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Article Summary: Oriard’s recent book examines the effects of politics and social change on big-time college football during the past fifty years. Our reviewer investigates the issues of race, power and money in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s storied football program.

Cataloging Information:

Names: John Mitchell, Lloyd Eaton, Ben Schwartzwalder, Don Bryant, Harry Edwards, Ernie Chambers, Mike Rozier, Dexter Manley

Nebraska Coaches: Bill Glassford, Bob Devaney, Tom Osborne, Frank Solich, Bo Pelini

Nebraska Players: George Flippin, Bill “Thunder” Thornton, John Pitts, John Dutton, Lawrence Phillips, Christian Peter, Sam Keller, Ndamukong Suh

Keywords: NCAA, Southeastern Conference, University of Nebraska, one-year scholarships, E A Sports, Big Ten, George Flippin, Bill “Thunder” Thornton, Bob Devaney, Tom Osborne, Ernie Chambers, Sam Keller, Ndamukong Suh

Photographs / Images: the Cornhuskers playing Stanford in the 1941 Rose Bowl (Nebraska’s first bowl appearance); the 1895 team with George Flippin, NU’s first black football player; the 1907 team at Nebraska Field, Lincoln; Bill “Thunder” Thornton, who became Nebraska’s first black football captain in 1962; Bob Devaney, head football coach, 1962-72
NEBRASKA FOOTBALL

and Michael Oriard's Bowled Over: A Review Essay

By Russ Crawford
The 1960s and '70s saw challenges to the authority of all American institutions, including major college athletics. In *Bowled Over: Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era*, author Michael Oriard turns a spotlight on college football during those years, and later as the National Collegiate Athletic Association took steps to prevent any recurrence of those tumultuous...
times. Oriard, Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture and an associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Oregon State University, is the author of seven books on football and sports. He also played college football for Notre Dame and professionally for the Kansas City Chiefs.

Bowled Over is the latest in a growing body of work considering the history of college football and its connections to larger social trends in the post-World War II era, and turns on the question of control. Oriard examines the evolution of that control, which was held firmly by coaches until the so-called Athletic Revolution of the sixties and seventies.1 During those years, football players protested what they saw as racist and over-authoritarian policies, and brought about the removal or diminution of the authority of several head coaches. This did not happen everywhere. The University of Nebraska was notably free of the troubles that wracked other programs.

Oriard’s central thesis is that the NCAA took steps to return control over athletic programs to the coaches in 1973, when that governing body enacted the one-year scholarship. This allowed coaches to withdraw financial support from players who no longer produced, or who challenged the head man’s authority. In the process, the student athlete, a semi-mythical construct of the 1950s, was transformed into the athlete-student. This amounted to a professionalization of the college football player.2

The author presents a compelling body of evidence to support his contentions, but is largely silent on the programs that successfully negotiated these challenges. This leaves a large question unanswered: why did athletes in some programs (such as Wyoming) rebel, while in others (such as Nebraska) did not? In this essay I will attempt to answer this question by reviewing Oriard’s work within the context of the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers program of the same era.

In Part One, Oriard considers racial integration in the Southeastern Conference, which began with Kentucky in 1967, and the revolt of black athletes in the late sixties. Then, in an interlude titled “The NCAA Goes Pro,” he makes his argument about the one-year athletic scholarship as a means of returning control to coaches. Part Two considers the college football world created by the NCAA’s decision, and discusses reform movements in college football, the changing nature of the student athlete, and the author’s thoughts on reform.
As in many of his previous works, Oriard examines the integration of the Southeastern Conference through the lens of press sources, including student newspapers. However, he argues that if one were to depend solely on those sources, one would conclude that integration in Southern college football was a smooth process—an incomplete picture of the challenges the first black players on Southern teams faced from opponents, coaches and teammates, and their peers on campus. Most press coverage fit the narrative of sport as a melting pot, where individual differences are submerged for the good of the team. This powerful narrative was largely the same one applied to Jackie Robinson; it said he was "just another player," and that his example would lead to improved race relations. Only in rare instances was the narrative challenged, such as when Lester McClain said in an interview that the University of Tennessee athletic department was presenting a false front on racial matters (p. 73). For the most part, only in recent years have some former coaches and athletes begun to challenge the narrative. Oriard doubts that we will ever have a full story of the challenges that black athletes faced in the South.

