College Bowl Sponsorship and the Increased Commercialization of Amateur Sports

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This study critiques the increased economic centrality and symbolic visibility of corporate sponsors to college football bowl games, focusing especially on the 1996 "Tostitos" Fiesta Bowl. The paper argues that sponsorship has three major effects on college football: embedding it in tele-spectacle, subordinating it to the commercial function, and perpetuating elitism. The paper argues that corporate sponsorship further devalues the integrity and essence of amateur sports.

Several recent works have highlighted the increased influence of advertising and commercialism in society generally and on non-advertising media content specifically (Andersen, 1995; Baker, 1994; Bogart, 1995; Jacobson & Mazur, 1995; McAllister, 1996; Schiller, 1989). Focusing on the expansion of commercial influences in society, this research critiques such promotional techniques as product placement in films and television, "place-based" advertising in schools, medical facilities and airports, advertising on the Internet, "cross promotion" deals between media companies and advertisers, such as motion picture tie-ins with restaurants, and television infomercials.

Scholars point to many factors that account for the increased amount of commercialism in society. Technologies that became popular in the 1980s, such as remote controls and VCRs, frustrated advertisers' attempts to hold audiences with television commercials. The over-saturation of advertising in traditional media like television and newspapers (e.g., the prevalence of advertising "clutter") caused advertisers to question the effectiveness of traditional spot advertising. The development of "advertising-free" media including pay cable, video games, video tapes, and the Internet allowed some of the most demographically coveted audiences a place to "escape" from advertising's reach (Andersen, 1995, chap. 1; McAllister, 1996, chap. 1). In addition, a major factor has been deregulation and privatization. By cutting funding to public institutions, passing laws that allow corporations more room to maneuver in public spaces, and failing to enforce previously existing restrictions, a more permissive environment for advertising's intrusive-

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ness into everyday life has been created (McAllister, 1996; Schiller, 1992).

This advertising encroachment has several detrimental effects upon the democratic function. Such activities increase advertising’s economic influence over media decisions, including what types of ideas are, and are not, given wide distribution (Bagdikian, 1997; Baker, 1994; Bogart, 1995). These techniques may also normalize the ubiquity of the commercial presence, allowing for advertising growth and its resulting “social imperialism” to become even greater as audiences become accustomed to seeing ads everywhere (McAllister, 1996). Advertising forms like infomercials serve as promotional “camouflage,” designed to hide the source of the commercial message, perhaps blunting critical ability to judge the validity of the advertising message (Andersen, 1995; Baker, 1994). Another detrimental effect is the devaluation process that occurs. Wernick (1991, p. 189) argues that whenever an advertisement links its product with a social value or well-known icon, this value/icon loses some of its social magic. Advertising teaches us that the “first date” becomes just another McDonald’s experience; Michael Jordan becomes just another flack for Nike. With advertising-heavy media content, techniques such as infomercials and product placement devalue the content itself in the eyes of the audience as this content becomes such an obvious tool for corporate selling. The magic of movies is lessened when obtrusive product placement signifies cinema’s promotional function, and the Rolling Stones dull their edge when Start Me Up is used in Windows 95 commercials.

This essay explores the effects of commercialism introduced by one type of advertising expansion, sponsorship, upon college football, primarily end-of-season bowl games. The essay first reviews the nature of sponsorship in modern society and the growth of sponsorship in sports, especially collegiate sports. It then critiques the increased economic centrality and symbolic visibility of corporate sponsors to college football bowl games, focusing on the 1996 “Tostitos” Fiesta Bowl. It argues that sponsorship has three major effects on college football: embedding it in televised spectacle, subordinating it to the commercial function, and perpetuating elitism. By looking at the effects of sponsorship upon supposedly amateur events such as college bowls, the paper will argue that the ultimate consequence of corporate participation is to further degrade the spirit of amateurism in such events and in many ways make it more commercial than professional sports.

The Re-Emergence of Sponsorship as a Promotional Form

One prevalent form of advertising encroachment is the rediscovery of sponsorship by commercial interests. Sponsorship, as opposed to spot advertising, is the funding of an entire event, group, broadcast or place by one commercial interest in exchange for large amounts and special types of promotion connected with the sponsored activity. Sponsorship is a “rediscovery,” of course, because of this funding system’s importance for early U.S. broadcasting, where one sponsor would finance, or even produce, an entire program.

In the 1960s and 1970s, as U.S. commercial broadcasting discovered the benefits of a spot advertising system,
including the potential for increased advertising revenue, sponsorship activity declined (McAllister, 1996). However, a substantial comeback beginning in the 1980s resulted from changes in both the sponsor and the sponsored. From the sponsors’ point of view, advertisers have been continually frustrated with the viewer’s ability to “zap” ads, with the fragmentation of the media audience, and with the high cost of spot advertising in different media, and they have turned to sponsorship as a corrective to these problems. From the perspective of the sponsored, organizers of cultural events and social programs have been forced to find alternative sources of revenue as government funding has declined (Schiller, 1989).

Moneys spent by corporations on sponsored events, locations or programs in the United States went from less than $1 billion in 1985 to a projected $6.8 billion in 1998 (Kasrel, 1997). Spending on sponsorship has experienced double-digit growth every year from 1984 to 1996 (Sponsorship-spendings . . . , 1997). Sectors of U.S. society that have accepted sponsorship money include museums, fairs, festivals (Schiller, 1989), elementary and high schools (Molnar, 1996; Wechsler, 1997), public broadcasting (Littleton, 1996; Merskin & Frazer, 1997), medical research, social causes (Kadlec, 1997), national parks (Egan, 1996), popular music concert tours (Matzer, 1996), and sports to be discussed below.

Although those involved in sponsorship argue that this corporate money provides cultural opportunities that would not otherwise exist, critics of the form (McAllister, 1996; Jacobson and Mazur, 1995; Schiller, 1989) argue that sponsorship has anti-democratic elements. Sponsors have an agenda-set-

ting power, as they may choose which cultural and social programs exist, and which do not, through their selective funding. Similarly, organizers of the sponsored event may self-censor the content of their events, altering this content to please sponsors. Also, corporations use such sponsored events as a public relations as well as an advertising tactic, raising the status of the corporation by offering the event as “brought to you by” the philanthropic corporation. This can even be used to counteract the negative reputation of a company, as when corporations with a bad environmental record sponsor nature programs on public television (Acts of contrition, 1991). Alternatively, the status of the cultural event may be lowered by its obvious use as a corporate flack. In addition, the effect of the sponsorship strategy is often to “blur” the distinction between media content and media ad. Because the sponsored event displays the sponsor’s name not just in the commercials for and during the event, but also in the event itself, the viewers’ attempts to discriminate an ad from a program may be undermined.

**Sports and Sponsorship**

Andersen notes generally about sports in U.S. society that “Probably the most commercialized sector of popular entertainment is the result of the merger between sports and product promotion. . . . Suffice it to say that, from corporate sponsorship to celebrity endorsements, promotion has penetrated the world of professional sports” (1995, p. 36). Such commercialism includes the multi-millions spend on endorsements by athletes, including Michael Jordan’s $40 million of endorsement revenue in 1996 (Stodghill et al., 1997) and the millions spent on
spot advertising during televised sports events, such as the $4.7 billion spent on advertising during U.S. national sports broadcasts in 1996 (McClellan & Jessel, 1997).

