

# SPORT AND COMMERCE

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## *In the Image of Rockne:* **Notre Dame and Radio Policy**

Knute Rockne was in his sixth year as football coach at the University of Notre Dame when the team's first radio broadcast occurred, a 34-6 Notre Dame victory over Nebraska in 1924. Already Rockne was considered one of the great coaches in America. When Rockne allowed WGN, the Chicago Tribune station, to broadcast the game free of charge, Notre Dame began two decades of giving away its radio rights. While other colleges by the 1930s began moving toward selling exclusive, commercial broadcast rights to radio stations, Notre Dame kept its nonexclusive policy. So strong was this policy that Notre Dame actually paid NBC radio to carry its game with the University of Southern California to the East Coast in 1934. This is in sharp contrast to Notre Dame's post-World War II commercial television and radio policy of extracting as much financial gain as possible for its broadcast rights.

This paper examines why Notre Dame persisted in a give-away policy when other institutions such as Michigan and Yale were selling home game exclusive rights for the high price of \$20,000 in the mid-1930s. Notre Dame officers and athletic officials decided to use football to publicize the University nationally and internationally in an effort to bring the educational institution greater renown. Only just before America's entry into World War II did Notre Dame waver on its policy when an internal debate became pronounced. At that time, Notre Dame concocted a compromise plan that allowed for both commercial and non-commercial broadcasting. For individual stations, broadcasts became commercial and advertising was allowed so that stations could recoup broadcast expenses and make a profit while Notre Dame received a share of the radio income. However, any network wishing to carry the games could do so only under a non-commercial, non-exclusive, sustaining broadcast. In this way, Notre Dame would have the greatest coverage possible from the networks and bring in some revenue from individual stations.

This research should help to clarify some of the uses and abuses, paradoxes and hypocrisies of commercialism in intercollegiate athletics and in higher education. The history of commercialism in radio, and later television, of American college sport 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. Educational leaders of American universities have used commercialized radio and television of athletic events

to raise the image of their institutions while increasing revenues. Notre Dame, though, decided early to maximize publicity, rather than profits, that would come from the most extensive broadcasting of games that it could achieve from a non-commercial, non-exclusive rights policy.

The source material for this study came principally from the University of Notre Dame archives, but it is supplemented with other university archives, the national archives, and newspapers. It is part of a larger study on the impact of radio and television on the development of Big-Time college sport.