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Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics

Fourth and Long: The Fight for the Soul of College Football

By John U. Bacon. Published 2013 by Simon & Schuster, New York, NY. (352 pages).

Reviewed by

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Reformers seeking a tawdry exposé of college football's seamy underbelly, peppered with tales of crooked coaches and unprincipled student-athletes, will be left wanting by John U. Bacon's latest work, *Fourth and Long: The Fight for the Soul of College Football*. While Bacon does provide a cursory review of past football-related scandals and foreshadows the downfall of former University of Michigan Athletic Director Dave Brandon, the student-athletes and their coaches are held up as the heroes of this book. The focus of the book is the incredible dedication of football players and their coaches at four institutions: the University of Michigan, Northwestern University, Penn State University, and The Ohio State University. The book provides glimpses of each at varying points during the 2012 season, with more attention paid to two programs whose seasons were inexorably linked: Penn State and Ohio State. Both programs were ineligible for bowl participation at the conclusion of the season. The sanctions for both were not the result of actions of current student-athletes or coaching staffs, which were in their first year. Thus, this daily struggle of the book's antagonists to persevere through losses and injuries while paying for the sins of former coaches and administrators is the central theme of the work.

Among the book's more insightful storylines focuses on Penn State players Mike Mauti and Mike Zordich, seniors who worked with new coach Bill O'Brien to gain the trust of the younger players. As news of the program's NCAA sanctions broke and players were afforded the opportunity to leave Penn State for other programs with no consequences, O'Brien considered establishing a deadline for current players to decide whether to stay or go. Mauti and Zordich convinced O'Brien to adopt a softer approach (without a firm deadline), while they convinced their fellow players to stick around. O'Brien listened to the veteran players, who held the team together as they cursed the inaction of school administrators and lost on the field (the season began with an excruciating loss to Ohio University, whose offense romped for 499 yards at Beaver Stadium).

However, the season ended with an upset win over heavily favored Wisconsin and plaudits for O'Brien's leadership during the tumultuous season. Meanwhile, as overtures from other programs were made to O'Brien, interim athletic director David Joyner was famously out

of town on a previously scheduled hunting trip. Perspective was provided on several other Penn State-related storylines, including the exploits of scholar athlete and mathematics graduate student John Urschel, the school's unwieldy 32-member board of trustees, and the lack of respect afforded by student-athletes to former assistant Jay Paterno.

Though the attention Bacon paid to the Penn State season throughout the book was unrivaled, Bacon did also attend several Ohio State games during their undefeated 2012 season (including key contests vs. Michigan State, Northwestern, and Nebraska). He provided details of the days leading up to the crucial road showdown with Michigan State, as new head Coach Urban Meyer and his coaching staff struggled to gain the trust of the upperclassmen. The win over the Spartans was hailed by Bacon as Meyer's first signature win in Columbus. However, it should be noted that Bacon was forced to provide third-party recollections of events within the Ohio State program, as it was obvious he was not provided insider access. Meyer did however sit down with Bacon for a wide-ranging interview following the conclusion of the season. Bacon compensated with his perspective from inside the Ohio Stadium press box and at local haunts such as Plank's in Columbus' German Village. The Michigan alum even stooped to detail Ohio State's rise over the past two decades to become one of the nation's premier research institutions, with perspective provided by former members of the Michigan administration and friends who attended Ohio State.

Like the season-ending wins by Penn State over Wisconsin and Ohio State over Michigan, Northwestern's season also ended on a high note. The team finished the season 10-3, capping it off with only their second bowl win in history, over Mississippi State in the Gator Bowl. Though Bacon lauded Northwestern athletic director Jim Phillips, head coach Pat Fitzgerald, and quarterback Cain Colter, the attention afforded to the Wildcat program was fairly cursory, particularly compared to Penn State.

Fans or alumni of the University of Michigan may want to steer clear of the work, despite Bacon's status as an alumnus. Bacon's access to the Michigan program for this book was non-existent, thanks to the details released in his previous work, *Three and Out: Rich Rodriguez and the Michigan Wolverines in the Crucible of College Football*. That book, which exposed the dysfunction of Rodriguez's three-year tenure in Ann Arbor, was filled with far more elicited details, most notably the attempts by former coach Lloyd Carr and his players to undermine Rodriguez and the program (given his outsider status). For this book Bacon was forced to turn to a former UM president, former athletic director Bill Martin, and his fellow alumni for their perspective on the program. Though largely steering clear of the program's on-field exploits during an 8-4 season, it seems as if Michigan was included in the book solely to provide Bacon with an outlet for his venom towards Brandon.

In the book, Bacon details Brandon's successful campaign to balloon the department's budget and modernize the athletic program. Bacon notes that Brandon increased student ticket prices for football games by 23% and adopted a general admission seating policy that angered students, all while joining coaches during Sunday film sessions and chest-bumping players on the sidelines. Bacon details the increase of the Michigan athletic department's operating budget from \$100 million in 2010-11 to \$137.5 million three years later. Bacon's beef centers on the fact that much of the budget increases were in areas that he feels do not directly benefit student-athletes, such as administrative expenses and salaries, marketing and promotions. In another example, "professional travel and conference dues" had tripled under Brandon's watch, from \$444,000 to \$1.32 million annually (Bacon, 2013, p. 276). It was just this type of criticism (and

the aforementioned Rodriguez tome) that led Brandon to relieve Bacon of his annual press pass to Michigan football games.

In contrast to this glimpse into the interworkings of an intercollegiate athletic department, Bacon also provides his perspective as a college football fan. Harkening back to Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Bacon devotes a chapter to a trip with college buddies in a RV to watch the critical 2012 Michigan-Notre Dame match-up. The trip featured Taco Bell drive-ins, Halloween costumes, and a buddy named Rhino who chose to sleep in the RV rather than spend more than \$200 on a ticket to the game. Bacon was more fortunate. Unlike his alma mater, Notre Dame provided him with a seat in the press box to watch the game.

Fans of college football (and the Big Ten in particular), will enjoy Bacon's escapades and tales from the road of the 2012 football season. Educators looking for a detailed text to assist in learning outcomes related to the business aspects of college football or the sociocultural role of intercollegiate athletics within the college experience should look elsewhere. Likewise, those looking for sordid details from a tumultuous college football season should purchase Bacon's *Three and Out*. In this one, the good guys win. This book is for the avid college football fan who yearns for a fellow (albeit *New York Times* bestselling) fan's perspective of football in Big Ten country.

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