Sponsorship is also a frequently used promotional strategy in sports. About 65 percent of the money corporations give for all sponsorships goes to sports (Sponsorship-spending . . . , 1997). Sports offer several advantages to the potential sponsor. Ratings, of course, are high for many televised sporting events, as shown by the 150 million people who watch NFL telecasts or attend games each Sunday (Jensen, 1996b). The demographics of major sports are also attractive to corporate promoters, with males between 18 and 49 making up a large percentage of the audience (Wenner, 1989). Many fans also feel passionate about their sports, and sponsors hope this passion will translate to sponsor-brand loyalty: one survey found that over 70% of NASCAR fans purchase the products of NASCAR sponsors (Trusdell, 1997).

Besides these purely marketing concerns, the ideology of sports may make the cultural form conducive to corporate needs or at the very least not antagonistic to them. Sports, with their risk-free, apolitical message of struggle and triumph, are safe messages for corporations to sponsor (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995, p. 111). In sports, the status quo goes unquestioned; social power remains unexamined. In fact, dominant social powers are celebrated in modern sports. Social critics have argued that the embedded values of sports serve as a form of corporate hegemony. Jhally (1984, p. 54) writes that the message of ‘win at all costs as long as the individual is subordinated to the good of the team,’ which the newly developed, turn-of-the-century team sports communicated, helped to mold a newly industrialized America to a bureaucratic ideology favorable to corporate capitalism. Other potentially hegemonic elements would include the segmentation of tasks in sports (quarterback and linebacker, reflecting the workplace division of labor), the separation of physical versus mental personnel (players and coaches, reflecting blue and white collar), and the trading of players (symbolizing the objectification of labor). Jhally concludes about the hegemonic nature of big-time sports that “What we are witnessing here is nothing other than the ritualized celebration of alienated labor” (p. 54).

From the perspective of the sponsored sports groups themselves, privatization has accelerated the intrusion of sponsorship into sports. Cutbacks of public funds to the Canadian Broadcasting System in the 1980s, for instance, encouraged private sponsorship of sports coverage (Gruneau, 1989). Colleges and universities similarly have experienced cuts in federal grants, student loans, and state aid through the 1980s, and now accept alternative sources of revenue and publicity, such as from private corporations (Benjamin, 1995; Soley, 1995). Thus, sponsorship has especially affected collegiate sports. It should be no surprise, then, that the corporate sponsorship of end-of-season college football bowl games is one of the most visible and influential segments of the commercialization of sports.

A Brief History of Sponsored College Bowls

End-of-season college bowl games have since their beginnings been tied to the promotional function in some way. Early bowls, for example, were
used to promote a warm-climate city or area of the country or to raise money for charities (Thurow, 1995, p. B5). The “Granddaddy of Them All,” the Rose Bowl, was created in 1902 to help publicize the Tournament of Roses Parade, which in turn was a promotion for the Pasadena area. The Rose Bowl was designed to “tell the world about our paradise,” according to one founder (Adande, 1995, p. D10). The Peach Bowl, created in 1968 by the Lions Club of Georgia, not only promoted the Atlanta area, but initially also generated funds for the Lighthouse for the Blind.

The participating universities, of course, received some revenue for their participation in early bowls such as the Orange (created in 1933), Sugar (1935), and Cotton (1937) (What’s in a name? A bowl game, 1996, p. A20). However, the monies were negligible compared to the expenses of sending a college team to a bowl. Georgetown University earned just $30,000 for its participation, before expenses, in the 1940 Orange Bowl (Povich, 1989, p. D11). The economic returns were so low before the 1980s that many teams, such as Notre Dame and the military service academy teams, often refused to participate in the college bowls (Povich, 1989, p. D11). Such resistance by the colleges is no longer found: today top football teams may earn more than 400 times the amount that Georgetown received in 1940.

Beginning in the 1980s, the relationship of college bowls to advertising and promotion changed radically. Colleges began to redefine themselves in regards to private funding, while modern advertisers became frustrated with promotional shortcomings of traditional media. Advertisers, then, began to explore alternative ways to deliver sales pitches. The advantages of college bowl sponsorship became evident. The Tangerine Bowl subtly opened the door for more commercialistic interests in 1982 when it changed its name to the Florida Citrus Bowl, thereby offering the game not just as an advertising vehicle for a potential vacation site, but for a specific commodity produced by the bowl’s home state (Campbell, 1992, p. C1).

Soon, other bowls not only followed suit, but also raised the ante of corporate involvement. The first major New Year’s Day bowl to become corporate-sponsored was the Fiesta Bowl, when it changed its name to the Sunkist Fiesta Bowl for the Jan. 1, 1986 game in exchange for monetary compensation (Waddell, 1995a, p. 5). A year later a second New Year’s Day bowl succumbed with the USF&G (U.S. Fidelity & Guaranty, an insurance company) Sugar Bowl (Sullivan, 1986, p. 13). In 1989, another corporate “milestone” was reached by bowl sponsors, when John Hancock successfully negotiated the complete elimination of the word “Sun” from the “Sun Bowl.” Thus, instead of “The John Hancock Sun Bowl,” the event was renamed the more promotionally advantageous “The John Hancock Bowl.” By the end of the 1980s, virtually every bowl game, except the Rose Bowl, had a corporate sponsor, and beginning on Jan. 1, 1999, it will become “The Rose Bowl Sponsored by AT&T” (Ad Notes, 1998, p. B6). Corporations such as IBM, Blockbuster, CarQuest, Nokia, Mobil, Poulan, and Outback Steakhouse have taken advantage of the marketing that college bowls offer.

Corporations receive many benefits from such economic participation. They link their corporate name/product with a socially admired event. Spon-
Sponsors demand that the official name of the bowl includes their corporate name. The logo for the bowl will also include the sponsor’s name. Through such promotional tactics, sponsors receive free publicity before the event (when news coverage mentions the sponsor, and the network broadcasting the event promotes it) and after the event (in post-game coverage). They receive spot advertising time during the broadcast and in such media as the event program. They receive exposure when the audience and the camera catch the corporate symbols placed on the field, players, stadium, broadcast graphics, and support personnel (more on this below). They receive prime-location tickets and luxury box access to the events. Such advantages allow corporations to break through the clutter of individually placed spot ads, discourage the “zapping” of commercial messages—a viewer cannot zap a product logo if it is on the field during a game—and create an air of philanthropy. Nokia provides the Sugar Bowl to us, Nokia hopes we will think.

But such promotional benefits carry a price. The social effects of corporate sponsorship are overwhelmingly detrimental to the nature of amateur athletics, the spirit of competition, and the independence of academia. It is naive, of course, to believe that sponsorship alone has eroded the amateur nature of college sports. The commercialization of college sports—through media deals, sky-high coaches’ salaries, and licensed selling—is a decades-old phenomenon. Yet sponsorship accelerates this movement. The remainder of this essay addresses the potential effects of sponsorship on collegiate sports, especially football, by focusing on the 1996 “Tostitos” Fiesta Bowl.

