

# **Television Pact vs. Home Rule: The 1951 NCAA Break with Traditional Policy**

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At the first meeting of what became the National Collegiate Athletic Association, December 28, 1905, a group of 62 institutions resolved that “the academic authorities of this country hold themselves as ultimately responsible for the conduct within their own respective institutions.” Four months later, Palmer E. Pierce of West Point, the head of the new inter-institutional groups, wrote that any institution joining the Association “would not thereby lose its independence.” “Home Rule” has been established in the NCAA from the first. About a half-century later, “Home Rule” was challenged on several fronts as member institutions saw a greater need for national rules and policies. The decision by the NCAA in 1951 to control television on a national level was perhaps the single most important policy in challenging traditional “Home Rule.” From 1951 until 1984, the NCAA’s television plan was in effect, but the U.S. Supreme Court returned television to “Home Rule” after three decades of collective television policy.

This paper addresses a four year period from the late 1940s to the early 1950s when the decision was made to change from “Home Rule” in television to a national policy controlled by the NCAA. The protagonists for a national policy were the overwhelming percentage of NCAA institutions that feared the unrestrained telecasting of football games would ruin stadium attendance and cause financial harm to all intercollegiate athletics. The antagonists were a handful of institutions led by the University of Pennsylvania and Notre Dame, both of whom favored “Home Rule” and saw the potential for publicity and profits from their own institutional television networks.

This research is part of a larger project looking at the influence of radio and television on the development of Big-Time athletics in America. This paper helps to clarify the place of traditional “Home Rule” in higher education, a concept that has been important in intercollegiate athletics and in the development of higher education in America. The history of television and “Home Rule” fits nicely into my theory that in a country with no federal control of education, an institution of higher education will do in a pragmatic way what is best, first for its survival individually, and secondly for its growth and development. In the period around 1950, the individual institutions felt that abandoning “Home Rule” to collective action would help them survive the advent of television. Later, however, we know that policy was challenged legally until the U.S. Supreme

Court returned football to “Home Rule” by declaring the NCAA television contract a violation of the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act. It was then up to each individual institution to determine once again how it would use television to its own advantage.

The sources for this research comes from three principal archives: University of Notre Dame Archives, University of Pennsylvania Archives, and the Walter Byers Papers at the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Other institutional archives useful to this study are University of Virginia Archives, University of North Carolina Archives, University of Wisconsin Archives, Stanford University Archives, and Tulane University Archives.