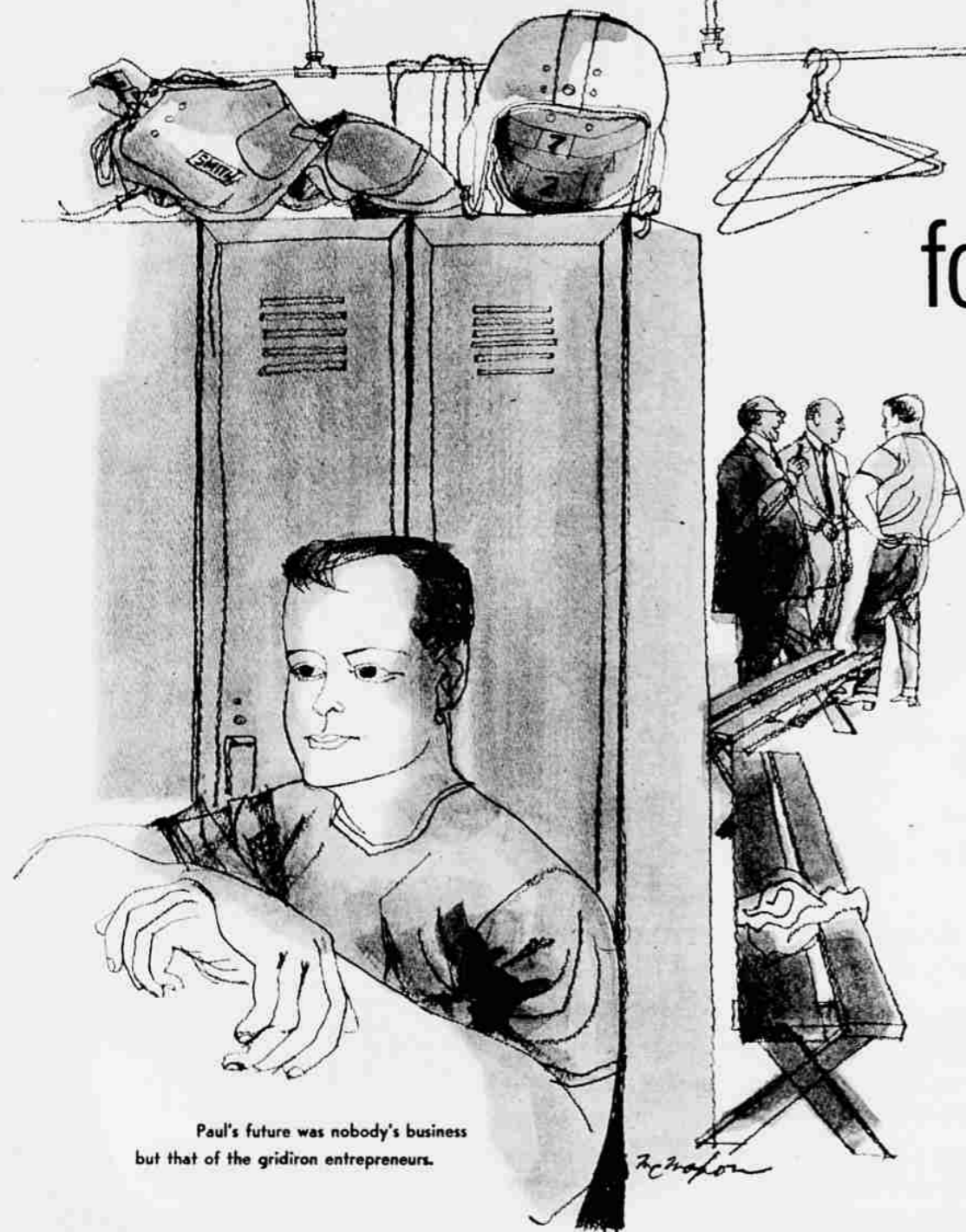


The father of a college player looks back on his experience and says:

"You can help clean up football!"



Paul's future was nobody's business but that of the gridiron entrepreneurs.

Anonymous

Art by Franklin McMahon

My son's a football hero. Like a lot of fathers, I'd always hoped he'd be a top athlete—better in high school and college than his old man was, I mean.

I got my wish—and a lot of worries besides.

Paul has just started college. Selecting the right school is always a problem, and for the boy who is football fodder, it can be a treacherous one. I think Paul made the right decision, but it took a Summer of agonizing debate by the whole family.

Long before Paul's graduation, we were visited by representatives of college athletic associations or "interested alumni."

"Paul is the kind of young man who will fit in at our school," each told us. "Intelligent, clean-cut, interested in athletics. Our school can do things for Paul."

What they could do differed greatly from school to school. Fourteen institutions contacted us, all with "deals" to lure the athlete to their campus. But some of these "athletic scholarships" were simply euphemistic disguises for what was play-for-pay "amateurism."

Frankly I was surprised at what Paul could get just for playing a game. On my earnings as a small retail businessman, I had been worried about paying Paul's way through four years of college. But these schools soon had us worrying about how much Paul could get for receiving an education.

Tuition and some incidentals were

standard offers and within the limitations of most "purity codes." One university, however, also guaranteed Paul part-time work with a "downtown booster" that would pay most of his living expenses simply for "modeling" sportswear.

At first, Paul and I considered only the schools that offered dazzling bids for his services. They spotted our interest and gave us the "hard sell" on the monetary advantages of their institutions.

It was Paul's mother who started us back to reality and focused our attention on the real problem. We had visited a week-end coaches' clinic—at somebody else's expense, of course—and met a well-known alumnus who confided that his firm guaranteed jobs for the school's stars during and after college.