**Sponsored Bowls as Televised Spectacle**

The notion of modern sports as a “spectacle” has been one much discussed by several scholars (Farrell, 1989; Gitlin, 1982; Gruneau, 1989; Morris & Nydahl, 1985; Oriard, 1993; Real, 1977; Tomlinson, 1996). Many of these scholars take as their starting point Guy Debord’s (1967/trans. 1983) *Society of the Spectacle*. In this work, he argues that the spectacle has become a major technique through which the dominant economic system reproduces itself. Debord attributes great power to the modern capitalist spectacle:

The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than ‘that which appears is good, that which is good appears’. The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance (paragraph 12).

Modern spectacle takes several forms, including modern “traffic patterns, urban geography, ritual landscape, escapist leisure entertainments, and even programmed interaction patterns” as well as other artifacts that substitute for more authentic human experience (Farrell, 1989, p. 160).

In trying to operationalize the spectacle as a sports phenomenon, writers have highlighted the crucial role of the mass media in spectacularizing modern sports. In the coverage, promotion, and presentation of sports, modern media have encouraged several “spectacular” effects, including the increased artificiality of the event, perhaps subverting the “spontaneous” nature of sport (Gruneau, 1989), and the often nationalistic themes that such spectacle perpetuates (Real, 1977; Tomlin-
son, 1996). Another effect of spectacularization that this section will focus on is the elevation of the social visibility of sports.

As the media cover sports, and attempt to position sports as a way to deliver audiences to advertisers, there is an incentive to promote sports, and thus elevate its presence. Bogart (1995, p. 107) argues about sports in U.S. society that “While talk about sports teams and players has long made up an important part of American conversation, its decibel level has been raised by the commercially induced influence of television.” Focusing on college football, McChesney (1989) notes that newspapers’ coverage of the sport in the 1920s led into its growing visibility, a visibility enhanced even more by the later social penetration of radio and television. Bogart’s above quote argues that such spectacularizing visibility is commercially driven. As the media cover and broadcast sports, they hype sports events to ensure lucrative ratings and demographics for advertisers. Such incentives, then, increase the prominence of sports on the social agenda.

However, with the modern sponsorship of bowl games, especially in the 1990s, the heightened decibel levels reached triple digits. Corporate sponsors are self interested and resourceful in promoting their events; thus they give spectacles such as the Fiesta Bowl a deafening voice in people’s lives. Several structural characteristics of sponsorship as a marketing strategy have led to the spectacularizing promotion of college football.

One such characteristic is the promotional incentive to achieve “exclusivity.” Sponsors, unlike spot advertisers, seek to be the exclusive voice of an event; in fact, it is one of the most desirable attributes of sports sponsorships for corporations (Copeland, Frisby & McCarville, 1996). By being the “signature sponsor” of an event, these corporations hope their name will be strongly tied to the event, and will receive most of the promotional benefit. Toyota pays large amounts of money for the Toyota Gator Bowl, not the Toyota-Ford-Chrysler Gator Bowl. But exclusivity also has another level of meaning. Corporate sponsors do not just want to be the exclusive sponsor of a common event, but rather the exclusive sponsor of an exclusive event.

In the case of college football, this ultimate event exclusivity was granted in 1996. That year was the first of the highly touted, and expensive, “tier” system of the “Bowl Alliance.” In this system, three “top tier” bowls would rotate among themselves the closest equivalent to a national championship game each year. The bowl selected for the first year of the system was the Fiesta Bowl. Teams would be chosen from participating football conferences and major independent schools like Notre Dame. The expensive nature of the tier system would not have been accomplished, at least in the form it took, without the seductive money offered by corporate sponsorship. In turn, the tier system offers sports sponsors a significant promotional opportunity. It guarantees a deep-pocketed sponsor the benefits of being exclusively linked to the national championship game. This is a marketing ploy unavailable with any other men’s major championship, including collegiate basketball or baseball championships and professional football, baseball or basketball championships.

This promotional advantage created the potential for a “sponsor war” for the bowls most likely to be in the top...
tier, and pushed up the sponsorship fees. The original sponsor of the 1996 Fiesta Bowl was slated to be the Dial corporation. Dial had agreed to pay $20 million for a six-year Fiesta sponsorship “if another hungrier company were not found” (A new sponsor adds spicy flavor to game, 1995, p. B12). A hungrier company was found: a company that in fact manufactured the Tostitos corn chip. Tostitos’ owner Frito-Lay (in turn owned by the very marketing savvy PepsiCo) signed a three-year deal. Instead of $20 million for six years, Frito-Lay committed nearly twice as much: $15 million for the three-year sponsorship rights (A new sponsor . . . , 1995, p. B12). It also meant that the Fiesta Bowl, in 1996, would be the grand finale of the college football season. Held on Jan. 2, with all other games decided at least 24 hours earlier, this game symbolized the end of the season, with the two mightiest teams vying for the championship in the “main event.” Tostitos’ need for exclusive sponsorship for an exclusive event increased the spectacular nature of football scheduling and its social visibility. Not only was it the only game in town, but Tostitos was the only sponsor.

Another characteristic of modern sponsorship that adds to the spectacularizing hype is the layers of advertising it encourages. Unlike the sponsorship of broadcasting in the 1940s and 1950s, sponsorship in the 1990s does not substitute one type of advertising for another. Rather, modern sponsorship as a form of funding is usually additive. Although sponsors desire title exclusivity, they understand that other advertisers are brought in as well, especially for related events and for television advertising of the broadcast. Other traditional forms of advertising and promotion are not removed from the event because a signature sponsor is added. The sponsorship is instead layered on top of the other forms of promotion.

As in regular spot programming, the networks, the producers of the program (or the individual teams, in the case of sports), and the spot advertisers have an incentive to hype the broadcast of the event: they all benefit economically from high ratings and packed stadiums. With sponsorship another loud “voice” is added to the shouting. It is the voice of the corporation whose name is now exclusively linked to the event, and has an even greater incentive than spot advertisers to ensure that the event is screamed from the rooftops. In many sponsored events, the pre-event publicity becomes deafening. And although the money corporate sponsors pour into bowl games increases the economic benefits to participating parties, it also increases the risks. There is more money to be gained in sponsored bowl games by the top colleges and by the television networks, cable stations or syndicators, but there is also more to lose.

Thus, the money that Tostitos pumped into the event—and the prestige manufactured through such money—elevated the pressures to create advanced publicity on the “normal” economic participants of college bowl games. Some reports place CBS’s fees for the right to broadcast both the Fiesta and Orange Bowls through 2001 at $150 million; individual spot advertisers paid as much as $500,000 per 30 seconds for a slot during the Fiesta broadcast (Fatsis, 1995, p. B1). The teams themselves feel pressure to pump up the game, especially to sell tickets, which event organizers often give to schools as part of their bowl payment. Teams may also feel the need to sell as
many tickets as possible so that they will continue to be asked back to the most prestigious bowls. The business community of the Phoenix-area knew that the event, if successful, would pump as much as $75 million to the regional economy (Adande, 1995, p. D10). So, as with any large-scale event, there is pressure felt by the broadcasters, the advertisers, the participants, and the community to keep publicity up. With sponsored bowls, there is the additional pressure felt by the corporate sponsors themselves, whose own economic contribution has put the heat not only on the sponsors’ marketing department, but also on the other participants as well.

