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Confessions of a Spoilsport: My Life and Hard Times Fighting Sports Corruption at an Old Eastern University

By William C. Dowling. Published in 2007 by the Penn State Press, University Park, PA 16802
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Confessions of a Spoilsport: My Life and Hard Times Fighting Sports Corruption at an Old Eastern University is the story of Rutgers University English Professor William C. Dowling and his often contentious view of the place of intercollegiate athletics, -specifically NCAA Division I - on campuses of higher learning in America. Overall, this is a great book that details many of the repeatedly cited problems with intercollegiate athletics such as recruiting scandals, pay for play, overpaid coaches, etc. While all of these problems are interwoven in Dowling's prose, the core issue he attacks is academic integrity, or lack thereof, and the erosion of academia on campuses for the fleeting satisfaction of perceived athletic success.

Dowling quickly begins by slamming the reader with one of the most sordid tales of intercollegiate athletic corruption; the Brian Dennehy murder and the subsequent details that led to the death of the Baylor basketball star in the summer of 2003. Tragically, one of Dennehy's teammates, Carlton Dotson, was eventually arrested and convicted for the murder of his teammate. Perhaps even more tragic is what Dowling called the ... "*story of corruption, and hypocrisy and self-deception,*" (p. 1) that followed the discovery of Dennehy's body near the Baylor campus.

Dowling spells out in detail the unraveling of the Baylor University men's basketball program, ironically a team representing a Christian bible-based institution. In spite of initial denials of the crime being involved with Baylor athletics, it was discovered that then head coach Dave Bliss had arranged for Dennehy's, and other players', tuition and living expenses to be paid outside of NCAA rules. Incredibly, Bliss (once the head coach at the University of New Mexico) tried to cover up the illegal payments by portraying the slain Dennehy as a drug dealer. A Baylor assistant coach

worried about his own professional future secretly taped Bliss' comments, which were then leaked to the media. The scandal was exposed for all to see. Dowling adds this tale was just one of many that have happened over the past few years including schools such as Miami, Nebraska, and Ohio State.

The introduction presents Dowling's thesis of the book, which states that thousands of undergraduates are losing a chance to gain a real education because of the watered-down and changed standards that support the commercialized quasi-professional college sports business. Dowling once was a professor of English at the University of New Mexico (before Bliss arrived), which preceded his move to Rutgers. His time at New Mexico and the rise of the Lobo men's basketball team to national prominence under flamboyant head coach Norm Ellenberger, gave Dowling a "courtside" seat at one of the most corrupt men's basketball programs in the history of college athletics. In Chapter One, *Lost in Loboland*, Dowling colorfully discusses the now famous "Lobogate" scandal in which Ellenberger and his assistants used forged transcripts and academic records to maintain academic eligibility of Lobo basketball players. Interestingly enough, this scandal was just a precursor to what Dowling believes was and still is the core problem at UNM and other universities. This problem is one of drastic academic decline while colleges and university thrive on success in NCAA Division I athletics.

Dowling believes the priorities of higher education are being skewed by its devotion to athletics and revenue generation.. He presents Lobogate and Baylor as detailed and salient examples. Dowling believes these have led to bright students and faculty fleeing some universities, causing institutions to morph into a body count formula of enrollment management to maintain enrollment levels. In turn, this causes lowered admission standards, weakening of curriculums, and the use of multi-million dollar mechanisms just to keep athletes academically eligible, while the rest of the campus suffers.

After what is almost a depressing beginning, the rest of the book details Dowling's arrival at Rutgers and eventually seeing and directly dealing with many of the same issues that were present at New Mexico. Initially, Dowling was overjoyed about escaping from UNM to Rutgers. He was excited about Rutgers' commitment to academics and academic integrity, but most importantly not letting athletics overshadow that mission. However, that honeymoon did not last long.

Dowling details the long decline of Rutgers' commitment as a top flight academic institution, to one in the early nineties more focused on entering the Big East conference and becoming a nationally recognized athletic university. This coincided with a dramatic shift in institutional emphasis toward commercialized athletics being advocated by then Rutgers President Francis Lawrence, who took over from the more academically inclined Mason Gross. Many of the brightest students in New Jersey were avoiding Rutgers which eerily reminded Dowling of New Mexico. The growing concern among faculty and students entering the Big East and leaving traditional rivals like Lafayette and Colgate for programs with less than stellar academic reputations, such as Miami (FL), reached a crescendo with the creation of the student-driven activist group called the "Rutgers 1000."

While this group started small with just a few students and Dowling, it began to grow and have a huge impact through the internet and media. The media and others were interested in student activism that questioned the role of intercollegiate athletics on campus. The concern grew from there.

The middle chapters of 3, 4, and 5 detail the growth of the organization and its' small successes, such as drawing attention to shoddy and ill-maintained classrooms in spite of increased spending on athletic facilities.

The last five chapters discuss the highs and lows of the Rutgers 1000 movement intertwined with other tales of athletic corruption at schools like North Carolina State and Tennessee. These scenarios at other schools amplify what Dowling tries to get across, that the same things were and are happening at Rutgers. The activism by the Rutgers 1000 eventually had a major hand in the resignation of Lawrence as president, and the raising questions of the role of NCAA Division I athletics at Rutgers. That was perceived as a victory and a blow to increasing commercialism in athletics, but as Dowling eloquently describes, it was short lived. The RU1000 began to disband thinking change was on the horizon with new President Robert L. McCormick. It became evident in the view of Dowling events were more similar to New Mexico than he realized. In fact he closes the book with a statement by a Rutgers booster, ironically living in New Mexico, on an internet message board. The post stated "*Rutgers is where New Mexico was in 2001—which is a very good thing!.....The Governor and State Legislature have so much confidence that the Lobos have turned the corner that they recently pumped 5 million into stadium renovations. Progress is being made the right way in New Brunswick (The town Rutgers in located in), just like I have seen it in Albuquerque. Good things are on the RU horizon my friends*" (p. 179).

The book is only 10 chapters long and is a very quick read. It is a must read for anyone interested in the big business of college sports and the all too often scandal and corruption that comes with it. Dowling has strong opinions and certainly biases that many may or may not agree with, but he back ups his contentions with real world examples not only at other universities, but at Rutgers. There is simply no denying the effect that changing the focus of Rutgers has impacted academic integrity at the school. Is the success or perceived success in athletics worth that price? Dowling certainly does not think so and recent events support him. In 2006-7, Rutgers has made deep cuts in staff, academic programs, and non-revenue sports programs; all the while, the football program budget and coaches salaries are dramatically increasing (Rimbach & Alex, 2006).

Dowling's comparison of Rutgers with UNM is all too familiar and it appears Rutgers is on a direct path to the same type of corruption that pervades big time athletics. For Dowling and members of the Rutgers 1000, it is sad, but similar to what is going on at other institutions of higher learning. There appears to be no turning back for Rutgers, in spite of the courageous efforts of Dowling and the Rutgers 1000 eloquently detailed in this book.

References

Rimbach, J., & Alex, P. (2006, November 5). The price of glory – Rutgers spends millions on football amid massive cuts, layoffs. *The Record (Hackensack, NJ)*. Retrieved September 27, 2007, from America's Newspapers.