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**College Sports Inc.: The Athletic Department vs. the University.** Murray Sperber.  
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Turn-of-the-century thinkers expected that, thanks to Darwin, organized religion would be replaced eventually: perhaps by art, perhaps by literature, perhaps by the state. In fact, one could argue that to the extent it has been displaced, it has been supplanted by organized sport. Cities once strove to build remarkable cathedrals; now they want domed stadia. Pilgrimages are made to the big games and to tournaments and bowls. Ritual and ceremony abound. But above all it is the faith, the pure blind faith in some mystical higher good that links religion and sport. And the irrational faith in the unlikely — even the absurd.

Murray Sperber's *College Sports Inc.* is an heretical tract by a true freethinker. Sperber sets out to debunk a number of cherished beliefs about College Sport, and he does so convincingly. He calls these beliefs myths, appropriate to a revisionary assessment of religion, but a more accurate term might be misconceptions. Less kind, one might call them Lies. Yet his book will have little effect. College sports — especially football and basketball — are so firmly entrenched as systems of belief, as articles of faith, that mere logic is not going to shake their foundations. Sperber is a fan who does "not want to abolish college sports," rather he wants major reforms to abolish the "massive hypocrisy and fiscal irresponsibility" that are so at odds with the assumed academic missions of higher education. This, however, may be one of the few points on which Sperber is wrong. While the "massive hypocrisy and fiscal irresponsibility" of college sport may be at odds with the stated missions of higher education, they probably mirror the fiscal irresponsibility and the hypocrisy of the ever-expanding bureaucracies currently feasting on higher education. That is no minor point, but to have investigated it would have drastically changed the direction of Sperber's book.

Refuting the most common "myths" of college sports, Sperber "introduce[s] the reader to the reality of contemporary college sports." He makes it easy for the reader, putting each myth in italics and preceding it with the word *Myth*, making absolutely certain that the target of his subsequent discussion is unmistakable. Indeed, his approach is not unlike Darwin's: present an hypothesis, then support that hypothesis with detail so extensive it borders upon overkill.

*Myth: College sports are part of the educational mission of American colleges and universities.* Sperber deals with this first and fundamental myth in his introductory chapter.

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Much of what he points out, we all know but somehow qualify or ignore. E.g., "Athletes are the only group of students recruited for entertainment – not academic – purposes." In an apt analogy, he suggests the outcry that might result if universities sought out potential rock stars and gave them full scholarships to learn their trade while they entertained the university community.

Other myths are less obvious and less suspect. *Myth: The alumni support – in fact, demand – that their alma maters have large and successful college sports programs.* In fact, the bulk of the support comes from boosters who have not attended the university. Of alumni who donate to academic units, "only 1 to 2% of them donate to athletic programs." Sperber's discoveries in this area are fascinating. Not only are the most rabid supporters boosters rather than alumni, it appears that most alumni are embarrassed by successful sports teams as well as by athletic scandals: donations from alumni go down after scandals and great athletic successes. The oft-heard justification for football and basketball, that the alumni demand them and they they bring in donations to academic programs, would seem to be blatant falsehoods.

This suggests another blatant falsehood, the lie of the "revenue sport." Only 10 to 20 athletic programs "make a consistent albeit small profit" each year. This is not news. The fact turns up every few years on the sports pages. Yet athletic directors – and worse, college presidents – continue to declare that basketball and football make money for the "non-revenue sports." In fact, at the vast majority of institutions, football and basketball lose money. This fact leads directly to other prevarications: that coaches deserve high salaries because they generate income for universities, that bowl appearances mean big money for universities, and that the NCAA tournament makes big bucks for the participants.

These are merely the big lies – or myths, as Sperber chooses to call them. College sport appears to be a web of lies. It is easy enough to check the statistics that confute some claims. The oft-heard statement that college sports provide wonderful opportunities for black coaches, for example, is refuted by a 1987 study that shows only 4.2% of head coaches in basketball, football, and men's track at 278 Division I schools were black. More incredible: the percentage of black assistant coaches was only 3.1%. Yet over 50% of the football players and over 70% of the basketball players at these schools were black. Sexual equality? Facts show that the lie with regard to sex is as bad as the lie with regard to race. "In the early 1970s 90 percent of the athletic directors of women's college sports programs were female, whereas by 1988 the percentage had dropped to 16." And the percentage of women coaches fell from the 90s to 48 over the same time period.

Sperber explodes numerous other myths: among them the notion that college athletes are amateurs, that sports provides an upward path for black ghetto youths, that the opportunity for a college education is important to college athletes, that the NCAA merely serves the will of its member institutions, that the NCAA's and CFA's announced annual graduation rates are accurate, and that the NCAA can correct the many problems in college sports.