This pressure leads to huge marketing efforts for the event by these groups. The network creates an extensive pre-game program, often using mythic themes to convince viewers about the importance of the event. In the Fiesta Bowl, the iconography used was that of the “Heroic” Western gunfighter showdown, backlit with golden hues (“Out here, legends aren’t born, they’re made . . . in the heat of battle and this one’s as big as the desert sky,”) emoted broadcaster Pat O’Brien). CBS also aired numerous promos on their network the weeks before the event and previewed the game in bowl specials and the halftime of earlier bowls. The college teams participating in the bowl, Florida and Nebraska, bought advertising space on their local television stations and in school newspapers to publicize the game. The spot advertisers created ads with football themes, or sponsor smaller pre-event activities of the event, such as the MicroAge Fiesta Bowl Parade. Bowl organizers and the community also sponsored pre-game activities. The Fiesta Bowl was accompanied by 29 events meant to supplement the big game (Adande, 1995, p. D1).

However, such tactics, perhaps on a smaller scale, are the normal manic efforts of mediated sports spectacle. Sponsorship adds another level to the amount of pre-event publicity found. The sponsoring corporation can use its own resources to promote the event. Sponsorship consultants argue that, to maximize marketing effectiveness, corporate sponsors should hype their sponsorship with as much promotional “leverage” as possible (Thwaites, 1995).

Frito Lay took heed to such advice as the sponsor used its corporate resources to supplement its sponsorship. Besides the $6 million spent on 1996 sponsorship rights, the snack company spent nearly $5 million more for its own event publicity. Using the tag-line “Tostitos Fiesta Bowl: College Football’s Biggest Party,” point-of-purchase displays at grocery stores touted their connection with the game. Pre-game network TV spots for Tostitos helped manufacture the game’s importance in this light. The promotional plan also included Tostitos’ visibility in pre-game events, including the four-day “Football Fiesta” and a giant tailgate party featuring comedian and product endorser Chris Elliot (Whalen, 1995, p. 42). A huge “Tostitos” sign placed outside of the stadium signalled to passersby the upcoming event and was used as video wallpaper by ESPN sports analysts who televised from a makeshift set in front of the sign. Most impressively, the 50 million Tostitos bags featuring large, prominent logos publicizing the event were a resource that only a sponsor like Frito-Lay could offer. The corporation even considered for a time hiring the conceptual artist Christo to drape the Camelback Mountains with a Tostitos design (A
new sponsor . . ., 1995, p. B12), coloring the landscape with the ultimate party decoration.

Through exclusivity and promotional leverage, sponsorship thus further elevates an already levitated domain. But although the spectacle of the national championship and the anticipatory amount of publicity may be awe-inspiring, the increased spectacularization of college sports by sponsorship and other commercial elements has its costs. Scholars such as Real (1977) wonder if one price of spectacular sports is found in the celebration of an activity that is nationalistic, violent, and ultimately domineering. In addition, the effects of this particular form of sponsored spectacle may serve to taint and devalue the essence of the event itself. This devaluation takes place on several levels.

One price paid for the high visibility and large amounts of money of sponsored bowls is the pressure that comes with that visibility and revenue. Both bowl selection committees and individual colleges may make choices that advance education and fair competition less, and marketing imperatives more. This has been a concern with college sports for a long time, of course. Since at least the 1920s, critics have wondered if the heightened attention given college sports by the mass media increase the pressure to win and thus subverts values of fair play and amateurism (McChesney, 1989).

Sponsorship accentuates these pressures. Without the big name teams or the big wins, bowls and colleges know that sponsorship money dries up. For instance, the 1992 Cotton Bowl, then sponsored by Mobil, chose the lower ranked, but more marketable (and potentially more spectacularizing) Notre Dame instead of Florida State to play Texas A&M. Critics wondered if Mobil put pressure on the selection committee to make the more commercially advantageous choice (Campbell, 1992, p. C5). As it turned out, even such “sponsor friendly” decisions did not assure loyalty by Mobil. Symbolizing the pressure to keep things big, Mobil dropped its sponsorship of the Cotton Bowl after the event failed to become a “Tier One” bowl in 1995 (Rubel, 1995, p. 8).

In a similar way, colleges may also be forced to make game decisions that are influenced by increased social pressure and visibility. The heightened publicity of such events increases the pressures to win. A blow-out loss in such a visible venue would haunt a team for a long time. Coaches of big programs may be more pressured to win and dine, or even lie to, potential recruits than ever before; they may be more tempted to pressure faculty to pass talented collegiate athletes (Soley, 1995; Sperber, 1990). Coaches may be more tempted than ever to look the other way when players break school rules or civil law in order to play them during the big sponsored game. Some sports writers wondered if one factor in Nebraska’s decision to start Lawrence Phillips, the running back convicted of domestic violence, was the sheer magnitude of the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl, a scale exaggerated by its corporate sponsor (Wojnowski, 1996, p. D6).

Likewise, the corporate ethos of sponsors, the large amount of money brought in by successful programs, and the large contracts signed by coaches and schools with these sponsors make money and corporate perks more visible in the college athletic arena, especially to the athletes. Nebraska and Florida players were constantly reminded that they were not playing in
the generic Fiesta Bowl, but the commercialistic Tostitos Fiesta Bowl. Players may have read about the highly publicized $26 million that their schools and athletic conferences made off their participation in this bowl (Wojnowski, 1996). The visibility of the money involved in collegiate sports also is accentuated when corporations become sponsors of entire teams, like Nike’s sponsorship of the University of Southern California’s athletic program or Reebok’s deal with Wisconsin (Asher, 1995, p. A18). Similarly, money becomes more salient when coaches sign “consulting” deals with sponsorship-minded shoe companies, leading to the mandate that all members of the team wear the company’s shoes (Sperber, 1990). The visibility of college bowl sponsorship has normalized such situations.

The obviousness of such sponsored moneys occurs in an environment in which players are not explicitly paid. They receive other benefits, of course, such as an athletic scholarship, but the value of such elements may be negligible. One sports economist calculated the equivalent of the “hourly wage” that college football players at different schools earn, factoring in such elements as the likelihood and value of the school’s degree, the percentage of players at the school who have turned pro, the cost of tuition and the hours clocked in during practice (Sheehan, 1996). He speculated that in the mid-1990s, about the same time the two schools earned multi-millions on the Fiesta Bowl, the average football player at the University of Florida made the equivalent of $7.23 per hour, while the average Nebraska player made $6.30 per hour.

The discrepancy between what institutions involved in sponsored bowls earn and what the players earn further erode the distinction between professional and amateur. One commonly held difference between the two groups, for instance, is that professionals receive a significant amount of their income from their activity, while amateurs do not (Stebbins, 1979). In sponsored college sports, this distinction may foster resentment among the “amateur” players when every other element of their surroundings says “pro” but the existence of a paycheck.

Like the pros, elite athletes at large-scale college sports may feel the same pressure to perform. They may need to maintain professional levels to start or receive extensive playing time. Such pressure is accompanied by the corporate symbols and licensing sales surrounding college football. Individual players become surrounded by the large amounts of publicity and money generated from their efforts—and even their jersey sales, often manufactured and distributed by such corporate sponsors as Nike. As the pressure to perform combines with the atmosphere of big business and big marketing, the temptation to accept the economic rewards of professional levels is increased. Top players may become pseudo-professionals either through subterfuge (receiving payoffs by agents or by college “boosters”) or through leaving the system entirely (dropping out of school to try for the pros) (Asher, 1995, p. A18). The overall level of commercialism in modern college athletics guarantees that these pressures would exist without corporate sponsorship, but sponsorship magnifies them.

