

GUEST ESSAY

The Only Way College Sports Can Begin to Make Sense Again

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By Jordan Acker

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College sports are in a state of upheaval. As of 2025, the century-old Pacific 12 Conference will no longer exist for all intents and purposes, as U.C.L.A., U.S.C., the University of Washington and the University of Oregon have decamped for bigger paychecks from the Big Ten Conference, and Stanford and the University of California-Berkeley will henceforth compete in the now ironically named Atlantic Coast Conference.

Adjustments like these are not entirely new. Before the University of Nebraska joined the Big Ten in 2011, it was a member of the Western Interstate University Football Association, the Big Eight (once briefly known as the Big Six and the Big Seven), and the Big 12 Conference. But these changes used to be about regional or

academic affinity. The recent creation of new national super conferences, however, is about one thing: getting the biggest television audience — and the biggest payout.

This past year, the Big Ten signed a seven-year, \$7 billion contract with CBS, NBC and Fox. Football was already a huge business for many large state universities. But now that TV executives with no interest in academics are influencing these decisions, conferences that were once schools of similar academic value and region have been dragged into direct competition, regardless of the impact it has on student athletes.

This is a money grab, and a shameful time for all of us involved in college athletics and higher education. As regents, trustees, presidents and athletic directors, we promised to focus on our universities as academic institutions first and sponsors of intercollegiate athletics second. We failed.

The problem has been the lack of direction and vision from the so-called grown-ups in the room — the National Collegiate Athletic Association. For decades, N.C.A.A. member institutions have spent their valuable time arguing (and losing) before courts and pleading on Capitol Hill for special protections of their “amateur” model, in which student athletes play their sport purely for the enjoyment of the activity, all while their coaches and administrators make millions.

Most recently, the N.C.A.A. and its members spent years trying to prevent two changes to the collegiate athletics model. One was the allowance of Name Image and Likeness compensation, which is essentially the ability of student athletes to engage in and be paid for outside advertising deals. The other was the widespread use by football and basketball players of the transfer portal, a website that allows student athletes to announce their interest in switching to another college so that coaches from other institutions can reach out, as they sometimes do in mere minutes. The N.C.A.A. says both changes do grave harm to the beloved model.

While Charlie Baker, the N.C.A.A.’s president, lobbies for one unpassable bill after another, his supporters repeat talking points about how the enterprise that has mismanaged college sports for generations should be saved for the good of

American society and the academic mission of universities. At the same time, the Big Ten Conference, flush with millions of dollars of new TV revenue, helped destroy the Pacific 12 Conference, a more than 100-year-old institution and for years its “sister conference.”

There is nothing amateur about a model that negotiates billion-dollar deals and pays its coaches and administrators millions while denying athletes the ability to share in the revenue or even to have a voice in determining whether these deals are a good idea. The Southeastern Conference just agreed to a 10-year, \$300-million-per-year deal with Disney, which owns ESPN, for its TV rights. This hypocrisy is too much to bear.

The steps that universities like mine — large institutions with prominent athletic departments and football programs — should take are clear: First, they should meet to consider how a revenue-sharing model would work within the current structure of the N.C.A.A., and release their plan for how to grant players employee or quasi-employee status. Second, if the N.C.A.A. is unwilling or unable to help schools through this dramatic transition, they should leave and found their own organization, similar to how the English Premier League broke away from the rest of English soccer in 1992. They can create a more efficient model with a sustainable infrastructure to protect the interests of student athletes.

College football teams get chartered planes and nice hotels. But for Olympic sports like field hockey, track and field, and crew, which most athletes play, flying commercial is the norm. For a University of Michigan team to travel to a game at the University of Oregon, for example, requires over seven and a half hours of travel on Delta Airlines, with a layover in Salt Lake City or Seattle. That’s longer than a flight from Detroit to London. As part of the Big Ten Conference, a Rutgers volleyball player might fly more than 2,800 miles to compete in a game at the University of Washington on a Tuesday, before returning for a Wednesday morning exam. Calling this amateur or college athletics is simply laughable. Many student athletes rarely have the chance to step foot in a classroom, attending their classes online and taking proctored exams in hotel ballrooms near the next game site.

The only way any of it can begin to make sense is if players get a percentage of the money that conferences make off that labor.

There are a number of ways it could happen. For example, all student athletes at the University of Michigan would become employees or independent contractors of the Big Ten Conference, and would receive a percentage of the \$59 million or so each member school makes per year from TV rights. Another model would involve the networks directly engaging in name, image and likeness deals with student athletes from major conferences, allowing these student athletes to make a guaranteed income without increasing their time commitment significantly. Say the Big Ten required its TV partners to share 30 percent of its revenues with its student athletes, each athlete would receive a percentage of that. At Michigan, where roughly 900 athletes compete in Ann Arbor, that would mean a wide receiver or field hockey player would get approximately \$20,000 per year.

In early August, during the latest round of Big Ten expansion, I heard from leaders from across other power conferences — from university presidents to athletic directors and coaches — several of whom agreed with a plan for revenue sharing. Two current Big Ten Football coaches, Iowa's head coach, Kirk Ferentz, and Michigan's coach, Jim Harbaugh, have already expressed support for revenue sharing. It's time for leaders who agree privately to help create a critical mass of support. The N.C.A.A.'s rules on revenue sharing are driven by their members; this change will not come from the N.C.A.A.'s home base of Indianapolis, but from leaders at member institutions speaking frankly about the challenges to come. It must also take into account the input of student athletes, who are too often shut out of decisions that directly affect them.

Make no mistake, the courts are judging the Big Ten Conference, and the other major N.C.A.A.' conferences, on their behavior. As Justice Brett Kavanaugh of the Supreme Court wrote in a concurring opinion to the landmark 2021 N.C.A.A. v. Alston decision, “[n]owhere else in America can businesses get away with agreeing not to pay their workers a fair market rate on the theory that their product is defined by not paying their workers a fair market rate . . . The N.C.A.A. is not above the law.”

With several other cases pending, the status quo is crumbling quickly. If the governing bodies and universities do not choose to reform soon, the courts, tired of the hypocrisy, will force their hand.

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