"Didn't he even ask what Paul wanted to do, or what he would study?" my wife asked. "Whom did you discuss his education with?"

The answer was—nobody. Strange for a parent, isn't it? And equally strange for educators. Paul's future was nobody's business but that of the gridiron entrepreneurs. He had become football "material" first, a student last.

Maybe, I decided, I'd better take a closer look at this scholarship business. We revisited the colleges that seemed the most openhanded. "The scholarship is attractive," we'd say, "but what happens to Paul's education if he doesn't measure up to high-school promise?"

We soon learned that most golden scholarships boil down to simple small-print contracts in which you either play top football or else!

Suddenly I was the indignant parent! Why worry about a game? It's the boys who play the game that count.

I preached to Paul that the true star recognized football as a small part of college and an even smaller part of life. The star is the man who looks on the game as a preparation for life, not life's goal.

I brought my righteousness to a man I had learned to respect as an athlete and as a teacher of young people—Paul's high-school football coach. He quickly cooled me off.

"Did you come here to tell me some schools are hypocritical or dishonest in their athletic programs?" he snapped. "Then I'll tell you some retail businessmen, like yourself, are crooks. Will you take the blame for all of them?"

I flushed. "You're defending them? Why, they think of boys simply as commodities in a \$100-million industry. They make them hired freaks at a public circus where winning is everything, and then talk 'building character!'"

"They?" the coach asked. "Who are 'they'? You mean the three or four colleges you bartered with,

don't you? Not all the 14 who contacted you. What right have you to condemn them all? You were willing to play a dirty game yourself until you found Paul might lose something—and not 'character' either! These colleges couldn't break the rules if it weren't for parents letting them. If underhanded bids were so shocking, you could have walked out. Honest colleges were waiting for Paul."

And so I was told off. There wasn't a reply I could make, either. The fault was obvious, of course, but when you suddenly find yourself on the receiving end of a big "free-load," your perspective gets distorted—and no alibi intended.

As the coach pointed out, it was time we righteous critics learned about a side of football that doesn't make headlines. College officials have their football problems, most of their own creation, but they are genuinely trying to solve them. Whether they like it or not, educators must now draw big crowds to support extravagant athletic programs and costly stadiums; they must help produce winning teams and All-Americans.

Many accomplish this by exploiting youths put under their guidance. Some solve the problem simply by dropping the Frankenstein-like sport. But others strive to bring total respectability to college football and still maintain it as a spectacular part of Americana.

They aren't having an easy job, as any newspaper reader can tell you. The cheats may be few, but they're like rotten apples in a barrel. Codes can't stop them. But parents and young men could.

It takes two to break any code, and the ultimate responsibility for a young man's acceptance or rejection of fair play lies with himself and his parents. Without their tacit approval, the football fraud of our land couldn't operate.

That oversimplification isn't the final answer, of course. But "policing" by parents would go a long way toward helping colleges restore the real value of football, a student activity designed to train and develop youth on a higher plane than "what's-in-it-for-me?"

Not that Paul didn't get a football scholarship. But he selected it for what it offered in education and self-respect. Since he had a specific career in mind, he entered a school with a fine reputation in his chosen field, if not in football prowess.

The college's grant-in-aid program seems relatively unattractive but, as a counselor explained, the true worth of a scholarship is what a youth and his teachers make it. For his tuition, Paul must be a campus leader in all respects—scholarship, character, and athletics. Saturday heroics don't exempt him from the responsibility of a

student and citizen. On the other hand, he will not be judged a failure in college if his yardage slips.

My wife and I believe this is training, this is education.

Other factors decided us on the college. It does not rely on football attendance to support its athletic program. Tuition, fees, and endowments take care of an adequate but not extravagant program. That means the athletic department isn't under pressure to fill a stadium to pay for everything from intramural canoeing to coast-to-coast football junketing.

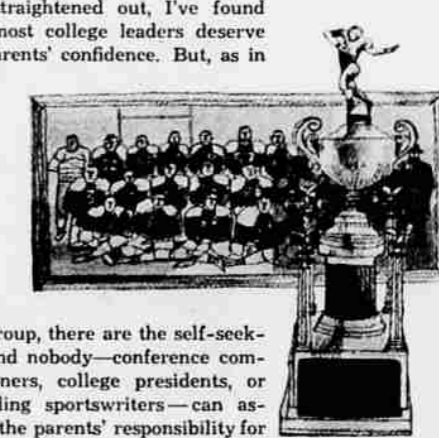
Second, most of the coaches are considered members of the faculty and have tenure. As long as they meet responsibilities as educators, they cannot be fired. Free of the demands of winning every Saturday, they can look on players as persons, not performers. Equally important, the faculty at this college has the strongest voice in athletics, not a clique of professional sports promoters.

Third, Paul's 12 hours of training weekly allows enough free time for normal student activities. Most big-time schools devote about 20 hours a week to practice; how can a young man learn anything, socially or scholastically, that way?

These factors influenced us. Other families with young athletes will face different circumstances and, consequently, find different reasons for their decisions. But I believe one tip applies in all cases:

Don't judge a football grant-in-aid on its face value. Among other things, look at the representative offering it and ask, "Do I want a person like this influencing my boy's judgment and sense of values? Will he help him be a better man, win or lose?"

Since I've had my own perspective straightened out, I've found that most college leaders deserve the parents' confidence. But, as in



any group, there are the self-seekers, and nobody—conference commissioners, college presidents, or crusading sportswriters—can assume the parents' responsibility for guiding a boy.

Sure, it's tough to pass up the gravy train, but I can tell you it's worth it in the long run. When I visit Paul on Saturdays, I'll watch him play football, not work at it. And if he scores a touchdown, I'll cheer because I'm proud, not because he's earned a bigger pay-off!

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