

# FOOTBALL ON THE BRINK

**When it comes to pay or play, some schools have opted out of the race**

**D**ion Lee is a football player. He came to California State U., Long Beach, to play football. But at California State U., Long Beach, they don't play football anymore.

"This is the year I was going to be the man — I was a starter," says Lee, a defensive back and wide receiver.

In a rare move — but one which may become far more common as budget cutbacks and NCAA sanctions take the air out of athletic departments — Cal State, Long Beach, officials realized last year their team no longer could afford to play Division I-A football.

"I've been playing since I was 5," Lee says. "Football has never been taken away from me. Half my life is gone."

This fall Lee won't head to the locker rooms, even though he has a year of football eligibility left.

"I look at the college football publications at the bookstore, and I think my name could have been in there," says Lee, a black studies and radio-television-film major. "Fall is coming up, and it's really eating me up. It hurts real bad."

Long Beach Athletic Director David O'Brien says budget cuts, coupled with NCAA sanctions, signaled the downfall of the school's program.

"The NCAA requirements went up to the point where to compete in Division I-A, you had to have a 30,000-seat stadium and average 17,000 in attendance," O'Brien says. "The fact that we didn't have an on-campus stadium and that we were only averaging 3,200 fans a game would not allow us to do that."

Long Beach officials realized the team could not stay in Division I-A but opted to cancel the program rather than play in a lower division.

"We looked seriously at going to Division I-AA but turned it down quickly," he says. "We just felt like we would be better off dropping the sport, and hopefully, when things get better, we can bring it back."

But Carl A. Kemp, a junior at Long Beach, says lower division play would have been better than none at all.

"Even if you don't want to be a football player, if you see Cal State, Long Beach, on the television, you're gonna want to become a part of it," he says.

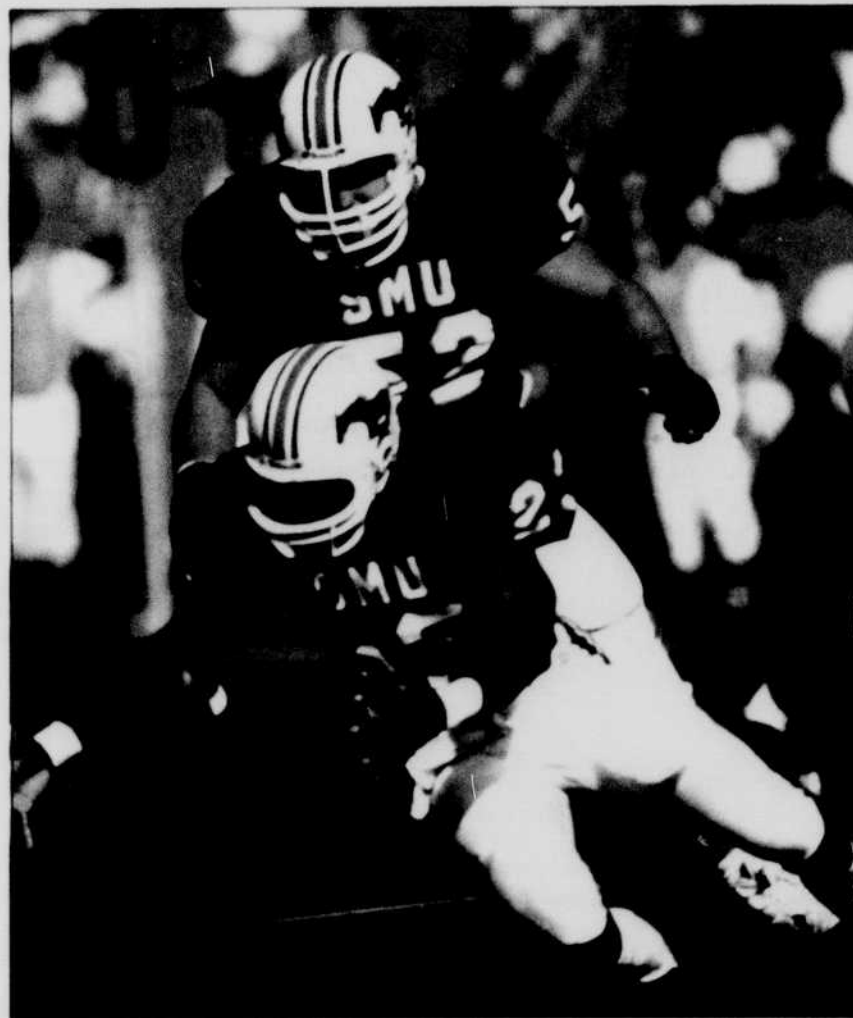
Kemp, who heads the Black Student Union at Long Beach, says many of the black student athletes on campus relied on the football program to stay in school — something no one seemed to consider.