The integration of University of Nebraska football began nearly eighty years before the Southeastern Conference, when George Flippin became a member of what was then known as the Old Gold Knights, and after his first two seasons, the Bugeaters. Popular with his teammates for his skill and character, Flippin was voted team captain, but head coach Frank Crawford overruled the players' decision, stating, "It takes a man with brains to be a captain; all there is to Flippin is brute force. . . . I don't take exception to him because he is colored, but it takes a head to be a football captain." In 1892, the University of Missouri forfeited a game with Nebraska when Flippin's teammates refused to sideline the star. Flippin was also involved in an early Nebraska civil rights case when he was refused service at a York restaurant. Despite these challenges, Flippin was a standout student. He was voted president of the Palladian Literary Society, and later earned a medical degree in Chicago.

The Huskers continued throughout the next six decades to have at least occasional black players on the team, which included lettermen William Johnson (1900), Robert Taylor (1905),
Bill "Thunder" Thornton, became the Cornhuskers' first black football captain in 1962. Football, 1890-, Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

In 1962, Bill "Thunder" Thornton became Nebraska's first black co-captain. New Husker coach Bob Devaney endorsed Thornton, a star two-way football player whose career highlights included outrushing Ernie Davis of Syracuse, the first black Heisman Trophy recipient, 132 yards to 112, in a 1961 game. Current NU Athletic Director Tom Osborne recalled that Thornton was also "kind of a 'Big Man on Campus' his senior year." Aside from football, Thornton was also selected for membership in the Innocents Society, a senior honor society composed of only thirteen men who are chosen based on academics, leadership, and service. Teammate Bob "Boomer" Brown recalled that "there weren't many black guys going to Nebraska in those days, but all the people in Nebraska treated us like we were Nebraskans—the same way they treat all the other out-of-state players who decide to come to Lincoln." After his Nebraska career ended, Thornton played four seasons with the St. Louis Cardinals before returning to the Huskers as an assistant coach; he later coached in the NFL.5

As a state, Nebraska was by no means free of ethnic or racial strife. In 1919, Will Brown, a black man accused of raping a white girl, was lynched in Omaha. In the mid-twenties, the football series between Nebraska and Notre Dame was put on hold for over two decades because of anti-Catholic sentiment in Nebraska.7 The arrival of Japanese American students from internment camps during World War II, however, brought the subject of racism into sharp focus at the University of Nebraska. Students and faculty pressed for an end to the formal segregation of the dormitories, and in 1949, they formally ended that policy for women's dormitories.8

Cornhusker athletes faced discrimination off campus when the team traveled south. In 1954, the three black team members had to stay at the black YMCA when the team played Oklahoma.9 While Nebraska was not free of the racism that affected the rest of the nation, the leadership of the university, and of the football team as we will see later, worked deliberately to create a campus where these issues were mitigated. By the sixties, the university and the football program were on a path that would help them avoid the spectacular troubles that plagued other campuses.

This all points to a much different experience than that of the first black players to integrate the SEC. The experience of Nebraska players meshes more neatly with the narrative that sports writers attempted to construct for players like McClain or John Mitchell. According to Oriard, Mitchell, the first black player at the University of Alabama, recalled hostile glances in Tuscaloosa businesses until someone mentioned that he was a football player, and everyone relaxed (p. 75). The positive comments of players such as Brown might well gloss over instances of racism that black players faced, such as the verbal abuse that former Husker linebacker John Pitts reported receiving from a fraternity house one night, but conditions at the university by the early sixties seemed to be conducive to more fully integrating black and white players in a common cause, as well as facilitating their more easy acceptance as part of the university community.10 So in 1969, when protests by black football players broke out at the University of Wyoming, Oregon State University, the University of Iowa, the University of Indiana, the University of Washington, and Syracuse University, Nebraska was able to weather the storm, despite head coach Bob Devaney's tenure being weakened after mediocre 6-4 seasons in 1967 and 1968.

