

Book Review: The Hundred Yard Lie: The Corruption of College Football and What We Can Do to Stop It

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE HUNDRED YARD LIE: THE CORRUPTION OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL AND WHAT WE CAN DO TO STOP IT

Rick Telander

[University of Illinois Press, 1996]

230 pages

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The abuses and corruption in college football have been around for some time. In the reissue of Rick Telander's book, *The Hundred Yard Lie* the perpetuation of the current and 'corrupt' system is attacked by exposing that most of the ideals the system is built upon are false. Telander, currently on staff at the Chicago Sun-Times, was one of two college football writers for Sports Illustrated at the time the book was originally published in 1989. After years of covering the sport, Telander became so disgusted with the system that he gave up writing about college football and wrote this book to expose what he saw as cracks in the foundation that have contributed to the denigration the game.

In each chapter, Telander addresses and attempts to debunk what he considers to be the main myths upon which college football is founded. By presenting personal experience, recounting stories told, and with quotes from the 1910s to the present, Telander supports his theory that the game has never been as noble as it claims to be, and that it is time to change the system. In college football today, those who stand to make the most money are those who are also setting up the rules of the game. The NCAA is often seen as some third person who is there to discipline both schools and athletes. But the voting membership of the NCAA is made up of the schools themselves, the administrators of member schools who make and approve NCAA rules. These are the same individuals who have the most to gain from successful programs, by getting the most from their athletes while giving out the least, and who have the most to lose when another school gains the exact competitive advantage they are seeking. NCAA discipline relies in great part on schools monitoring each other, a predatory system that focuses its attacks only on the successful.

One of the biggest points Telander makes is that the notion of amateurism in college athletics, is only that — a notion. The way college football is premised, playing the sport is supposed to be its own reward. The joy of competition should be all the satisfaction the athlete needs.

Sporting competition began this way, as an entertainment for the upper classes who had leisure time to indulge in play. The amateur was also a gentleman, uninterested in payment or return for his performance. But the gentleman did not face the same demands that current amateur athletes, especially in big time college football, must face. The love of the game is still at the heart of why athletes choose to compete. Unfortunately, along with the competition comes the demands of coaches to meet practice and weight-lifting schedules all year round, the media, the scrutiny of an athlete's private life, the public appearances, in addition to being expected to carry a full course load of college classes — and do well in them. As Telander points out, Frank Sinatra loved to sing, yet no one begrudged him the millions of dollars that he earned doing something he enjoyed, and doing it well. Yet the public will attack as greedy a twenty-year old kid who accepts free shoes, parking or extra cash. In the majority of schools, these are the same kids that are financially supporting an entire athletic department — themselves, the other teams, and an entire bloated administrative staff.

Telander also attacks the idea that the coach is a benevolent and good force in the life of the athlete. Telander played football at Northwestern in the late 1960s under Alex Agase, and he recounts his personal experience of the coach-player relationship. While coaches are thought to be instrumental in the shaping of young men into good role models, upstanding citizens and team players, Telander believes instead that coaches only help to alienate athletes, creating “warped perspectives based on obedience, morality and competition who are often unable to function appropriately in the real world — that is, any world without football at its epicenter — until they learn new methods of behavior and thought.” (pg. 86). Football teaches that life is ruled by cliches and third-rate psychology. Coaches are in an artificial world, the one many of them grew up in controlled only by the game and alienated from the real world. Telander believes that getting an education in this manner is one of the leading causes of the numerous problems athletes seem to have in maintaining relationships with the opposite sex. Football coaches emphasize masculinity, physicality, aggressiveness and domination, traits that are more likely to lead to felony convictions than success in the ‘real’ world.

