

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 26, 1989

SPORTS OF THE TIMES

George Vecsey

As Long As It Isn't 'Tacky'

Hunter Rawlings 3d has flipped his lid. The president of the University of Iowa plans to stop freshman athletes from playing varsity sports, proving once and for all that college sports are too important to be left to educators.

Rawlings believes there is something inherently wrong with the next Ronnie Harmon scoring touchdowns for Iowa before he weaves his first basket.

However, the businessmen who run booster clubs at major sports universities have invested too much money to let athletes adjust to college for a year. You wouldn't bring in a load of eight-cylinder beauties from Detroit and let 'em rust in the back lot. No, sir. You'd put 'em in the showroom and try to earn your money back.

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That's just good business, and if there's one thing college sport is all about, it is good business. Afraid they are not generating as much money as they might, the members of the College Football Association are talking about a mammoth playoff system perhaps as soon as 1991.

They are willing to sabotage the delightfully anarchic bowl system and go head-to-head with the ultimate professionals from the National Football League, with dueling Super Bowls late in January.

Never mind those icky commercials extolling the virtues of student-athletes. The C.F.A. coaches

know there is more money to be squeezed out of the alliance between network and cable television. And they want theirs. But will the labor supply, the players, get paid for the playoffs, or will boosters have to slip it to them illegally, the way they normally do?

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Meanwhile, the Division I-A athletic directors are trying to set up corporate sponsors for individual football games. You got it. First the auto racers and tennis players sold every corner of their uniforms to the highest bidders. Then there were corporate tennis and golf tournaments, followed by corporate awards.

Somebody said the historic Fiesta Bowl might be sponsored by an orange juice company. The Minute Maid Bowl? Got a nice ring to it.

The next step would be baseball selling major awards and events. The Winn-Dixie All-Star Game is one possibility. The Light Beer Most Valuable Player Award seems inevitable. So does the Piggly-Wiggly World Series.

But individual games? What a stroke of genius. Georgia Tech officials have reassured that the proposal would not involve anything "tacky." Of course not. The Yankees have blasted mustard commercials at the captive audience for years. What old alum wouldn't like to have his tailgate party ruined by blaring commercials for an insurance company?

And why stop at football? Why not sponsor basketball games too? Here is a partial list of potential sponsors:

After one of the recent basketball finalists was helped by a rent-a-player from Down Under, it seems only right that Seton Hall games be sponsored by Qantas.

Because Kentucky basketball got in trouble when some \$100 bills fluttered out of an overnight package, the air-freight industry ought to repair the bad publicity by sponsoring next year's games. If any.

With Georgetown basketball having had a few brawls in the past decade, its games should be sponsored by the Detroit Pistons.

The University of Miami got a bad image a few years back for showing up at social functions in combat fatigues. To change that image, Miami football should be underwritten by those inspiring be-all-that-you-can-be commercials from the U.S. Army.

Implicated in a steroid scandal, South Carolina football should go on the offensive. The next time the Gamecocks get into a post-season game, it should be called the Dianabol Bowl.

After a generation of scrutiny for just about every illegality, the University of Nevada-Las Vegas should have its basketball games sponsored by the National Association of Probation Officers.

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Bobby Knight had a run-in with a police officer in Puerto Rico and went around for years afterward making derogatory comments about the island and its people. Just to show there are no hard feelings, his Indiana basketball games should be sponsored by Banco de Ponce.

In light of Notre Dame's almost miraculous successes over the years, the Fighting Irish could be sponsored by Celestial Seasonings Teas.

Come to think of it, why should college sports have a monopoly on game sponsors? Why hasn't Fred Lebow thought of letting the New York City Marathon be sponsored by foot pads? Every baseball seventh-inning stretch could be sponsored by Jane Fonda's Aerobic Workout. And given the way George Steinbrenner changes managers, the Yankees could be sponsored by the Book-of-the-Month Club.