

Noll, Roger, *Government and the Sports Business*, (Brookings Institution, 1974).

The economic turbulence of the sports world is manifested by player strikes, the expansion and dissolution of leagues and by numerous lawsuits involving players, owners, fans and various levels of government. Many sports followers are perturbed and frustrated by these developments, and as a result there seems to be a nostalgic longing for the comparatively serene days when teams just played the game. The staunch sports fan now requires more than a program to follow the games, he needs a law degree and a Ph.D. in economics. In this regard, Noll's book is a useful and timely offering which helps to clarify the sometimes murky domain of commercial sports.

This book is a compilation of scholarly papers which were presented to a conference of experts at the Brookings Institution in December of 1971. The conference of experts was attended by lawyers, economists and professional sports executives; however, all of the papers were written by either lawyers or economists.

The twelve separate papers which comprise the book focus on the various aspects of the interrelationship between the American federal government and professional sports leagues. The main area of inquiry is directed toward the legitimacy of the special treatment received by professional sports leagues in contrast to the federal government policies which regulate other business endeavors.

Each paper has been painstakingly researched, and together they provide an incisive analysis of how professional sports leagues operate. One of the many strengths of the book is the ability of the authors' to demonstrate the fallacy of certain conventional practices and beliefs that are common in professional sport. For example, it is axiomatic in professional sport that equality of playing talent among league teams leads to a closer championship race which heightens fan interest which in turn increases owner's profits. This is generally true, so in order to ensure a semblance of equality all professional sports leagues have a rather complex set of built-in balancing mech-

anisms such as: player drafts, waiver rules, reserve clauses, option clauses and so forth. The pitfall lies not in the notion of league balance but in the methods which are attempted to achieve it.

The professional sport establishment clings to the view that the present balancing mechanisms are essential to the survival of commercial sport. The authors in this book argue convincingly that intra-league parity has not been achieved in the past with these policies in operation. On the surface it appears that the present means of trying to equalize playing talent are well reasoned. In practice they are often ineffectual because you cannot legislate to equalize brains or guile. Some owners and managers are simply smarter and more cunning than others.

The Pittsburgh Steelers and the Chicago Bears both finished with a 1 and 13 record a few years ago. The Steelers, through judicious drafting and trading built a juggernaut that has won two successive Super Bowls. The Bears are still sadly inept, yet they had the same opportunities to improve that the Steelers had. Indeed the Bears passed over many of the players in the draft that now form the nucleus of the Steelers team.

In hockey the Montreal Canadiens have remained near the top for so long because of their ability to dupe teams into trading their future draft choices for the Canadiens' fading veterans. Montreal is supplied with a constant flow of youthful talent while the other team may benefit temporarily but is soon forced into a long rebuilding process.

Included in this book are numerous insights which in many cases would be interesting to sports fans and sports scholars alike. For example: despite their high salaries most star quality players generate more revenue for their teams than they are paid. The color of the starting pitcher in baseball can have a significant affect on attendance; with a black starter attendance declines by nearly 1,500 fans. The absence of professional football on Fridays and Saturdays is thought to be an altruistic act on pro football's part to protect the attendance at high school and college games. This is not the case however; this practice is a holdover from the earlier days of the sport when owners were afraid to compete directly with established leagues.

Noll's book probably contains the best overall treatment of this rather complex subject, but like most anthologies it has certain shortcomings. There is considerable overlap between some articles, particularly concerning topics such as factors which affect game attendance and the utility of league policies that limit player freedom.

In many cases the documentation used to support hypotheses is very scanty. This is excusable to some extent as most professional teams or leagues do not open their books for public

scrutiny. The information garnered in these reports comes from the books of publicly owned teams (of which there are very few) and from court case proceedings where teams were forced to disclose their profit-loss statements. The inability to gain access to information is understandable in this case but it still does not justify the broad generalizations that are made about leagues and all of professional sport on the basis of data from a few teams.

One hypothesis put forth stated that small city teams had little if any chance of surviving in professional sports. The rationale being that the big city teams with their greater financial resources, would eventually attract better quality players and more than their share of championships. A cursory examination of various sports leagues shows that this is not true. Oakland and Cincinnati, two of the smaller cities in major league baseball, have been dominant in recent years. In Canadian professional football two of the three largest city teams (Vancouver and Montreal) are on the brink of bankruptcy and only one of the three (Montreal) has been an artistic success in recent years, whereas some of the smaller city teams such as Hamilton, Edmonton, and Regina are financially solvent as well as successful on the field.

The book is written in a very academic, technical style and the use of mathematical models make it difficult for the uninitiated to understand. This is not a criticism of the book but it is a major factor in limiting the book to a smaller audience.

This book nicely straddles the areas of pure economics, sport sociology and sport history; it would be a valuable auxiliary text in all of these disciplines. It is a notable work because it has had a significant impact on the operation of professional sports leagues. The arguments used in this book have been employed in the proceedings which made the "Rozelle rule" illegal, and which made professional basketball the most progressive professional sport, by creating major changes in the option clause, the college draft and in key compensation issues.

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