Coaches understand their position in relation to their players, and in relation to their jobs. For a coach to maximize his off-the-field earnings - like shoe deals, or radio shows - he must lead a successful and popular team. To be successful as a team, and to keep a job, coaches learn how to manipulate their players and demand total obedience. Supposedly for

the players' own good, and incidentally their own, coaches play mind games with athletes to push them to peak performance — berating them for a sub-par performance that was actually satisfactory, threatening not to start them or cut down playing time, or questioning their chances of a professional career. This can lead to physical consequences if a coach urges a player to play through an injury or belittles him for time spent on medical needs. Telander also believes that a majority white coaching population is failing an increasingly minority athlete population often lacking in guidance and role models in the community.

All of this accumulates in enormous amounts of money and Telander examines the commercialization of the sport that has led to the separation of the athletic department, entirely autonomous from the rest of campus. Telander describes the image of sitting in the stands on a Saturday afternoon for any one of a number of big time college football games. The stands are a sea of school colors, every drop of which the school has reaped licensing fees from. The fans have paid for an emotional experience, and the athletic department has pulled in the profit. Add onto this the television revenues, advertising in the stadium, gate revenues, parking and concessions — the sums are staggering. Unfortunately, the majority of the student body will never see, nor benefit, from this money unless they flip to the right channel. The money instead will go towards increasing the size and power of the athletic department so that “if there should ever should be a downturn in the money generated . . ., the resultant shuttering of gyms or laying off of staff or cutting back on scholarships would seem unfair and socially repugnant and there would be a lot of sympathy for the poor wretches in the athletic department.” (pg. 125). While a school knows better than to ask for a slice of the football pie, an athletic department has no problem asking for some of the general coffers during hard times.

Behind all this money are the same boosters that fill those stands and even more important staff the alumni associations. Telander states that these boosters are interested only in athletic departments and focus their donations on sports programs alone. He believes that university presidents are drawn by the dollar signs and their own love of sports, putting all their fundraising energies into appeasing the athletic boosters. The presidents mistakenly believe that the boosters will donate to the general school funds and are willing to put resources from the university into the athletic department. Unfortunately, boosters are truly only interested in sports, and Telander cites studies showing that a successful athletic program has no correlation to an increase in donations to general university funds. With the president of the school so entranced, the resources of

the whole school are available to the athletic department (administrators, athletes still see none of these dollars either) to the detriment of the remaining student body. This focus on athletic success leads to the de-emphasis on academics that outrages the public. Athletes are not encouraged to attend class beyond the minimum needed to meet grade requirements and admission levels may be lowered to ensure quality athletes get into the program. The commercialization of college football has led to a reversal of the student-athlete to the athlete-student, whose interests in attending school are only because he has to meet eligibility requirements.

Telander ends the book by suggesting there is something to be done about all of this. He suggests that university presidents stand up and say they are not taking it anymore. Once schools start admitting what fallacies exist, real reform can begin to take place. Telander suggests the formation of a junior football league, similar to hockey's or baseball's minor leagues. Division I school who want to make the leap, will form the core of the league, which the NFL will be requested to subsidize. League athletes will not be required to be college students, but will be granted a year of education for each year of service, to be used when they desire. The teams will retain their names and logos affiliated with their current schools. Schools who decide not to join the league will be able to retain 'college football teams' more in along the lines of high school teams, where coaches must also have teaching duties and athletes are students, along with greater restrictions on scholarships and the outside earnings of coaches.

Telander originally published the book in 1989, and reissued it in 1996 with only the addition of an afterward. His main comment is how nothing seems to have changed in the passing six years. Each of the four preceding years' national champions had faced serious problems (1990 — University of Washington, 1991 — University of Miami, 1992 — University of Alabama, 1993 — Florida State, 1994 — Nebraska). Head coaches are commanding higher salaries every year. The former head of the NCAA, Walter Byers, has desecrated the state of the current system (See, Byers *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes*). Telander had hoped in his first release to say things he knew had been said before, but hoped that saying them a little louder — someone might listen. As he ends the reissue, "But who knows? Maybe this time people will hear. As every football coach I ever had told me, you never know unless you try." (pg. 230). It is about time someone listened, and kudos to Telander for having kept trying.

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