

The Illinois Slush-Fund Scandal of the 1960s: A Preliminary Analysis

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This paper recounted and analyzed in a preliminary fashion what has become known as “The Illinois Slush-Fund Scandal of the 1960s.” This was just one example of the large number of excesses within intercollegiate athletics in the United States during the 20th century. In many of these situations there have been serious questions of moral turpitude on the part of many of those who were directly or indirectly involved. Although great attention is usually accorded to these occurrences by the media, it should be kept in mind that most colleges and universities have been relatively free from such rule infractions.

This particular case began approximately on December 16, 1966 when Big Ten Athletics Commissioner, Bill Reed, announced that alleged athletic irregularities at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, would be investigated at the request of President David D. Henry. This unprecedented request came after he had learned about the existence of a “slush fund” that had been developed over the years from money donated by local business and well-to-do alumni.

The events leading up to this disclosure, and what transpired thereafter, were treated largely in chronological order as follows: (1) the resignation of the Director of Athletics at Illinois, and the seemingly unrelated disclosure of the alleged irregularities and events surrounding this disclosure; (2) the following period of several months during which a great variety of opinions, news releases, accusations, and counter-accusations were made; (3) the appointment of a new athletic director during the period in which the Big Ten investigation was being carried out; (4) the decision of the Big Ten upon conclusion of the investigation, and the hue and cry that followed it; (5) the appeal by decision that three coaches must resign and that a number of athletes would lose eligibility; (6) the resignation of the three coaches, and the “life must go on” aftermath, and the situation in retrospect with several conclusions.

What happened at Illinois in the 1960s merits historical analysis in the 1980s now that it is possible to achieve some historical perspective. If the overall situation in the United States had improved generally, such a tale might just be for the historical record, not forgetting the tragic “fall-out” impact on the lives of so many people. However, this University and so many others don’t seem to have learned much judging from ongoing violations that have continued down to the present day. “If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us” (Coleridge).