Oriard describes common elements of the black football players' rebellions. In each instance, black players boycotted practice or were suspended for violation of team rules. Those athletes then framed the dispute as discrimination, after which support coalesced on one side or the other, with the coaches typically garnering the most widespread backing. Finally, regardless of whether the coach stood firm or was forced to compromise, some of
the players lost their position on the team for defying their coach’s authority. None of the coaches lost their jobs as a result of the rebellions, but their coaching careers in all cases ended soon thereafter (p. 91). In most of the protests, the complaints seemed to come out of the blue, against coaches who often had decent records in building integrated teams. Lloyd Eaton at Wyoming had been Bob Devaney’s assistant coach in the early sixties when they had integrated the team; in 1969 he had fourteen black players, all of whom defied the coach’s orders by joining a protest against segregated Brigham Young University. At Syracuse, head coach Ben Schwartzwalder had coached some of the most famous and talented black athletes to that point, including Jim Brown, Ernie Davis, and Floyd Little.

Oriard describes each of these coaches as fitting into the authoritarian model. Some of the protests were precipitated when black players felt that the coaches’ rules impinged on their rights as men. A protest at Oregon State began when an assistant told linebacker Fred Milton to shave his goatee, which violated team rules. Many of the coaches also seemed to be searching for some excuse to assert their authority over their players, and their players were often backed by campus civil rights organizations such as the Black Students Union. Both sides in the disputes quickly drew hard and fast lines, with little room for compromise.

When Bob Devaney became the Nebraska head football coach in 1962, he immediately produced results, winning nine games with the same players that had won only three during the previous season. He also created an atmosphere that allowed black players to feel a part of the team. Former players have testified to the tremendous tongue lashings that Devaney could deliver when they failed to live up to his expectations, but he also listened to his players’ concerns.11 In an interview on Huskerspot.com, John Pitts, the “monsterback” on the 1970 and 1971 National Championship teams, remembered Devaney’s “Irish temper that just boils over,” but also told of how black players complained to the coach that while there were several black players on the football team, there were no black cheerleaders. Pitts reported that Devaney apparently took their concerns seriously, and the next season there were two on the cheer squad.12

Devaney also knew where to allow players personal freedom. Longtime Sports Information Director Don Bryant recalled that Devaney “recognized that everybody of that squad [1962] was a man who had his own individual concerns and he treated him that way.”13 Harry Edwards, the sociologist and activist at the center of the black sport protests of the sixties and seventies, mentioned Devaney in his seminal work, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969). Edwards favorably related Devaney’s comments at the 1968 NCAA meeting where panelists discussed the new demands of black athletes, and debated instituting the one-year scholarship. Devaney reportedly said, “I don’t know what we can do about it if the fellows want to effect [sic] those Fu Manchu beards like Joe Namath of the Jets. Joe seems to pass all right.”14 Therefore, while some coaches were drawing lines in the sand, Devaney allowed his players to exercise their rights as individuals outside of the gridiron.

But Nebraska football was not always free of controversy and rebellion. Between the 1953 and 1954 seasons, dozens of players signed a petition calling for Head Coach Bill Glassford’s removal, citing his authoritarian style and what they considered to be his too-strenuous practices. The crisis was fueled by television and print reporters, but Glassford’s job was protected by an ironclad contract. However, he was out of football after the 1955 season.15

Devaney himself faced booster calls for his removal after the lackluster 1967 and 1968 seasons, and his replacement, Tom Osborne, was challenged by a tempest-in-a-teapot during practices for his first bowl game after the 1973 season, when senior defensive tackle John Dutton began grumbling about Osborne’s practices being harder than Devaney’s and those of other schools. According to teammate George Mills, Dutton complained that “bowl games are supposed to be a reward, not a punishment. All this conditioning stuff is bullshit.” Mills and other players encouraged Dutton. After a players’ meeting, the tackle confronted the staff. When it was in the open, however, the other players remained silent, leaving Dutton seemingly alone. Some press reports questioned whether the star would play in the Cotton Bowl, but Osborne met with the senior players and ended up allowing Dutton to play, but stripped him of his captainship.16 There was also talk of a players’ revolt following the 2003 dismissal of Frank Solich, but this went away after Bo Pelini was named interim head coach.