"The team wasn't even given a chance," he says.

But in the end, tough economic times ultimately are responsible for killing the programs.

"We brought in [late NFL coaching great George] Allen and he did a great job, but it just wasn't enough to keep us above water," O'Brien says. "With the budget cuts in the state of California, our situation just got progressively worse over the last three or four years."

The university's funds have been cut



**The ultimate fumble: Will SMU recover from a string of losing seasons and funding cuts?**

by \$35 million in three years and are slated to be cut by \$15 million more this year.

In the meantime, football coaches at colleges and universities trapped in stagnant economic times are waiting out the storm, hoping that when the game resumes this fall, their locker

rooms, too, won't be empty.

"I think other schools are going to have to take a look at their programs, and some of the small institutions are going to have to face reality and see that they can't continue to play Division I-A anymore, and some may see that they will have to drop their programs

completely," O'Brien says.

Sometimes, though, a compromise can be reached.

At Towson State U. in Maryland, officials are implementing a plan to save the football team, which closed the season last year with a 1-10 record.

Towson will scale back its football program in the next two to three years, moving toward a non-scholarship program. By doing this, university officials hope to save \$400,000.

Dan O'Connell, a spokesman for the Towson athletic department, says the move is a compromise to keep the team. A similar compromise saved the Western Kentucky U. team, which went 3-8 last season.

The university cut WKU's budget from almost \$1 million to \$450,000 for this season, a move to keep the program from being cut completely, says Barry Brickman, associate athletic director for business affairs.

"We are competing for people's entertainment dollars, and if we don't put a good product on the field, we will lose that revenue to other forms of entertainment," he says.

In the end, the fate of a football program rests on its record, O'Connell says.

"When you aren't winning, people look at you and say 'what do we need that for?'" he says.

Take Southern Methodist U. in Dallas.

SMU, a college rich in football tradition, is trying to find ways to eliminate athletic department deficits in excess of \$1 million.

The team, which finished 1-10 last season, reportedly suffered a \$4.8 million loss last year alone. President A. Kenneth Pye says administrators considered deficit reducers, ranging from eliminating scholarship athletics to dropping SMU athletic teams to playing in a lower division.

But SMU head football coach Tom Rossley is fighting the drop, even though his team's best record is 2-9 since 1989.

"I think football is too big in Texas and in the Dallas area, and I don't think students, alumni or citizens of Dallas would ever let that happen," Rossley says. "They all know that Southern Methodist would not be the place it is today without athletics."

The deficit is related to tough economic times in general, Rossley says, and once the Texas and national economies rebound, SMU will be back where it wants to be. "We're getting less money donated from our alumni and from all our other sources, and that's just the way things are economically," Rossley says.

Rice U. Athletic Director Bobby May says administrators there decided to keep the football program in Division I-A play, despite speculation that a \$3.7 million deficit would force officials to consider slicing the athletic program.

"I don't think dropping the football program or going to a smaller division is a solution to our problem at all," he

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