MICHAEL SOKOLOVE
Football Is a Sucker's Game

DURING MY THIRTY YEARS IN ACADEMIE, I have always been at schools with massive athletic departments and football teams that play in prime time, first at The Ohio State University and then at the University of Texas at Austin. So I found Michael Sokolove's "Football Is a Sucker's Game"—a lengthy, sprawling essay on the efforts of the University of South Florida to establish an NCAA Division I-A gridiron program—compelling reading.

It is possible, I think, to be a fan of college football and still have doubts about what football programs have become in the last few decades—grossly overfunded, overproduced, commercial ventures wholly disconnected from the major and even peripheral purposes of a university. Sokolove shows how schools get sucked into spindling commitments and expenditures when school administrators, looking for an easy way to get public attention for their institutions, decide to play with the big boys of the NCAA.

What he doesn't show is how such programs lose their hold on the very students the football teams are supposed to represent. These days, ordinary undergraduates at Division I-A schools may not be able to get—or afford—decent seats at a "big" game. They've been squeezed out by alumni or businesses whose handsome contributions buy them prime real estate in a stadium enlarged every decade to cover the salaries of coaches paid like Hollywood celebrities.

Moreover, chances are most students have never taken a class with a football player or studied in the same library with one. And don't even try to make the case that football builds character or school spirit or community. Too many recent post-game victory riots undermine any notion that football, as played in Division I at least, has much to do with our better angels.


J.R.

The University of South Florida sprawls over nearly 1,500 acres in a once sparsely populated section of Tampa, close to where the city bleeds into unincorporated Hillsborough County. The campus is pancake flat and in desperate need of more trees and shade. Grass comes up in stubborn clumps through sandy soil. I can't say that I was shocked when I learned of a previous use of this parcel of land: a practice bombing range.

In many other ways, though, the University of South Florida is attractive—and useful. It has produced about 170,000 graduates in its four-decade history. It has a medical school and some well-regarded academic programs.
Current enrollment stands at 39,000, and students tend to be grounded and hard-working rather than rich and entitled. (A professor told me that one challenge of his job is teaching morning classes to students who may have worked the late shift at Chili's.) What U.S.F. does not have is any kind of national profile. It has no standing. No buzz. The latest edition of the Princeton Review's Best 345 Colleges does not rank it low on the list—it leaves it off entirely.

University officials want U.S.F. in the guidebooks. They want fewer commuters, more out-of-state students, more residence halls and more of a "traditional" campus feel, by which they mean a campus with a soul and some spirit. It is a big job, and the burden for getting it done has fallen, largely, to Jim Leavitt.

"Sit down," he says as he enters his office one morning this fall. It's clear to me that I'm not only supposed to sit, but to do so in silence. His office is a mess. Clothes are strewn everywhere. About 50 videotapes are scattered on the floor by his desk. Leavitt himself doesn't look so great, either. His brown hair is a tousled mop, a modified crewcut gone to seed. He gives the impression of being simultaneously weary and wired.

Leavitt continues at what he was doing before I arrived, drawing with a red pen on an unlined sheet of paper. At one point he reaches behind him on the floor for his Pepsi, which he drinks by the two-liter bottle. When he finally speaks again, his voice leaks out in the weak rasp of someone who does more yelling than sleeping. "I'm sorry," he says, "but I was in here late last night and I never even got to this. To be honest with you, there aren't enough hours in the day. But I've really got to get through it. It's important."

After several more minutes, when he is finally done, I walk around behind Leavitt to inspect his handiwork. On the white paper are a series of squiggles and arrows, 11 on each side of the page.

"What is it?" I inquire.

"A punt return," he says.

Football is the S.U.V. of the college campus: aggressively big, resource-guzzling, lots and lots of fun and potentially destructive of everything around it. Big-time teams award 85 scholarships and, with walk-ons, field rosters of 100 or more players. (National Football League teams make do with half that.) At the highest level, universities wage what has been called an "athletic arms race" to see who can build the most lavish facilities to attract the highest-quality players. Dollars are directed from general funds and wrestled from donors, and what does not go into cherry-wood lockers, plush carpets and million-dollar weight rooms ends up in the pockets of coaches, the most exalted of whom now make upward of $2 million a year.