Oriard does point out many of the off-the-field problems the Huskers have had in recent decades. He cites the cases of running back Lawrence Phillips and defensive tackle Christian Peter as being emblematic of “the most disturbing new category of athletes’ criminality” (p. 216). Both Phillips and Peter were accused of assaulting

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women, and Oriard adds that “with other Cornhuskers arrested for attempted murder, unlawful discharge of a firearm, and theft, Nebraska joined Miami, Oklahoma, and Colorado as an All-Criminal Final Four” (p. 216).

Because of Bob Devaney’s success in navigating the issues of the sixties and seventies, the steps taken by the NCAA to return control to coaches—particularly the one-year scholarship—may not have been as crucial at Nebraska as at some other schools. However, the Husker program exists within the world created by NCAA. Oriard argues that the “student athlete” has become even more of a myth since the one-year scholarship was introduced in 1973. Because big-time football programs can more easily remove players who are not performing or are otherwise problematic, players now face the same pressures as do professional football players. They are professionals in everything but name, bringing in millions to their programs.

The debate over the disparity between the money generated by college football players and their compensation has been a familiar one to many Nebraskans because of former State Senator Ernie Chambers. In 1986, Chambers introduced legislation into the unicameral that would have essentially made Husker football players state employees. The bill passed, but was vetoed by Governor Kay Orr. In 2003, Chambers once again brought the issue to the floor of the legislature, arguing, “Education has nothing to do with these young people. They are recruited to be players, not scholars.” The bill, which allows the university to pay stipends to players, was passed again by the unicameral and signed by Governor Mike Johanns. However, it contains a clause that prevents it from going into effect until three other state legislatures in states with Big 12 teams pass similar legislation. The bill garnered qualified support from Chancellor Harvey Perlman, who said that it might pressure the NCAA to allow more financial assistance to low-income players.7

Other than providing rhetorical points for those who seek change in NCAA rules, the Nebraska law has had little effect. Two groups seeking to reform college athletics, the Drake Group (1999) and the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (1989) have urged a return to the four-year scholarship but have gained little traction.

The idea of college football players as revenue-generating professionals has, however, caught on with some players. Sam Keller, who played quarterback for the Huskers in 2007, brought a 2009 lawsuit against video game company EA Sports and the NCAA. The suit charges that EA, with NCAA complicity, illegally used players’ images in their games. Keller argues that while the NCAA prohibits players profiting from their likenesses, EA’s NCAA Football game allows gamers to “upload entire rosters, which include players’ names and other information, directly into the game in a matter of seconds.”18

Keller’s case is still wending its way through the courts, but this is not the first instance of Husker players acting as businessmen. In 1984, Heisman Trophy recipient Mike Rozier admitted to Sports Illustrated that he had signed with an agent prior to the 1983 season. When asked for comment, Husker Coach Osborne told the magazine that he had no knowledge of the matter, but “if he did take money he would simply be another one of a number of players such as Billy Sims and other players who admitted that they had taken some money before their senior season was over.” Athletic Director Devaney also denied any knowledge and argued that there is “nothing that any college or university can stop. It’s an uncontrollable situation.”19

Therefore despite NCAA rules to the contrary, athletes sometimes act to protect their economic interests. Oriard does not consider this in Bowlled Over, other than to relate the story of Dexter Manley who told the U.S. Senate that he attended Oklahoma State for four years and left unable to read. Oriard quotes Manley’s academic advisor as saying, “We exploited Dexter for four years, but he exploited us too” (p. 205). Manley’s exploitation lay in his use of OSU to learn his craft before making millions of dollars in the National Football League. This is an area, along with college players turning professional before their college careers are over, that Oriard perhaps could have explored to bolster his contention that college football players have become de facto professionals. Of course, this sort of behavior likely dates back at least to Red Grange signing with the Chicago Bears the day after his last collegiate game in 1925.

As a consequence of the game’s professionalization, Oriard says it is becoming increasingly difficult for a player in one of these programs to juggle the time requirements of his sport and still be a student. He contrasts that with his own experiences at Notre Dame in the 1960s, when it was possible to play football and also have the traditional college experience while getting an education.