The spectacular nature of sponsored football even affects colleges not directly involved in the final sponsored spectacles, especially smaller colleges. First, to reach the level of the spectacle,
powerful college football teams may schedule much weaker opponents during the regular season. Such scheduling allows the marquee teams to maintain their rankings in the national bowls and help their “Bowl Alliance” chances. The benefits of such a technique were driven home in the 1995–1996 season when Penn State was voted down from its No. 1 ranking after allowing the University of Illinois to score a late, but meaningless, touchdown in one regular season game (Barrett, 1996). Others football powers learned from this lesson. The football team of the University of Florida, for instance, a participant in the 1996 Fiesta Bowl (and the national champion the next year), is notorious for its gridiron slaughters. During its Fiesta Bowl season it beat Georgia Southern 62-14, and in 1997 defeated the Central Michigan football team 82-6, the week after a narrow and disappointing win over a huge underdog, Southern Mississippi. During the Central Michigan game, the starting quarterback for Florida was kept in the game to throw seven touchdown passes. College football, then, becomes a spectacular ritual sacrifice and humiliation.

Even those schools who do not play the spectacular teams may be undermined by football spectacle. As big-time college football teams participate in spectacularized events like sponsored bowl games, the schools that do not routinely participate in such spectacles, like the colleges of smaller divisions, seem insignificant (Sperber, 1990). Here the true effect of the modern spectacle is seen. In smaller schools, the spirit of amateurism—including the values of sound mind and body, the thrill of playing for its own sake, school spirit and teamwork—often is more authentic than at the big-school powerhouses. The over-produced, manufactured, corporate-supported spectacles though, may overpower the student-body support of smaller schools.

**Sponsored Bowls as Paid Corporate Advertisement**

The economic pressure applied by sponsorship does not just influence the amount of pre-event publicity for a bowl game. It also profoundly alters the nature and look of the event itself. It often turns the bowl event into a giant commercial.

This essay began with a discussion of current advertising trends that blur the distinction between media advertising and content. Because sponsorship gives the sponsor such powerful economic clout with mediated events, it offers perhaps the most potential for the cooptation of media content by commercial interests. Bowl sponsors spend so much money for the link between themselves and the game that they want significant return for their investment. One way to guarantee such return is to create what is in essence a four-hour commercial.

A comparison of the sponsored 1996 "Tostitos" Fiesta Bowl with the unsponsored 1996 Rose and 1996 Super Bowls illustrates how corporate sponsorship has tilted the scales toward promotional function. A content analysis was conducted comparing the network broadcasts of the above three games. The Rose Bowl was used as one point of comparison because, besides its unsponsored status, it was analogous to the Fiesta Bowl in several ways. Both have exclusive air times (no other bowls are played when the Rose and Fiesta play). Both also had received significant news coverage because of a unique news angle: the Fiesta because of the national championship implications...
(No. 1 Nebraska versus No. 2 Florida), and the Rose because of the “rags-to-riches” implications of Northwestern’s appearance. The Super Bowl was chosen because, like the Rose Bowl, it does not have a title corporate sponsor, and because it is the national championship game for its level, similar to the Fiesta Bowl for college football in 1996.

A coding scheme was developed to measure the amount of air time devoted to corporate promotion during each game’s broadcast. Several categories of corporate promotion were timed with a stopwatch for each game. One category was “Spot,” which was measured when the game’s broadcast “went to commercial” for a product or corporation. “Promo” was measured when a promotion for an upcoming network or local program or special is placed on the screen, either in a separate spot or during the game. When a network graphic included a corporate symbol or name, then “Graphic” was timed. “Signage” was timed whenever a clear corporate logo or name appeared on the screen during the game itself, either on the field, in the stadium, on players uniforms or anywhere else. “PSA” was timed when a public service announcement for a non-profit organization or activity was aired during the broadcast. Finally, when the game itself was being played and no corporate message appeared, then “Ad Free” was timed and coded.

As Table 1 shows, the “Tostitos” Fiesta Bowl is more commercialized in every commercial category than either the Rose Bowl and, more surprisingly, the Super Bowl.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Ad Free</th>
<th>Spot</th>
<th>Promo</th>
<th>Graphic</th>
<th>Signage</th>
<th>PSA</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiesta Bowl</td>
<td>1:59:15</td>
<td>0:46:10</td>
<td>0:08:47</td>
<td>0:16:45</td>
<td>0:31:02</td>
<td>0:02:30</td>
<td>3:40:33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>102</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose Bowl</td>
<td>2:45:34</td>
<td>0:31:30</td>
<td>0:07:47</td>
<td>0:03:21</td>
<td>0:04:46</td>
<td>0:04:30</td>
<td>3:36:23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Super Bowl</td>
<td>2:36:07</td>
<td>0:36:40</td>
<td>0:07:06</td>
<td>0:02:56</td>
<td>0:01:33</td>
<td>0:01:30</td>
<td>3:26:02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1The total time may not equal each category summed individually, because some categories, such as “Graphic” and “Signage” may overlap, as they occasionally both appear on the screen at the same time.
Bowl was sponsored accounts for the greater amount of spot advertising time when compared to even the Super Bowl. Tostitos, as part of its $15 million price tag for sponsoring the Fiesta Bowl, received several advertising slots during the broadcast. Lay’s products accounted for over four and a half minutes of the spot ad time during the broadcast, including a multi-part “storymercial” in which actor Chris Elliot attempts to enter the stadium without tickets. He finally ends up, in one camouflaged spot, on a simulated CBS broadcast of the game, thanks to his bags of Tostitos.

Despite the guaranteed nature of a sponsor’s spots, the networks want to recoup their own costs as much as possible. Thus the additive nature of modern sponsorship becomes a bonus. Instead of these guaranteed spots by the sponsor substituting for other spots, they are added on to the normal number of spot ads.

But the degree of spot ad time was only half the promotional story, literally. During the Fiesta broadcast, while the game was played, both corporate-labeled graphics (“CBS Presents the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl”), and background signage nearly equalled the amount of time devoted to spot advertising. The sponsored bowl featured significantly more commercial symbols during the event than either the Rose and the Super. Seven “Tostitos” logos appeared on the grass field itself, including two in each end zone and a 20-yard wide sign on the fifty-yard line. The word “Tostitos” was visible in more than two dozen large signs in the stadium. It also appeared on the players, the support personnel holding the down markers, and the goal posts. The “Tostitos” sign outside the stadium was displayed by the ever-present blimp shots at such events. When a game graphic was placed on the screen, updating the time left in the game or the player lineups, Tostitos was there. Sometimes what the camera caught was simply the word “Tostitos” on a sign. Sometimes what they caught was the word “Tostitos” integrated in the official logo of the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl. It really did not matter which version was seen: in the official bowl logo, the word “Tostitos” is significantly larger and more legible than “Fiesta Bowl.”

