Should College Football Be Subsidized?

BY J. D. LEACH

Just about everybody in the country knows that colleges make a lot of money out of football and that this is done by paying good football players. But few of the millions who stream through the turnstiles each fall know much more than that about football subsidization. Very few know how it started or why it is allowed.

This knowledge is available, thanks to the records of a complete cycle of subsidization as experienced by several American universities. To appreciate this conflict between academic ambitions and rewards and athletic ambitions and rewards—the old business of brain vs. brawn, in short—it is necessary to understand both sides of the question.

There are some schools where the school rests in the shadow of the stadium; but there are others where the stadium rests in the shadow of the school. Which of these situations is the most acceptable is definitely a matter of opinion. Chancellor Bowman of Pitt University says the latter is exactly where the stadium belongs. The contention is set forth in many schools in the South and Southwest that the former is the better method.

We have often wondered why there should at times be such a flare of conscientious objections among the leading universities and colleges of the U. S. There are any number of these institutions which built their magnificent stadia as a direct financial result of more highly paid teams. In the case of one prominent Eastern school, an elaborate and over-ambitious building program drained away the resources of the University. This fact caused intense dissatisfaction among the alumni. When questioned as to the method of replacing the finances, the officials were quite positive that the financial surplus from the football season would help greatly.

Football subsidization began for a very simple reason—the game caught on. Public interest attracted high-pressure press coverage, which straightway produced even more public interest. The football converts in the stands became violent partisans, clamoring for victories over traditional rivals. The direct result was the hiring of big-time coaches. In these enlightened days we don't have to ask anyone to find out why a stellar cast of athletes always appears about a year after a famous coach has been hired at some university.

Every university has a business manager whose duty it to schedule money games. Every big game this manager adds to the schedule makes the coach's job tougher, but the job is not so tough as long as the university provides enough finances for superior material. And during this golden age of football the athletic policies are usually coldly realistic. To pay these stadium debts it is necessary to schedule the money games. To play money games it is necessary to get Grade A material. Most universities have a high-pressure organization which forms a sort of "go-and-get-'em" brigade. These men cover the football front like hungry traveling salesmen—and they have something to sell.

The money that colleges pay football players is seldom discussed. Subsidization is a form of collegiate bootlegging, but the only real crime is to get caught at it. The players are cautioned to reveal nothing of their financial take. The colleges simply claim the thing doesn't exist. In spite of this, word gets around because the boys talk to family and friends, and college-football-talent scouts make it their business to find out what the competition is paying.

In order to fully understand this situation, let's consider the case of one particular university—the University of Pittsburgh. This is the only case that I know of where the actual figures on the money paid to the players are available. Here is the record.

1924-1927—During this period the players were paid on an individual basis, depending upon their prestige and personal demands. A few received as high as $100 per month, plus tuition and books. The average payment, plus tuition and books, was $55 a month for ten months. Out of this the players were to take care of their own board and room. In addition, there were probably individual gifts by alumni or business men to certain players.

1928—For one year Pitt adopted a flat rate of $500, to be paid in ten installments of fifty dollars each, plus tuition and books.

1929-1932—The rate was raised to $650, in ten payments of $65 each, plus tuition and books. This was to be an established figure. When the depression came, this scale produced an unexpected result. Board and room in Pittsburgh became much cheaper. The players, profiting by the deflation, became fairly well-to-do. Some of them married. Some of them grouped together in apartments and lived in comparative opulence.

1933—Salaries were cut to $400, or forty dollars a month, plus tuition and books. This was designed to put Pitt practically on the "BRT" basis—board, room, and