LAST SPRING a sociology professor at the University of Washington invited me to his campus to answer questions from students about my book, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education* (Henry Holt, 2000), which he had assigned. One of the first questions that a student asked was: "Are you a fan of intercollegiate athletics and, if so, considering your book, are you not engaging in doublethink?" He was referring to my discussion in *Beer and Circus* about how George Orwell's concept of "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously" applied to student sports fans who, as I put it, "acknowledge the dysfunction of college sports while fervently following its teams and games."

I began my response, like many professors faced with an unexpected question, by bobbing and weaving. I outlined my sports background and explained that I was a serious fan of professional sports. I proudly stated that I attended many San Francisco 49ers home games last season. (I became a fan when I lived near their original home field, Kezar Stadium, over 40 years ago.) I also watched most World Cup soccer games last year on TV, including those only on Telemundo, and I regularly attend Major League Baseball and National Hockey League games.

But I had not answered the question. I then headed toward a response by talking to the students about another concept from English literature: the "willing suspension of disbelief."

I first realized that I willingly suspended disbelief about college sports on a spring evening in 1989, when I was watching the telecast of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's final men's basketball game between the University of Michigan and Seton Hall University. My wife entered the room as an announcer was praising "the wonderful student-athletes" on the teams. She asked whether they were, in fact, regular students at their colleges. I told her how many Michigan athletes, particularly football and basketball players, were sheltered academically in sports-management courses taught by athletics-department personnel, and how Seton Hall's star forward, Andrew Gaze, was a former professional basketball player in Australia who had come just before the basketball season. (Indeed, he returned to Australia soon after the final game.) After I finished, I could no longer suspend my disbelief that those athletes were not professionals, so I turned on a National Basketball Association game. At least those players were paid—overpaid—upfront, and the announcers did not blather on about the "fine, young student-athletes." After that, I watched fewer men's big-time basketball and football games, and the more research I did on the topic, the less tolerance I had for the propaganda of the NCAA and its member institutions.

Then, in 2001, my wife and I bought a home in the San Francisco Bay area, and I began going to football games at the University of California at Berkeley. As a grad student there many years before, I had attended games and enjoyed the experience. Memorial Stadium, built in the 1920s, sits in the Berkeley hills, and from some seats you can see San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance. Usually the weather is sunny and mild, and, in 2001, you could buy a general-admission seat in the end zone for $12, bring a picnic lunch, and stretch out and enjoy the game. Because it was the Cal Bears, you usually saw the home team lose (they went 1-10 that year). But it was Berkeley, and the fans were relaxed—not particularly concerned about defeats, and mainly enjoying the sunny afternoon and the walk to and from the stadium through one of the most beautiful campuses in America.

I found it easy to suspend my disbelief about the California Golden Bears. The next year, I had lunch with Derek Van Rheenen, director of the Athletic Study Center at Berkeley, and he introduced me to the quarterback Kyle Boller, who seemed bright and a real Berkeley student. Indeed, Derek assured me that everyone on the team was an authentic Berkeley student. However, one of his tutors, Rachel Swan, later wrote an article for the *East Bay Express* and persuasively argued that the players did not remotely resemble typical Berkeley students either in their admission or class performance. In addition, the team's low NCAA academic-progress ratings and graduation rates seem to call for skepticism.

Still, my disbelief could have remained suspended except for the arrival of a new Bears' coach, Jeff Tedford, in 2002. Soon after, the team began to win and then, as the Tedford era progressed, win big. Last season they even flirted with the Top 10, and they are doing it again in preseason 2007 polls.

"ON BEING A FAN"
MURRAY SPERBER
CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, OCT 5, 2007.

RON SANFORD, PANORAMIC IMAGES

Tedford's winning teams have many community-college transfers who, often for academic reasons, did not enter the university directly from high school. In fact, one reason for the NCAA's academic-progress ratings is to close the transfer loophole, as some athletes with poor high-school grades and low test scores enroll in community colleges and, lo and behold, two years later, with no further testing, become students at tough academic institutions like Berkeley. But as Tedford turned the team around and beat teams like the University of Southern California, I cheered for the Bears and felt good about their victories. And I began to employ double-think.

I HAD TO ADMIT to the students at the University of Washington that I saw the Bears beat their Huskies in overtime last fall in Berkeley, and I was on my feet cheering the winning touchdown. After the game, as I happily walked from the stadium, I recognized that, although I was a critic of big-time college sports, I was also a fan and rooted for my team. I know that some fellow critics root against their college teams—William C. Dowling, a professor of English at Rutgers University, told *Sports Illustrated* that he hoped that the Scarlet Knights would lose—and hold the view that if you love academe and believe that big-time college sports is crippling undergraduate education, you should want your college's teams to fail. Even though I agree with the first proposition—it is the subtitle of my book—I've never wanted my alma maters' teams, Berkeley and Purdue University, to lose. Nor did I root against the teams of my longtime employer, Indiana University, except when they played teams from Purdue.

Undoubtedly, I am suffering from double-think on this issue. But many of those other critics will never understand the amazing power of college sports over tens of millions of Americans until they cheer for their team. Over the years when talking with them, I have often asked how many games they go to per season and how many have they ever attended. They often admit that the numbers range from zero to none.

Such critics have always had logic on their side. But most have overlooked the inescapable reality that fan attitudes on college sports are beyond reason, even irrational, and that frequently they stem from childhood experiences and family bonding: Many of my students at Indiana said that their earliest memories included sitting on the couch with their family in front of the TV and rooting for the Indiana University Hoosiers. For many other fans, the attachment to a team connects to positive feelings about their college days—indeed, that is the basis of my own loyalty. To overturn such deep emotions with logic and reason is almost impossible.

Not surprisingly, over the years, the critics have landed only a few arrows in the hide of the college-sports behemoth—a beast that these days grows larger while other parts of the university, especially many academic areas, are shrinking. This fall those critics should attend a Division I-A football game in their area. The event will probably appall them, but they might also learn something important about the behemoth's strength.

I remember an autumn day in 1990, soon after *College Sports Inc.,* my first book-length criticism of intercollegiate athletics, came out, and I was on a book tour. That day I was at the University of Texas at Austin and had time to take a walk around the campus. I went by the football stadium; the side gates were open, so I walked in and wandered to the 50-yard line. I stood and looked up at the stands—severe cantilevers that held 85,000 people. I was awed by the overwhelming size of the place, and I imagined what it must be like when 85,000 people are screaming for their "Horns."

The experience was a kind of epiphany for me. I realized that no matter what critics say, no matter how logical our arguments, the 85,000 Texas fans are not going to disappear, nor will the close to 110,000 fans who fill the Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, nor will the millions of other fans at other universities across the country. Thus, to reform intercollegiate athletics, critics will have to understand the power that it has over its fans—a significant percentage of the U.S. population—and how deep its roots are in the American psyche. Little serious research has gone into the subject, but it cries out for investigation.

Meanwhile, "Go Bears."

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