Notably, the Rose Bowl had more commercial graphics and signage time than the Super Bowl. The greater amount of non-spot commercialism in the Rose can be attributed to two factors. First, the corporate sponsorship of other bowls allowed corporations to “invade” the purity of the un-sponsored Rose Bowl. When other bowl scores were updated (like the “Toyota Gator Bowl”), then the bowl symbol may appear on the screen with the corporate name visible. Also, the corporate entrenchment of collegiate sports generally accounts for much of the greater amount. The University of Southern California, for example, has a deal with Nike, in which the corporation provides resources to the athletic department, and in return receives promotional perks. One perk is the placement of the Nike “swoosh” symbol on football uniforms and coaches’ jackets. If a corporation cannot sponsor a bowl, then it will sponsor a team in the bowl. 4

The difference between the sponsored bowl and unsponsored bowls becomes even more apparent when one separates out the halftime segment of the broadcast, as Table 2 shows. The Fiesta Bowl halftime was, essentially, a series of commercials. Less than three minutes of the 21-plus minute halftime segment was free from corporate logos,
ads, or names. Through halftime replays of the most exciting action, the background signage in the stadium and on the field was given second life. Halftime becomes an infomercial for Tostitos and other bowl sponsors.

The symbolic takeover of the bowl games by corporate sponsorship is strategic and deliberate. Sponsors do not want to be a part of the event; they want to be the event. As one Frito-Lay executive explained, “We’ve sponsored the Super Bowl halftime for the past three years, but you share the marquee with many other advertisers. We wanted to own something” (A new sponsor . . . , 1995, p. B12). Such symbolic ownership is established in the eyes of the fans, then, by the Tostitos promotional tidal wave. Sponsors are not coy about their goal of blanketing an event with their corporate symbols: “Events like the Fiesta Bowl will really help stamp names like Tostitos on consumers’ foreheads,” said another executive (Whalen, 1995, p. 42).

Applying a corporate risk/benefit mentality, it is safer for a corporate sponsor to flood an event with the corporate name than to be tastefully discreet. As one sports marketing executive described this logic, “If you’re putting a lot of money into sponsoring a game, and we’re talking millions of dollars here, it’s a lesser sin to be overexposed and offend people than to be underexposed and have no one realize you’re the sponsor” (Hirsley, 1996, p. C4). In fact, corporations will hire firms—such as Joyce Julius and Associates of Ann Arbor, Mich.—to conduct the kind of content analysis done for this essay. The only differences are that with the hired analysis specific company exposure is coded, rather than commercial exposure overall, and the normative tone is congratulatory when overexposure is achieved (Hirsley, 1996, p. C4).

The promotional takeover of the event by the corporate sponsor has several implications. One is the level of control over the event, and even over academic freedom, that sponsors seek. Corporations will often detail in their sponsorship contracts the degree of exposure they demand. Such demands affect more than the game venue. In some sponsorship contracts, players and coaches may not tape over a spon-
sor’s name or logo on uniforms except for medical reasons (Asher, 1995, p. A18). Thus players, who receive no specific monetary compensation from a sponsor, must become human billboards to compete, even if they personally dislike a corporate sponsor. Coaches may be put in the awkward position of having to scold their players, not because of a bad pass or a missed practice, but because those players put on a warmup jacket that features the sponsor’s competitor. The head coach of the University of Colorado had to do exactly that after spotting a player wearing a “Starter”-labeled jacket during post-game interviews. “Coach Neuheisel didn’t want me to do anything that might tick off Nike,” said the player afterward (Cold? Cover up with a swoosh, 1996, p. 31).

There are even broader influences on campus speech that corporate sponsors try to garner through their economic clout and symbolic takeover of collegiate sports. As an athletic administrator at Yale asked in the late 1980s, “Are we foolish enough to think that six- and seven-figure [now eight-figure] patrons are going to be satisfied with signage, mentions, and preferred seating?” (Sperber, 1990, p. 63). Sponsors insist on a maximum amount of not just exposure, but of positive exposure. To refer to a term in the previous section, sponsors do not want anyone despectacularizing their events.

Sponsors will even try to put that desire in writing. When the University of Wisconsin agreed to a $7.9 million sponsorship deal with Reebok, the shoe manufacturer attempted to maximize its return by including a “no-criticism” clause in the contract. This clause stated that the university “not issue any official statement that disparages Reebok” and should “promptly take all reasonable steps necessary to address any remark by any university employee, including a coach, that disparages Reebok” (Planet free speech, 1996, p. 14). Although the contract was drawn up, conveniently enough, during the summer months when many were away from the University, protests by faculty and students helped convince the sponsor to withdraw the clause. And even if in this case the “anti-sponsor” clause in the contract between the school and the sponsor was removed, in other cases a “pro-sponsor” clause remains. The University of Michigan has promised to advise its athletes of the advantages of wearing Nike (Asher, 1995, p. A18). The message in both cases is clear: Big Sponsors On Campus spend Big Money for Big Influence. Academic freedom becomes a marketing obstacle.

Another implication of sponsorship visibility, to extend a point made earlier, is that the commercialization caused by sponsorship collapses the social distinctions between amateur and professional. When this effect was discussed earlier, it was in the context of the pressure felt by players and coaches because of the visibility of special events such as bowl games, and the cynicism of players because of the added money sponsorship symbolizes. For the viewer, the ubiquitous nature of a sponsor’s presence during the Bowl’s sends the same message during the Bowl broadcast, and thereby devalues it.

Because collegiate bowl sponsorship has as its goal the blanketing of the event with the name of the sponsor, the Super Bowl, one of the most commercialized events on the planet, is actually in many ways less “professional” than the “amateur”-status Fi-
esta Bowl. The function of the Fiesta Bowl is to generate money for the various parties involved, except the players and the viewers. Nearly 50 percent of the broadcast, the amount of time devoted to corporate promotion, reminds us of this. Although the colleges involved are not-for-profit and individual athletes cannot earn spending money from their participation, the overall symbolism of the event is as crassly money-grubbing as professional team owners moving their property to another city for more lucrative stadium contracts. Wernick argues that advertising devalues whatever it touches. Movie stars may undermine their “Hollywood magic” if they appear on too many infomercials. In the same light, although the popularity of sports in society will continue, in part because of the glorifying nature of the media coverage and corporate publicity, how much commercialism will college sports take before it loses its social distinctiveness? Other sports, notably the Olympics, have absolutely erased the distinction between professional and amateur, a movement again sparked by corporate sponsorship; the marketing machine that is the Dream Team shows us this. With college sports, do they become less special when modern Red Granges are turned into scrimmaging Energizer Bunnies? Future sports fans may view Nebraska’s Tommy Frazier’s amazing third quarter run in the 1996 Fiesta as less inspiring than such runs in earlier eras because, whenever Frazier makes that run in future replays, a giant “Tostitos” sign will always accompany him.

A second implication of the blanketimg of collegiate sports by corporations involves the nature of “free TV.” A cliche of broadcast television is that it is “free,” because there are no subscrip-

tion fees that viewers have to pay, unlike pay cable or theatrical movies. However, work by Jhally (1987) shows the flaws in this argument. Time is money, and so viewers “pay” for programming with their time. Thus, given that we sit down in front of the TV to watch programs and not the ads, we symbolically work for the TV industry by watching the ads on TV. By this logic, TV is hardly “free.” For every four hours of programming we watch, about one hour of that is spent watching ads that were not the original reason for viewing. At our place of employment we would get paid for that hour; in front of the TV we get Baywatch.