The current college sports landscape is meaner than ever, more overtly commercial, more winner-take-all. And just as in the rest of the economy, the gap between rich and poor is widening. College sports now consists of a class of super-behemoths—perhaps a dozen or so athletic departments with
budgets of $40 million and up—and a much larger group of schools that face the choice of spending themselves into oblivion or being embarrassed on the field. (Which may happen in any case.) It is common for lesser college football teams to play at places like Tennessee or Michigan, where average attendance exceeds 100,000, in return for “guarantees” from the host school of as much as $500,000. They are paid, in other words, to take a beating.

Any thought of becoming one of the giants and sharing in the real money is in most cases a fantasy. Universities new to Division I-A football (in addition to U.S.F., the University of Connecticut and the University of Buffalo have just stepped up to the big time) know that the first level of competition is financial. It is a dangerous game. “The mantra of the need to ‘spend money to make money’ can be used to justify a great deal of spending, without leading an institution to any destination other than a deeper financial hole,” write James Shulman and William Bowen in *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values*, their 2001 examination of the finances of college athletics.

The current college bowl season began last week and ends Jan. 3 with the national championship game, the Fiesta Bowl. This year, the cartel of teams belonging to the Bowl Championship Series—members of the six most prominent conferences plus independent Notre Dame, a total of 63 teams—will split a guaranteed payoff of at least $120 million from the Fiesta, Orange, Sugar and Rose Bowls. Teams outside the B.C.S. are eligible to play in such low-wattage affairs as the Humanitarian Bowl, the Motor City Bowl and the Continental Tire Bowl. For the privilege, they will almost certainly lose money, because the bowl payouts will not even cover travel and other expenses.

“We are receiving letters and calls from conferences that want in,” Mike Tranghese, coordinator of the five-year-old B.C.S., told me. “And we have formed a presidential oversight panel to form an answer.” But letting more members in would mean splitting up the money more ways. I asked Tranghese if I was missing something in assuming the B.C.S. had no incentive to cut more schools in. “If you were missing something, I would let you know,” he said. “The B.C.S. consists of the major teams as determined by the marketplace. Any other system is socialism. And if we’re going to have socialism, then why don’t we share our endowments?”

One reason B.C.S. members do not want to share is that college sports have become so immensely expensive that even some of the biggest of the big lose money. The University of Michigan, which averages more than 110,000 fans for home football games, lost an estimated $7 million on athletics over the course of two seasons, between 1998 and 2000. Ohio State had athletic revenues of $73 million in 1999–2000 and “barely managed to break even,” according to the book *Unpaid Professionals: Commercialism and Conflict in Big-Time College Sports*, by Andrew Zimbalist, a Smith College economics professor. A state audit revealed that the University of Wisconsin lost $286,700 on its athletic program in fiscal year 2000.

The conditions facing programs in the Big Ten, including Michigan and Ohio State, are so strained that it has been described as a state of disrepair. The Big Ten, in fact, was formed in 1916 as a sports rehabilitation for the Midwest, a reaction to the end of World War I. The first Big Ten conference was the Big Four conference.

Institutions that have been running losses in college sports have resorted to a variety of funding schemes, including the sale of naming rights. Nine athletic departments have signed five-year contracts with a minimum guarantee of $12.5 million for naming rights on a stadium or a football field. Some universities have successfully baked the expenses of athletic programs into the price of tuitions. The University of Colorado at Boulder has been able to double its participation in athletics in the past decade, in part because its high tuition ($23,976 for 2000–2001) has helped to cushion a large athletic budget that includes football. The university charges an additional $1,500 per semester to help support the athletic department.

One result of the financial strain has been that German cars, which used to be reserved for the upper echelons of athletic programs, now are also being used in the middle tier of teams. A 2001 report in *The New York Times* found that at least 40 percent of Division I-A schools have a special committee or task force dealing with athletics. In 1996, the NCAA began investigating the relationship between the athletic and academic programs at some schools, including the University of North Carolina and Duke University, which were using the proceeds of football _to_ pay for football. The NCAA has consistently found that football is a revenue center itself, and that other athletic programs depend on it heavily. In 1998, the NCAA began investigating the relationship between the athletic and academic programs at some schools, including the University of North Carolina and Duke University, which were using the proceeds of football _to_ pay for football. The NCAA has consistently found that football is a revenue center itself, and that other athletic programs depend on it heavily.
on its Rose Bowl appearance in 1998 because it took a small army, a traveling party of 832, to Pasadena.

