

## **Saving College Football**

*Jon Ericson*

*Co-Founder and First President, The Drake Group*

[Nebraska Athletics Director Bill] Moos was asked about the challenge of attracting fans to the stadium or arena during an age when fans can access games at the finger tips.

"The younger generations may not want to drive five, six, seven hours, or they may want to go to play a game of golf and have it on their iPad or something in the golf carts," Moos said. "What really is important is that the gameday atmosphere and the show is lights out. Once the ball's kicked off, that's in the hands of 19- and 20-year-old young men. But everything leading up to it, everything at the halftime and intermissions and afterwards, as well, that can all be orchestrated and produced.

Clark Grell, "Moos' first day at Nebraska includes meeting more new faces and popcorn tweak requests," *Lincoln Journal Star*, October 23, 2017

Pageantry, tailgating, alumni gatherings, color, excitement, sex, violence, . . . what's not to like about college football? What's there for Mr. Moos to fix?

Okay, there's the pretend courses, the faux patriotism, noise piped in someone, somewhere thinks is music, drunk fans, high prices, uncomfortable seats, and the ubiquitous TV commercials and plays under review. Whew, maybe Mr. Moos has a lot to fix.

Dear Bill,

About that game-day atmosphere: I can help. Let's begin with the easy one: understand, for football fans, arriving at the stadium is akin to visiting a cathedral. While the teams warm up, lean back, soak in the sun, and listen to the ball hit the foot and the players smack the pads. Peaceful, quiet, chat with friend or family. Except it is ruined by someone piping in a screeching sound similar to railroad car wheels when the conductor has slammed on the brakes. What is this madness? Is it some misconstrued idea of entertainment? Is there some sort of fear of silence in the land? Yes, don't blame you, I guess. Restaurants, baseball parks—everywhere there has to be "background" music. Psychiatrists need to investigate. In the meantime, unplug the noise. You have a band; you have a great fight song: Hail Varsity. Play it time and again. That will be music. End the torture.

The next one is difficult, but manageable: play reviews limited to 15 seconds. Difficult, but doable. Hire NASA or Homeland Security or some geeks to set up

a video program that captures every play from 18 angles. Hire three people who follow every play and within seconds tell the referee if the call should be overturned. There, that wasn't so difficult after all. Getting the call correct should be a goal; not an obsession.

The next one is difficult, really, really difficult: end the TV commercial timeouts. Does Vegas have an over/under on how long fans are going to put up with these things? Talk about treating fans like dirt!

It's the money you say. I do understand that your one million dollar salary plus incentives comes from those commercials. Without some of the commercials, athletics directors might make \$400,000. Ouch! And coaches' salaries would nosedive. But that money makes your game-day atmosphere assignment even more difficult. The average teachers' salary in Nebraska is a bit under \$50,000. You are asking not only those teachers but thousands of people to pay a far greater percentage of their salary than you would pay for a ticket, to sit, time and again, for TV commercials. The word is ubiquitous. Think ubiquitous. TV commercials, plus play reviews, plus regular timeouts—do the numbers: ubiquitous is bad.

Okay, you aren't going to fix that one, but you might work on tearing out the plank seats and replacing them with individual seats. Reduce capacity by about 20,000. Fan comfort would increase, but more, the sell-out streak would less likely end on your watch. And that would be a good thing for you.

I left out mention of paying athletes. You have enough on your plate as it is. The present situation *is* shameful: adults making tons of money while the players make peanuts. But there is something as shameful as adults ripping off college athletes, and that is controlling them. Paying athletes is about more control and, more than control, the ultimate surrender to commercialized college athletics. A better topic: free the athlete, not control him. You said "Once the ball's kicked off, that's in the hands of 19- and 20-year-old young men." Unfortunately, you are wrong; it is in the hands of the coaches. But I can help you with that too. Here's how—game time: lock up the coaches. [Your plate is full; we can talk about that at a later time.]

Saving college football means to stop seeing fans as props and players as hired hands. Free the athletes; don't control them. Make the game less painful for the fan and more fun for the players.

Okay Bill, that's your assignment should you accept it. Hope you do; someone needs to save college football.