Applying this argument to sponsored programming, clearly the sponsored event is more “labor-intensive” to viewers than spot-supported programming (Jhally, 1987, p. 92). Compared to the Super Bowl, we have given advertisers another 30 minutes of our time to watch the Fiesta; compared to the Rose it is 45 minutes. Much of this added labor is explicit, as it comes from increased spot ad time. Increased signage and graphics during the game are also factors. Although we certainly can still watch the action on the field despite “Tostitos” obtrusively plastered on that field, Tostitos is banking on at least a part of that audience being distracted from the game and noticing that Tostitos symbol. Continuing the labor metaphor, they want us to work even during our break. In addition, unlike the labor involved with spot ad viewing, you cannot sneak away from the workplace through the remote control or fast forwarding through the pre-recorded game. The symbol is there on the screen and cannot be zapped or zipped. To extend the “watching as work” schema, much of the value to
Tostitos of such sponsorship is the slave labor situation that signage and graphics during the game create.

One last implication of the cooptation of the event by the sponsor’s image is the irreparable symbolic damage often done to an event when a sponsor is successful in its marketing efforts. A sponsor's goal is to create as strong an association as possible between the event and the product or company: hence the extensive spots, signage and graphics. Often, sponsors may feel that their goal has been met (the saturation point of promotion has been reached), or the event may downsize, as in the Cotton Bowl's failure to be in the Bowl Alliance, thus limiting its promotional appeal. What happens to the event when the sponsor, who has firmly intertwined the sponsor with the sponsored, leaves? Event organizers may find that they are now commercially “tainted.” Because the association with the previous sponsor is so strong, other potential sponsors will avoid the event, believing that too much symbolic work will need to be done to break the association (Copeland, Frisby & McCarville, 1996). For many events, their future may depend not just on sponsorship generally, but on the longevity of one sponsor. Despite their recruiting efforts, both the Sun Bowl and the Cotton Bowl were sponsorless in the 1995–96 season after the exodus of John Hancock and Mobil, respectively.

A common boast by bowl committees and corporate sponsors involves the money such events pump into local economies. As noted, the Fiesta Bowl and its events may have meant upwards of $75 million to the Phoenix area. Less touted by sponsors is the economic damage that is wrought when the sponsor, after encouraging the set-up of a event infrastructure in the sponsored city, decides its promotional goals have been fulfilled and abandons its sponsorship after several years of symbolic bombardment. When an event is left without an identity or, worse, with the previous sponsor's identity, the loss to the community is significant.

**Sponsored Bowls as Elitist**

An attractive element of amateurism is the notion that it is more egalitarian than the professional realm. Access to events is more open. Community theater and city league baseball provides inexpensive and geographically accessible sources of culture and entertainment to those in large and small communities. The performance levels may be more egalitarian as well. With athletics, the success of teams may be less dependent upon money (trading for players, or attracting free agents through huge contracts) than on coaching, the love of the game, luck and hard work. However, in the modern era of amateur collegiate sports, this ideal is often subverted in many ways, but one especially destructive element to the egalitarian nature of amateurism is corporate sponsorship. Sponsorship perpetuates elitism in sports at two levels.

The first elitist element of the corporate sponsorship of sports is at the level of spectatorship. One social rational for sponsorship is that such funding activity contributes to the social good by simply allowing such events to exist. Without corporate sponsors, the argument goes, we would not have access to as many events as we do. This conclusion is flawed. Although the televised spectacle may be promoted heavily and available at prime-time on
“free” TV, physical access to the event itself becomes more limited when corporate sponsors take over.

A large promotional benefit to corporate sponsors is the privileged access to tickets and special seating that such sponsorship brings. Corporations use sponsored events to build goodwill not just in their symbolic association with the event, but also by using their blocks of tickets to impress clients, inculcate employee loyalty, and stroke the ego of the executives. Hundreds of tickets in prime locations and luxury boxes are unavailable to the general public as these tickets become part of the sponsors’ “ownership” of the game. When Georgia Tech offered individual games for sponsorship consideration in 1989, it was willing to part with 250 top seats (plus luxury-box seats and parking privileges) as part of the deal (Maxie, 1989, p. A6).

However, one might wonder if corporate sponsorship of bowls or other college events would help to correct this elitist access by lowering the price of general sales tickets to the event. After all, corporate sponsorship adds another source of funding to the event. When a bowl lands a corporate sponsor, ticket prices should be affected.

And ticket prices are indeed affected. They go up. When a corporation decides to sponsor a bowl, two things may occur that encourage ticket prices to rise, thereby decreasing, not increasing, access to the general-sales tickets. First, the sponsor puts pressure on the event organizers to have as massive an event as possible. The pressure to have the “big game” spectacle may increase expenses more than the corresponding increase in sponsorship revenue. The bowl must now attract better teams, better networks, and even better halftime entertainment. In other words, although the revenue increases when a sponsor enters the picture, the expenses and expectations for sponsor benefits may increase even more. After the Sugar Bowl landed the lucrative Nokia sponsorship for its December 1995 game, for instance, ticket prices went from a uniform $50 the year before to a scaled system of $50 to $150, depending on the location of the seats (Finney, 1995, p. C3). The scaled formula was deemed necessary to shoulder the expenses of becoming a “Tier One” bowl, a status which in turn was influential in landing Nokia.

In a similar way, sponsorship of college bowls can increase the ticket prices of other, unsponsored bowls. The latter must find ways to increase revenue in order to compete. To maintain a competitive level with the Bowl Alliance, the 1996 Rose Bowl raised ticket prices $27, making the price of a ticket to the Rose Bowl $75 (Finney, 1995, p. C3). Given that the $27 increase was for a single ticket, the raised price may have cost a family more than $100 more from the year before. Many people who had previously gone to the game may no longer afford to now.

Sometimes corporate sponsorship can even geographically limit access to games by removing home games from a team’s schedule and moving them outside the community. In the 1996 season, The Carquest Bowl began sponsoring regular season games in Florida’s Joe Robbie Stadium by “enticing” teams to give up one home game for a $1 million payout (Nakamura & Asher, 1995, p. F1). In the “inaugural” game, the University of Maryland received the payout due to the attractiveness of its opponent, national powerhouse Florida State. In this case, Maryland
(and its fans) had to give up the home field and play in its opponent’s home state to earn its fees. Understandably, some Maryland fans were upset with this move (Asher, 1995, p. A18).

As elevating ticket prices separate “have” from “have-not” fans, sponsorship of college bowls and football games can become elitist in another way—by widening the gap between the “have” football programs and the “have-not” programs. This is not to suggest that college football “dynasties” and “disasters” did not exist in the past, but rather that corporate sponsorship could further institutionalize such discrepancies.

Both college bowl sponsorship and the sponsorship of college athletic programs can make the successful programs even more successful. College bowls perpetuate athletic elitism through their tiered status and differential payouts. In sponsored college bowls, the sponsor, the event organizers, the city, and the networks can generate a large amount of revenue. Whether the college does depends upon the status of the particular bowl. The payout difference between the most prestigious bowls and the less prestigious is significant. In some circumstances, a school may actually lose money because of its participation in a season-ending bowl game.