The endemic criminal and ethical scandals of college sports are connected by a straight line to the money. Teams that do not win do not excite their boosters, fill up stadiums, appear on national TV or get into postseason play, thereby endangering the revenue stream that supports the immense infrastructure. It is the desperation for cash, every bit as much as the pursuit of victory, that causes university athletic departments to overlook all kinds of rule-breaking until it splatters out into the open.

One day this fall I opened my morning sports page and, in glancing at the college football briefs, took note that it was a particularly bad day for the Big Ten. The headlines were: "Spartan Tailback Dismissed"; "Iowa Player Arrested"; "Wisconsin Back Stabbed." The Michigan State Spartans dismissed two co-captains within 10 days: the starting quarterback, who checked into rehab for a substance-abuse problem, as well as the tailback, who was accused of drunken driving and eluding arrest by dragging a police officer with his car. The next day, the head coach, Bobby Williams, with his team's record at 3–6, was fired — and sent off with a $550,000 buyout.

At tiny Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, N.C. — a Baptist institution in its first season of Division I basketball — the university president resigned in the fall after acknowledging that he ordered a change in the calculation of a star basketball player's grade-point average. At Florida State University, quarterback Adrian McPherson was suspended days before his arrest for supposedly stealing a blank check, then expressed shock at the discipline meted out by the normally lenient head coach, Bobby Bowden. (When a star player was accused of theft a few years back, Bowden said, "I'm praying for a misdemeanor.")

The University of Alabama at Birmingham, which started football just over a decade ago, is playing this season under a cloud. The trustees of the Alabama higher-education system have given the university two years to reverse a $7.6 million budget deficit or face being shut down. In addition, pending civil suits charge that a 15-year-old girl who enrolled at U.A.B. was sexually assaulted, repeatedly, by a large number of football and basketball players, as well as by the person who performed as the school's mascot, a dragon.

The list goes on. Ohio State's thrilling 14–9 victory over Michigan on Nov. 23 occasioned a full-scale riot by inebriated Buckeye fans who burned cars, looted businesses and caused tens of thousands of dollars in damage before 250 police officers finally restored order at 5 A.M. These sorts of things have become the background music of college sports.

Being a striving team trying to keep up in a big-time conference can be a particular kind of debacle. Rutgers University, in this regard, is Exhibit A. It belongs to the Big East, a B.C.S. football conference that also boasts powerful basketball programs. Rutgers can't compete in either sport. Its cellar-dwelling teams draw poor crowds, and the athletic department ran a deficit of about $13 million last year.
A dissident group, the Rutgers 1,000, has waged a passionate campaign to get Rutgers to leave the Big East and to de-emphasize athletics. This has led, indirectly, to yet another new way of throwing money away on sports. The administration tried to block publication of a Rutgers 1,000 advertisement in an alumni magazine. Not only did Rutgers lose the ensuing court battle, but it also spent $375,000 fighting it, including court-ordered reimbursement of legal fees to the A.C.L.U., which took up the case of the Rutgers 1,000 as a free-speech issue.

"Schools get on a treadmill, and there's no getting off," says James Shulman, an author of The Game of Life. "They have to stay on; they have too much invested." The former Princeton basketball coach Pete Carill once said of the big-time programs: "If you want to get into the rat race, you've got to be a rat."

Another way to look at big-time college sports is as a sucker's game, one with many more losers than winners. Notre Dame, a great football team before it was a great university, is the prototype for all schools hoping to hitch a ride on the back of a popular sports team. Duke certainly has become more celebrated and academically selective in the years its basketball team has been a perennial Final Four participant. But Notre Dame and Duke are exceptions. For every Notre Dame and Duke, there are many more like Rutgers and U.A.B., schools that spend millions in a hopeless mission to reach the top.

The University of South Florida, nonetheless, wants in on the gambit and in on the perceived spoils. The new gospel there is that football is "the tip of the marketing sword." I heard the phrase from several administrators at U.S.F. Vicki Mitchell explained the concept to me. She had directed a highly successful university-wide fund-raising campaign, but in May, not long after the team jumped to Division I-A, she moved to the athletic department to raise money specifically for sports. Under Mitchell, the office devoted to sports fund-raising was ramped up from three staff members to eight, and in the first three months of this fiscal year she and her team brought in $1.6 million, just $200,000 less than the total raised in the previous 12 months. "The easiest way to build a U.S.F. brand is to build an athletic program that is known, and that means football," Mitchell said. "Maybe that's not what the university wants to be known for, but it's reality."