If a book such as Sperber's were directed at another area of life, the Arts, for example, and uncovered such a complex of intentional misrepresentation, outright lies, and questionable financial manipulation, surely a tremendous outcry would ensue. The fact that a book as carefully documented and well-argued as *College Sports Inc.* can appear and barely cause a ripple is sad, but not at all curious, for it is proof that sports have little to do with logic and a great deal more to do with emotion; faith rather than fact dominates. It requires no great inductive leap to see the similarities between college basketball and football and religion, especially as it has adapted to television. The faithful refused to see the greed and hypocrisy of the Bakers and Swag-

garts, continuing to support them unequivocally, even when the facts were revealed. TV evangelism became a wonderful amalgam of entertainment and the impulse to worship, entertainment as faith. Is college sport much different?

Consider the vehemence with which the *Louisville Courier-Journal* was attacked when it reported the Kentucky basketball scandal. Or the hatred directed at Peter Golenbock when his book in press, *Personal Fouls*, threatened to expose irregularities in Jim Valvano's basketball program at North Carolina State. Not only was Valvano defended to the last ditch, he was rewarded beyond it. Golenbock was attacked, his veracity and motives called into question, and the book was temporally withdrawn from publication. When the book was eventually published and investigations supported Golenbock's allegations, no apologies ensued. What values do sports teach when the Valvanos, Sherrills, and Mike Whites receive settlements in the hundreds of thousands of dollars after they have been found in violation of numerous regulations? The values currently at the heart of college sport: greed and success at all cost.

Sperber provides an abundance of disheartening and carefully documented detail: coaches and athletic directors are hugely rewarded for gross incompetency, collusion abounds, cheating abounds, a kill the messenger mentality pervades most athletic departments — indeed, most universities (when Jan Kemp, sickened by blatant disregard for academic regulations by the athletic department at the University of Georgia exposed the truth, she was dismissed for doing her job correctly and had to sue for reinstatement). To reveal college sports' dirty laundry is to risk one's own neck. Of course, this extends beyond college athletics; it would seem to be a sad principle of American life. Whistle blowers in congress, in the pentagon, in the FBI, in major urban police departments have all met with similar fates.

Indeed, it may well be that the tendencies to corruption that Sperber reveals are merely reflections of American society as a whole, a trickle down effect from decades of "leaders" who have fed gluttonously at the public trough, who have mismanaged then rewarded themselves excessively, who have consistently raised their own salaries by arguing that bigger salaries were needed to attract the "top" people into government, business, administration, college coaching. In fact, college sports is a good argument that we need to return to the notion of amateur, to doing things for love rather than money. It may well be that paying less attracts the best, and the best people will do it from love and a sense of responsibility rather than out of greed. Consider the teachers who could be making bigger money in other arenas, or the vastly underpaid workers in child protective services throughout the nation. And no university would have problems finding athletes to represent it on the playing field, whether scholarships were given or not.

Perhaps Sport is not such a bad religion; it may be that the combination of sports and greed is simply as sinister as the combination of greed and religion that televangelists have come to represent. Perhaps our Faith, at any given time, reflects our society's basic assumptions and desires. The spiritual side of athletics is ignored by Sperber, however. This is an intensely practical and factual book. Sperber, to his credit, does not devote his entire study to delineating where college sport has gone wrong. His final chapter, "Solutions to the Systemic Problems in College Sports," is devoted to solutions. Few of the solutions are new ideas. Sperber generally suggests the obvious, that the pretence that college athletes can get a good education be dropped, for example. Although embarrassing breakdowns continue, from SMU's death penalty to the rapes and shootings that became symbolic of Oklahoma's shameful success-at-any-cost football program, Sperber doubts that those responsible will do anything to change college sports. He speculates that the impetus for change may come from outside: perhaps "a major economic recession" will force change, or perhaps "Congress and the IRS"

will revamp tax laws, or more unlikely, college presidents will display courage and band together for reform (courage, Sperber notes wryly, is not part of the job description for university presidents). Sperber speculates that the big players – the CFA members, for example – will reorganize conferences and college sports will move more toward professionalization. This observation seems prophetic in light of recent conference realignments.

Sperber presents the present situation as excessively unstable, a situation that is volatile and will, whatever the ultimate causes, eventually change. In the volatile 1960s worried conservatives stood at central locations on college campuses and handed out free copies of *A Nation at Risk* and *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Demonstrators laughed at the time, but who knows? Perhaps this paved the way for Reagan and Bush. If it were possible, copies of Sperber's book should be given to all incoming freshmen – or to their parents. If enough tuition-paying parents were to read it, perhaps outrage would change things.

In the meantime, College Sports Inc. would seem to be in much the same position as the Catholic Church just before the Reformation: a monolith on the verge of shattering into fragments of its revised self. The need for it, the craving for it will remain even as college sports in its present form topples. Sperber has played Luther. It is time for the heretics and martyrs: perhaps some unlikely candidate, say a university president, will risk his or her own neck in the interest of reform and thereby inspire other presidents to similar bravery. It is, of course, more likely that the whole system will collapse under the weight of its own greed, blatantly short-sighted self interest, and fiscal and moral mismanagement.