Many teams, such as Nebraska, Florida, and Notre Dame, make millions of dollars off their bowl participation. This is because they are continually invited to the top bowls. As noted earlier, the Fiesta Bowl paid out $26 million to the two schools and their conferences.5

However, expenses to schools are significant as well. Many schools do not get to keep all of their bowl monies because of “revenue sharing” deals that these schools may have with their conferences. In addition, schools must pay for their teams’ travel, food and lodging, the travel of support personnel like cheerleaders and bands, publicity, bonuses for coaches, and special access for school officials, influential alumni, and their families. Such large expenses, coupled with the relatively low payouts of less prestigious bowls, may make bowl participation a losing investment, and can widen the resource gap. The University of Kansas lost more than $31,000 in its 1992 trip to the expensive Aloha Bowl, for example, while Notre Dame netted $2.2 million in its 1995 Fiesta Bowl trip (Layden, 1995). In some cases the payout to colleges is not entirely in cash, but may be in the form of tickets the school must sell. If the tickets do not sell, the school receives less money. Besides the loss of guaranteed income, such deals increase the marketing expenses for a school (Layden, 1995).

Accentuating the monetary effects of the “rich bowl versus poor bowl” system of bowl sponsorship is the promotional logic behind the corporate sponsorship of college athletic programs generally. As mentioned earlier, certain sports-wear manufacturers like Nike or Reebok will sign contracts with schools in which, for promotional endorsements, the corporation will donate money, equipment and other resources to the school’s athletic program. Such deals can create scholarships, help defer expenses, allow access to athletic equipment consulting and expertise and, of course, pump money into the program. But colleges do not have equal access to such vast corporate resources.

The reason they do not have equal access again goes back to ultimate pur-
pose of corporate sponsorship. Corporate sponsors will not approach the teams most in need of financial help; they will go to the teams least in need of financial help. The teams that are already visible, successful, and popular are offered deals. Linking to established symbols is the whole point for the corporation. The athletic programs of many schools that sign large contracts with corporate sponsors already have annual budget surpluses (Asher, 1995, p. A18). Corporate sponsorship helps the rich get richer. And the rich can then devote their riches to being Number One. By the building and display of such resources as state-of-the-art, technicized athletic training facilities—called “football theme parks” by one writer (Denlinger, 1989, p. F9)—and the high visibility guaranteed by corporate sponsored publicity, wealthy programs can impress recruits and maintain their elite status.

In the early- to mid-1990s the University of Florida’s athletic program was estimated to be worth $223 million. Such an estimated economic worth made this program the 21st most valuable sports franchise in the United States, in any sport, professional or amateur. The University of Florida is more economically valuable than professional franchises like the Pittsburgh Steelers or the Chicago Bears (Sheehan, 1996). This estimate was made before the University of Florida’s back-to-back participation in sponsored national championship games, the 1996 Tostitos Fiesta Bowl and the 1997 Nokia Sugar Bowl, and the multiple millions in earned from this participation. It may be difficult to become a Top 25 team, but, thanks in part to corporate sponsorship, it is considerably easier to stay there.

Conclusion

The sponsorship of college sports clearly benefits the sponsor. It helps that company achieve its promotional goals. Although corporations reap rewards, other groups fare less well. The collegiate student receives very little benefit from corporate sponsorship. Even in the rich schools, the sponsorship money mostly stays in the athletic departments themselves to pay for state-of-the-art facilities (Sperber, 1990). The college may believe that a successful program will bring in revenue, but the majority of programs, those not in the elite, lose money on their football programs and may even siphon money from the university (Sheehan, 1996; Sperber, 1990). Universities hoping for positive publicity from successful football teams may find that the pressure to win the spectacular game leads to embarrassing scandals, even causing alumni support to decline (Sperber, 1990). The pressure to win the sponsored spectacle pushes ever greater on the collegiate player, with no real corresponding economic benefit for the overwhelming majority. Does the fan benefit? The game becomes bigger, surely. And the fans of already large programs like Nebraska or Notre Dame are assured of continued success. However, from the perspective of sports integrity, of academic and athletic freedom, of the amount of commercial time the viewer has to labor through, of the revenue lost when a sponsored bowl loses its sponsor, of the price and availability of tickets, sponsorship may erode the joyfulness of sports.

The sponsorship of college sports also illustrates the increasing commercialization of American society. As Jacobson & Mazur (1995, p. 115) conclude, “The commercialization of
sports is yet another illustration of the way practically every activity, diversion, and form of expression is pressed into corporate service.” And the corporate grip on college sports is increasing. Sponsorship involvement is broadening in college football: teams (Asher, 1995), regular season games (Asher, 1995; Maxie, 1989), and college rivalries (Waddell, 1995b) are targets of corporate sponsors. In addition, as college football becomes “cluttered” with advertising, other college sports—at least those with promotional potential—are targeted. NCAA rules about sponsorship activities in the men’s basketball Final Four tournament were relaxed in 1997, a move that one media trade journal called “a cataclysmic change” in its implications for the tournament’s increased promotional potential for sponsors (Leighton, 1997, p. 34). Sponsors like Nike have even formed sports production firms, like Nike Sports Entertainment, which is designed to produce and market international sporting events (Himelstein, 1997).

Given such developments, is it that outrageous to wonder if, in a future football or basketball game, we will watch the Florida Gatorades versus the Nebraska Fritos Corn Chips? □

Notes

1The then unsponsored nature of the Rose Bowl game itself does not mean the event was not highly commercialized. Corporate involvement with the Rose Bowl festivities is heavy: about 70 different companies sponsor various parts of the Tournament of Roses Parade and activities around the game. In July 1996 the Rose Bowl announced it would be part of the “Super Alliance,” which will replace the Bowl Alliance as the championship cartel in 1999 (Hodges, 1996), and, as noted, AT&T, beginning in 1999, became its corporate sponsor.

2As it turns out, the publicity machine power of the sponsor may not always be enough to guarantee the highest ratings. The inherent human interest of the 1996 Rose Bowl garnered perhaps more attention than the Fiesta, despite the latter’s “No. 1 vs. No. 2” appeal and the prepublicity efforts of Tostitos and CBS. That week’s TV Guide featured the Rose, not the Fiesta, on the cover. In addition, the final Nielsen ratings showed that the Rose had a 22.6 rating, while the Fiesta had a 18.8 (People’s choice: Ratings according to Nielsen, Jan. 22–28, 1996, p. 36). Much of the ratings difference can be attributed to the lopsided final score of the Fiesta (Nebraska won 62-24) compared to the much evenly contested Rose, even though the Fiesta was aired during the highly rated prime time daypart, while the Rose is traditionally a late-afternoon game for the East Coast.

3Coding began for each game after the first commercial break before the kickoff and ended with the first commercial break after time ran out on the game clock. Pregame and post-game coverage outside these parameters was not included. Two primary coders were used to time the three games. Intercoder reliability was measured by having each coder measure independently the same 10-minute segment of the Fiesta Bowl, and then comparing the seconds coded for each category. Intercoder reliability ranged from 96% agreement to 100% agreement. Logos and names of the football teams and the networks were not coded as commercial messages, nor were logos/names of obviously narrowly targeted athletic equipment manufacturers that was not meant to be marketed for the general viewing audience.

4The prevalence of corporate logos on uniforms is now as common an occurrence in professional football as well as college football (Heath, 1997), although college football was the “pioneer” in this area, as shown by much heavier use of such logos in college sports than pro sports in the 1993–96 season.

5Notre Dame receives a larger final percentage of their bowl money than teams such as Florida and Nebraska, because as an independent, it does not have “revenue sharing” obligations with a conference.
References