Nearly two decades ago, the exploits of the Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie and the success of the team were credited with increasing applications by 25 percent and transforming B.C. from a regional to a national university. The syndrome was even given a name: the Flutie effect. That's the kind of magic U.S.F. is trying to catch.

U.S.F. didn't play football at any level until 1997. Its founding president, John Allen, who presided over the university from 1957 to 1970, was that rare thing in football-crazed Florida—a staunch opponent of the sport. In the 1980's, U.S.F. alumni and Tampa businessmen began pushing for foot-
ball, and the U.S.F. administration began lobbying a reluctant state Board of Regents for a team. In 1993, the outgoing president, Frank Borkowski, in his final weeks at U.S.F. and with the Regents’ decision on football pending, hired Lee Roy Selmon—a former N.F.L. star and one of the most admired men in Tampa—to lead football fund-raising. That was the pivotal moment. “I was in a pretty tight box,” recalls Borkowski, now chancellor at Appalachian State University. “The Regents did not want us to have a team. But to deny football would have been a slap to Selmon.”

Jim Leavitt was hired in 1995, two years before the University of South Florida Bulls played their first game. From the start, the university intended to move quickly to the N.C.A.A.’s highest level and eventually challenge football factories like Florida State, the University of Florida and the University of Miami. By the time the current U.S.F. president, Judy Genshaft, arrived in 2000, the program was in full bloom. Genshaft’s term has so far been marked by a thorny dispute spawned by her suspension of Sami Al-Arian, a tenured professor of computer science, over charges that he had ties to terrorism. Compared to the fallout from that, football has been pure pleasure.

Genshaft, who attends the team’s games and keeps a jersey in her office with her name on the back, was an undergraduate at Wisconsin and a longtime administrator at Ohio State. “I know big sports,” she says, “and I love big sports. It brings more visibility, more spirit, more community engagement. Even researchers coming to us from other big universities, they are expecting sports to be part of campus life.”

The rationales put forth for big-time sports are not easily proved or disproved. One example is the assumption that successful teams spur giving to the general funds of universities. “The logic is reasonable enough,” Zimbalist wrote in Unpaid Professionals. “A school goes to the Rose Bowl or to the Final Four. Alumnae feel proud and open up their pocketbooks.” But Zimbalist looked at the available evidence and concluded that winning teams, at best, shake loose dollars given specifically for sports. And only for a time; when on-field fortunes reverse, or a scandal occurs, the money often dries up.

Genshaft says that U.S.F. can play football at the highest level without financial or ethical ruin. “It’s a risk and it’s expensive,” she says. “But we’ve decided that football is part of who we are and where we’re going.”

But others see disaster as the only possible result. At Rutgers, the sports program has split the campus community and spawned an angry and unusually organized opposition. “The reality of sports at this level is it can’t be done right,” says William C. Dowling, an English professor and one of the leaders of the Rutgers 1,000. “It’s not possible, anywhere, even at the so-called best places. Look at the differences in SAT levels.”

One study showed the SAT scores of football players at Division I-A schools to be 271 points lower than incoming nonathletes. “You have kids brought to campus and maybe, maybe they could be real students if they studied 60 hours a week and did nothing else,” Dowling says. “But everyone knows that’s not happening. It’s not their fault. They’ve been lied to in high
school, all these African-American kids who get told that playing ball is their way up in society, even though it's never been that for any other ethnic group in America. It's dishonest. It's filthy."

When Vicki Mitchell pitches U.S.F. donors, however, she sells the program as if it were in a state of grace—unsullied by scandal, at least so far, and still operating with a degree of fiscal sanity. She begins by painting a picture of what life is like at the really big football powers. To secure a season ticket at one of those schools in a desirable part of the stadium, if that's even possible, can set a donor back tens of thousands of dollars. "I'll say to someone: 'You're a sports fan. You need to get on board, because everyone knows what it costs at those other places. Our aspirations are no less, but we're not there yet. We're young. We're fun. We're a growth stock. Get in now while it's still affordable.'"

I met head coach Jim Leavitt for the first time just a few days before the biggest home game in the history of University of South Florida football. The opponent, Southern Mississippi, was the strongest team ever to visit U.S.F. and a favorite to break its 15-game home winning streak. U.S.F. had lost an early-season road game at Oklahoma, then the second-ranked team in the nation, but outplayed the powerful Sooners for long stretches. Leavitt's team was surging in the national polls; the *New York Times* computer rankings would place it as high as 18th in the nation, ahead of such tradition-rich football powers as Tennessee, Florida State, Auburn, Clemson and Nebraska. These accomplishments, for a program playing just its sixth season, were nothing short of astounding.