Ndanaekong Suh’s record of athletic and academic achievement argues against the notion that players have little chance of succeeding in a substantive degree area. In addition to Suh’s considerable success on the field, he also graduated with a degree from the Charles Durham School of
Architectural Engineering and Construction with a major in construction management. When announcing his $2.6 million gift to the university, which included $600,000 for the Engineering School, Suh stated that "the balance between athletics and academics is one-of-a-kind at Nebraska. That's the reason I came here, and that's the reason why I wanted to support the College of Engineering."

One player does not refute aicht make, but the Husker graduation rate continually rates at the top for the Big 12 Conference and near the top for the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision of Division I. According to the school's athletic website, Huskers.com, the football team has more than twice the number (98) of Academic All-Americans as their nearest Big 12 rival Oklahoma (47), and is number one in the nation in all sports, leading number two Notre Dame 271 to 213. The football team ranked number one in the Big 12 in Exhausted Eligibility Rates at 93 percent of those football players who use up their college eligibility graduating, and tied for second in the Big 12 with a 78 percent Graduation Success Rate. However, Oriard discusses the disparity between graduation rates for black and white players, and black players at UNL still graduate at a much lower rate (59 percent), which placed the Huskers twenty-sixth out of the sixty-eight teams who played in bowl games last year.

One final indicator of the university and football program's effort to address the problem of non-graduate football players, or at least to avoid the perception of athletic exploitation, can be found in the new contract that head coach Bo Pelini recently signed. The contract has several performance bonus clauses, which will earn Pelini an extra $125,000 if his team's graduation rate is equal to or greater than that of the student body as a whole. He will also make an extra $25,000 if the team has an Academic Performance Rate of 930 or higher (the NCAA minimum allowable score is 925, and NU is currently at 935), $75,000 for 940 or higher and $125,000 for 950 or higher. Nebraska has for quite some time publicized the academic accomplishments of its athletes, and the numbers indicate that this is more than mere lip service. That is not to say the Husker program can or will dismiss the likelihood of systemic or unilateral reform, but argues instead for multilateral reform. This would require universities to identify their athletic and academic peers, with whom they would then form agreements, "trusting those peers to conduct their football programs in a like manner." In this, Oriard appears prophetic, foreshadowing the Huskers' move to the Big Ten in 2011, which was promoted in part by pointing out the academic, as well as the athletic advantages that will accrue to the school when they join the conference. He also suggests the possibility that change will be forced on the NCAA and big-time football programs by outside forces. For instance, one of President Obama's first interviews included his argument that the Football Bowl Division should replace the BCS with a true playoff.

What Oriard is arguing for seems to be a return to the past when football conferences such as the Big Ten and Pacific Coast Conference set their own eligibility and financial support rules, or an argument for the Ivy League's 1952 decision to de-emphasize football among member schools. I would agree with Oriard that this is indeed a fool's task, and that his proposal will probably be ignored. He is possibly right that reform might come from outside of the NCAA, but big-time
college football has taken on a life of its own, and likely will be able to withstand significant changes in the future, unless fans grow disinterested in state pride and weekly spectacle.

Michael Oriard has written a gripping and insightful exploration of many of the issues that have affected big-time football programs in the sixties, seventies, and beyond. His work has merit for both sport historians and sport fans. The University of Nebraska Cornhuskers football program provides an interesting exception to many of the issues that he considers (race, academic exploitation), and a disturbing example of others (sexual violence). An interesting book to read would be one dedicated to the programs that have worked and how they surmounted the challenges that threatened so many others. Perhaps building on the examples of those programs would be a better model for future reform efforts.

NOTES

4 Robert E. Knoll, Prairie University: A History of the University of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, and the Alumni Association of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1995); 29, History of Stromsburg 1872-1997, http://www.stromsburglibrary.com/flippin.htm. Flippin was also the recipient of the first speeding ticket issued by the York Police Department.

11 Benjamin Rader, James L. Sellers Professor Emeritus of History at UNL, remembers Devaney as a "shrewd and genial man. Whenever he expressed his temper, it was a carefully staged outburst. He was non-confrontational, [and] wanted everybody to like him.”
12 Ibid.
13 Knoll, Prairie University, 139.
15 Knoll, Prairie University, 138.
Bob Devaney, Nebraska Cornhuskers head football coach, 1962-72. Football, 1890-, Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.