Fall. Such debate will force the issue of institutional priorities to the fore as no other issue will. Athletics' continued movement toward entertainment and away from education, coupled with higher education's struggle to address increasingly complex public demands for solutions to issues like poverty, illiteracy, multiculturalism, environmental degradation, ethical standards, and preparing our workforce to compete in the global economy of the 21st century, will result in a period of change more significant than we have ever seen in the history of intercollegiate athletics.

This brings us to the question of how you respond individually and how the N4A responds as an organization. My advice? Stay the course. Stay the course because your most valuable asset as individuals and as an organization, and the reason why I have always enjoyed spending time with this group more than any other, is that you have always been able to distinguish between what we in college athletics *do* (conduct games) and what we are *about*, or should be about, (education). So while what you *do* may ultimately be meaningless, what you are *about* as individuals; what the N4A is *about* as an organization, is not. In fact, it is critically important. As John Kenneth Galbraith writes in *The Good Society: The Humane Agenda*, regarding the importance of education, "In this world, there is no literate population that is poor, no illiterate population that is not." You are about education. That is important. It is important because you know that championship banners fade and trophies tarnish with the passing of time. It is important because you know that our most significant product, indeed the only product we produce that has a lasting impact upon our society, is not the event that appears on television but rather the young people we send out into our communities. It is important because you know that a university's most important function is to develop a student's educational potential rather than their time in the 40 yard dash.

So, stay grounded in your belief in the importance of education; your belief in the potential of your student- athletes -- not athletically, but educationally and personally and your commitment to help them realize that potential. Keep talking about student-athlete welfare. Keep challenging coaches to be educators. Keep reaching out to the academic community. Keep working to help student-athletes understand that yes, in fact, they can be both a great student and a great athlete.

Don't forget what you are about. Education is your foundation and that foundation will serve you well in the tumultuous times ahead. Because ultimately, despite what the media might write, despite what coaches may preach, and despite what those rabid fans may scream, the success of our nation's colleges and universities will be determined on their ability to develop the educational potential of our populace, not by their ability to score touchdowns and generate television ratings.

Thank you and good luck.

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