As the showdown against Southern Mississippi loomed, two things obsessed Leavitt: winning the game, and money. "The kind of money we need is big, big money," he said to me not long after saying hello. He kept returning to the same point. "We have what we need for a beginning program, but we're not a beginning program anymore." Then: "I don't know what this program will look like in the future. It can be big. But you've got to have money. You've got to have facilities. If you don't, it ain't gonna happen."

Leavitt, 46, grew up in nearby St. Petersburg. He was a high-school sports star, a defensive back at the University of Missouri, then an assistant coach at several universities before he came home to be the first coach of U.S.F. football.

Leavitt has won praise not just for winning, but also for doing so on the cheap. He and his nine assistant coaches work out of a complex that includes floors that need to be cleaned and rooms that will be torn down. Leavitt's team is now coached by three former assistants. He's used the setup, every last ounce of it. "I imagine it's expensive, but it's not," Leavitt said. "As it should be."

Like his associate athletic director, he mandates envelopes. His office manager says, "I am a stickler for these things. People don't pay women's sports. Women's sports, in every instance, should pay for themselves."

To build the stadium, $65,000 was paid for the site, $65,000 for the downlinks, $65,000 for the entrances—which for now are just austere exits.

Despite the relative lack of money, Leavitt has reached one deal that will boost revenue substantially. He struck a deal with the government and the corporate sector to rename the stadium Genshaft to honor the former governor of Florida.

U.S.F. could net another $5 million in revenue and non-program costs. The president has committed the university to spending the money on the program, and even admit more students, the budget the university can absorb easily.

One woman who got a job at the stadium, a laundry department worker, said the money will buy enough laundry to sustain the school, break out from the state's commitment, and strengthen the program. "The more we make, the more the university will give back," she said. "I was assigned to the laundry room, and I was given a million fee to..."
plex that will be as big as a football field—104,000 square feet over two floors that will serve most of the university’s men’s and women’s teams but will be dominated by football.

Leavitt views this as natural and right. He tells me about Oklahoma, coached by his close friend Bob Stoops, which already has “an outrageous setup, everything you can imagine,” and has just raised yet another $100 million. “I imagine they’ll tell you it’s not for football only, and I would assume it’s not,” Leavitt says. “But I’m pretty sure football will get what it needs first. As it should, in my opinion.”

Like many football coaches, Leavitt is no fan of Title IX regulations that mandate equal opportunity for female athletes. “Don’t get me wrong,” he says, “I am a big proponent of women’s sports. I want us to be great at women’s sports. But football should be separate from the Title IX thing, because nobody else operates like we do. We’re revenue-producing.”

To build the U.S.F. athletic complex will cost as much as $15 million. To furnish it—starting with $425,000 in weight-training equipment, a $65,000 hydrotherapy tub, portable X-ray machines, satellite uplinks and downlinks, trophy cases for a U.S.F. sports hall of fame in the atrium entrance—will cost up to $5 million more.

Despite aggressive fund-raising, private pledges for this facility have reached only $5 million, so it will be built on borrowed money. The construction bond will be backed partly by the “athletic fee” charged to students, which for those who attend full time has reached $224 a year—a fairly substantial add-on to a tuition of only $2,159.

Mitchell says the university considers students “its biggest donor,” and student leaders are, in fact, courted like boosters. In October, the student government president and vice president flew on a private jet with President Genshaft to the big game at Oklahoma. U.S.F. calculates that the football team brings in, roughly, $4 million in revenue and spends about the same amount. But as in most athletic departments, the accounting makes no attempt to measure the true resources used.

One day, I stood in a humid basement room and watched the laundry—muddy Bulls jerseys and pants, T-shirts, sweat socks, wrist- and headbands, jockstraps—from 105 football players being cleaned. Several colossal washers and dryers were fed by three athletic-department employees. They perform this task early August through late November, six days a week, 10 hours a day. None of this—the salaries, the utility costs, the $8,000 a year just in laundry detergent—is charged against football. Nor is there any attempt to break out football’s share of such costs as sports medicine, academic tutoring, strength and conditioning, insurance, field upkeep or the rest of its share of the more than $5 million in general expenses of the athletic department not assigned to a specific sport.

In the papers I was shown, I also could find no evidence that a $2 million fee to join Conference USA (which is not a B.C.S. conference) as a